

Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Calidris subruficollis* at France Road Turf Farm, Wrights Creek, Queensland 4869. -17.032908, 145.777609

Submission to BARC

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Summary

During a trip to Far North Queensland a group of birders observed what we believe to be a Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Calidris subruficollis* seen on a turf farm in Wrights Creek on the 16th November 2019 at 3.40pm. This record, if accepted, will possibly/probably represent the first sighting of this species in Far North Queensland. There have been 2-3 sightings in southern Queensland previously to this observation.

Preamble

During an arranged birding trip with 12 participants to Far North Queensland over a 17 day period in late October to mid-November 2019, a Little Curlew *Numenius minutus*, was reported on eBird at Harden Park Farms, 14 France Road, Wrights Creek, colloquially known as The Turf Farm. On the first day of our trip we visited the site and did not find a Little Curlew. Sixteen days later, a report of a Little Curlew at the same site was posted by Patrick De Geest onto Birdlife Northern Queensland Facebook page. The group went back to the turf farm for a further look.

On arrival, a local birder was present who informed us the Little Curlew on a mound of fresh dirt at the side of France Road. As we approached the mound, the Little Curlew popped up and sat atop the mound for a few seconds before flying about 20 metres away to settle onto the manicured grass of the farm.

After congratulations amongst ourselves were exchanged, some of the group continued talking to the local and thanking him for his information, while the remaining members took photos of the Little Curlew. As the Little Curlew was being photographed, we observed two small waders (both *Calidris* sp) within a few metres of the Little Curlew. As we were concentrating on the Little Curlew and not using binoculars, they were both quickly and cursorily identified Sharp-tailed Sandpipers *Calidris acuminata*. The subsequent discussion in the car as we were returning to Cairns CBD only mentioned that the Sharp-tailed Sandpipers were “in the way of the Little Curlew” in the photographs being checked on the back of cameras.

On the weekend of 18-19 April 2020 during the Victorian Government Covid-19 restrictions, I was inspecting the 10,000 images I took during the aforementioned trip. In the images of the Little Curlew which also included the two *Calidris sp.*, one of them did not immediately strike me as a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Having seen the Buff-breasted Sandpiper in January and February 2017 at Lake Murdeduke in Victoria on 3 separate occasions, the size, shape and plumage of this bird in Queensland instantly identified itself as a Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Although my images were not great, I picked the best images, posted to some friends for discussion but the bird's identification remained elusive. My photos were affected by lighting, blurry pixels. A fellow birder, Jack Parrington, had been standing alongside me at the time. He was able to provide better quality images which confirmed the identification for us.









Habitat

A turf farm with lush, green pasture at a height of 2-6cm, well watered with sprinklers. There was a set of 6 paddocks, each with manicured lawns, and freshly dumped topsoil just inside the gate of the farm where the Little Curlew and several Black-fronted Dotterel were searching for prey. There was also a small farm dam located approximately 300 metres to the west of the soil dump in a paddock with dried perennial

pasture species. We observed Plumed Whistling Ducks on or next to the dam and a pair of juvenile Black-necked Storks in this paddock on each visit. The GPS co-ordinates for the site are -17.032908, 145.777609.

Observers

Philip Peel, Jack Parrington, Tim Nickholds, Alison Nisbett, Matt McCrae, Jack Winterbottom, Heather Alexander.

Description of bird

- Same size as a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper as seen in the images.
- Delicate, dove-like head shape with a relatively short, needle-like, black bill.
- Bright yellow legs.
- A long neck, a large dark eye and a circular head with buff tones.
- Black/ dark scaly back feathers

Potentially confusing species

Of waders seen in Australia, the possible confusing species are:-

- Ruff *Calidris pugnax*,
- Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata* and
- Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*.

Of these three species, only the Ruff looks similar but is appreciably longer (22-29cm v 19cm, Shorebirds of the Northern Hemisphere, Richard Chandler). In the images alongside the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and the Little Curlew, the small, black needle-like bill, large and dark eye, bright yellow legs and the more buff toned and uniform face patterning rule out the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper.

Lack of a slightly down-curved, brownish bill and a bulkier shape rules out Pectoral Sandpiper.

For me, the best features pointing to the identification of this bird as a Buff-breasted Sandpiper are the rounded, dove-like head shape, the needle-like and black bill, and the large dark eye.

Conclusion

I have little doubt that, after examining my photos and those of Jack Parrington, that this bird is a Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Calidris subruficollis*.