

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, from 9th November 2016 to 15th January 2018

Submission to BARC (15th May 2019) Case # 1063

By Mike Carter and Geof Christie



Fig. 1: Eurasian Curlew eating a crab on West Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands on 20th February 2017
Photo by Geof Christie

Note the very long bill and white flanks with narrow dark streaks diagnostic of this species.

A Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* was present in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands from at least 9th November 2016 through to at least 15th January 2018. We suggest that it was a young bird (by plumage & moult, 1st year when first seen), female (by bill length) of the expected subspecies *orientalis* (by range & absence of dark spots on underwing). As we believe that the same individual was observed over the 15 month period, we are treating this as one case.

Throughout its stay, it frequented the main lagoon particularly the sand flats adjacent to South Island. It was found by Geof Christie & Pam Jones on West Island just three days after they returned to Cocos for the 2016/17 summer season following a winter spent elsewhere. Just two days later Geof Christie saw it again but this time on South Island, where so far as is known it spent most of the next 15 months, usually being seen whenever Geof or other birders visited that island. These visits were typically at least twice a month but only during the austral summer as birders in general and Geof in particular, was absent from Cocos for about seven months from early April to early November 2017. However, it returned briefly to West Island from 20th to 23rd

February 2017. The last confirmed sighting was on 15th January 2018 and it was not found during a concerted search on 25th March 2018.

West Island typically hosts a very small number of marine shorebirds usually less than five individuals of perhaps five species whereas South Island normally hosts somewhere between 80 to 150 shorebirds of ten or more species. Regular boreal winter residents on South Island are Grey Plover, Pacific Golden Plover, Lesser Sand Plover, Greater Sand Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Grey-tailed Tattler, Ruddy Turnstone, Great Knot, Red-necked Stint, Sanderling and Curlew Sandpiper. Like many other species Eastern Curlew is an occasional visitor.

Whether this individual stayed throughout the boreal summer is not known for certain because no birders were present to monitor its occurrence, but as it was present immediately before and after that period we contend that that was probably the case. Given the remoteness of Cocos it seems very unlikely that different individuals occurred in successive years or that one individual departed and then returned. According to Hayman *et al.* (1986) 'Many non-breeders remain in winter quarters all year' and we believe that was the case with this bird.

MC saw the bird during a Birding Tours Australia visit to South Island by motorised canoe on 8th December 2016. The visit was timed to coincide with high tide when the shorebirds congregate on exposed sand bars, reefs and islets. A total of 134 were counted that day. In addition to the Eurasian Curlew the high tide roosting flock comprised 12 Bar-tailed Godwits, 2 Eastern Curlews, 22 Whimbrel, 2 Grey-tailed Tattlers, 41 Ruddy Turnstones, 4 Red-necked Stints, 1 Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, 2 Sanderling, 2 Great Knots & 45 Greater Sand Plovers.

Description

Structure, shape and morphology are depicted in Figures 1 to 4 with important field characters emphasised in the captions.

Size: When seen together with Eastern Curlew its slightly smaller size was apparent. It was much larger than Whimbrel as can be seen in Figure 4.



Fig. 2: Eurasian Curlew showing extensive clean white rump on Cocos on 10th November 2016

Photo by Geof Christie

Note absence of evidence of wing moult.



Fig. 3: Eurasian Curlew and Whimbrel on South Island, Cocos on 31st December 2016

Photo by Geof Christie

Note the diagnostic white, unbarred wing linings (underwing coverts) of the Eurasian Curlew and its much larger size in comparison with Whimbrel. The total absence of large dark spots on the underwing coverts is in keeping with it being of the expected subspecies *orientalis*. MC's reading of the literature suggests to him that onset of primary moult at this date as evident in the above photo, is indicative of it being a 1st year bird.



Fig. 4: Eurasian Curlew in flight on Cocos on 20th December 2017

Photo by Geof Christie

This shows active moult of outer primaries. We think it would be abnormal for an adult (race *orientalis*) not to have completed its wing moult well before December (Cramp 1983). Thus we suspect that this bird is in its 2nd year having arrived as a 1st year bird as would be expected of a vagrant. The subspecies *orientalis* is the most likely subspecies to occur on Cocos as that is the form that is widespread in South Asia (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), the area to the north of Cocos and the likely source of vagrants to the atoll.

Identification

Distinctions from Eastern Curlew, the only potentially likely confusion species, are the *white underwings*, white flanks with *narrow dark streaks without crossing bars* and the *white back and rump* (Hayman *et al.* 1986; Chandler 1989; Higgins & Davies 1996; Beaman & Madge 1998, Paulson 2005, (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), van Duivendijk 2011; Menkhorst *et al.* 2017).

Status

This is the first report of Eurasian Curlew from Cocos and if accepted may become only the 4th for Australia. To date BARC has accepted only two records of this species. The most recent is Case 861 which was a bird that was seen at Broome, WA in 2015. Another seen in 2016/17, concurrent with the subject bird, was at Pt Douro, WA, BARC Case 1049. That is still under consideration but is likely to be accepted.

Acknowledgements

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