

SHORT NOTE

First record of Cox's sandpiper (*Calidris x paramelanotos*) for New Zealand

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The Cox's sandpiper (*Calidris x paramelanotos*) is considered a hybrid between a male pectoral sandpiper (*C. melanotos*) and a female curlew sandpiper (*C. ferruginea*). The world's first known Cox's sandpiper was seen relatively recently, in August 1955, in Australia (Hayman *et al.* 1986). Originally the bird in question was identified as a dunlin (*C. alpina*), but by 1986 around 20 had been seen and their identity was still a topic of debate. In an attempt to clear up the mystery surrounding these birds, John Cox collected a specimen in 1975, followed by another in 1977. He sent them to the South Australia Museum. Following this they were transported to the American Museum of Natural History where they were compared to the Cooper's sandpiper (*C. ferruginea x C. acuminata*), a hybrid between a curlew sandpiper and a sharp-tailed sandpiper (*C. acuminata*). It was determined that they were not the same species (Buckley 1988). In 1981,

a live specimen was captured and photographed, and the following year it was officially described as a new species by Shane Parker (Parker 1982). In 1996, Les Christidis and his team reassessed the taxonomy using mitochondrial DNA. Their results showed that Cox's sandpipers are in fact hybrids between male pectoral sandpipers and female curlew sandpipers (Christidis *et al.* 1996).

On 25 November 2016 Mike Ashbee was at Lake Ellesmere, Canterbury (43°43'36.4" S 172°29'40.6" E), photographing migrant waders, including what he believed to be a pectoral sandpiper. Upon arriving home, M.A. posted some of his photos on the Birding NZ website (<http://www.birdingnz.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=6454&start=20>). The following day, wader experts from around the country began to question what species the supposed pectoral sandpiper really was. Based on a number of distinguishing features, it was quickly re-identified as a Cox's sandpiper (Fig. 1). A picture of the Cox's sandpiper was sent to Danny Rogers, an Australian wader expert. He concluded that it



Fig. 1. The Lake Ellesmere Cox's sandpiper, photo by Mike Ashbee. Note the long, gently decurved black bill turning slightly yellow towards the base, which helps to separate this bird from a pectoral sandpiper. The breast markings lack the clear demarcation from the belly, as is found in pectoral sandpipers. Another helpful identification feature are the legs, which are rather long and green-grey in colour.

was a first winter bird, still in its first year, but no longer a full juvenile.

Following this first sighting, the bird was found on at least 7 different occasions from November 2016 to February 2017, and photographed again. Like all waders, it moved around the lake depending on water levels and was seen in a variety of areas, including the north end of Selwyn Huts, near the Embankment Road fence line, and at Crescent Island. The last reported sighting of this bird was at Crescent Island on 11 February 2017 by Phil Crutchley and Matt Rose.

In both size and overall plumage, the Cox's sandpiper appeared similar to a pectoral sandpiper; however, there were of course some differences in plumage. The nape and mantle of the Cox's sandpiper were streaked in light brown and off white, with the brown being more dominant than in pectoral sandpipers. The back and wings were darker brown, with buff edging to the feathers similar to that found in pectoral and sharp-tailed sandpipers (Fig. 2). The Cox's sandpiper's belly was white, and the throat and breast were streaked off-white and brown. The demarcation between the breast and belly was indistinct, whereas in pectoral sandpipers the demarcation is clear. It had pale brown cheeks, a cream coloured chin, and a brown crown. The supercilium was faint, off white in colour with light brown flecking. The bill was quite long, about the same length as a curlew sandpiper's, and gently downcurved. It was black in colour with a pale, slightly yellow base. The bill was 1 of the Cox's sandpiper's most distinctive features in the field. The length, gentle decurvation and predominantly black colouration along with the yellow base made it appear markedly different to the bills of pectoral

sandpipers, which are shorter, straighter, and have black tips and pink bases. The legs were a pale shade of indistinct grey green, unlike the brighter yellow legs of pectoral sandpipers. The bill length, decurvation and colour, coupled with the leg colour and overall plumage separate Cox's sandpiper from the 3 most common sandpiper species in New Zealand – pectoral sandpiper, curlew sandpiper and sharp-tailed sandpiper – as well as dunlins.

While the Cox's sandpiper had undergone much of its head and body moult, there were many juvenile feathers remaining which allowed D.R. to age the bird. The upper wing-coverts were all at the same stage of wear with slightly pointed tips, typical of juvenile sandpipers. The wing-coverts were visible, meaning that the overlying scapulars were small. D.R. detected two generations of feathers in the scapulars – the juvenile feathers with broad black centres and the wider, mainly greyish feathers of the incoming first non-breeding plumage (Fig. 2). Finally, the Cox's sandpiper had fresh outer primaries showing no moult and little to no wear. In November, adult sandpipers would be in primary moult with worn outer primaries. The small white fringes on the tips of the bird's outer primaries are also typical of juvenile plumage in small sandpipers.

The majority of Cox's sandpipers have been found in southern and south-eastern Australia (Buckley 1988). In addition to the Australian sightings, a juvenile Cox's sandpiper was seen in Plymouth Bay, Massachusetts (Kasprzyk *et al.* 1987; Vickery *et al.* 1987; Buckley 1988) in 1987, while in 2001 another juvenile was seen in Iburaki Prefecture, Japan (Ujihara 2002). M.A.'s sighting on 25 November 2016 was the first record of a Cox's

Fig. 2. Cox's sandpiper (left) and sharp-tailed sandpiper (right). Photo by Mike Ashbee. Note both the juvenile feathers with black centres and the wider grey feathers of the first non-breeding plumage which can be seen in the Cox's scapulars.



sandpiper in New Zealand. An Unusual Bird Report (UBR 2017/13) was submitted to the Rare Birds Appraisal Committee and accepted in May 2017.

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