

Status and Occurrence of Little Curlew (*Numenius minutus*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Little Curlew (*Numenius minutus*) is a small shorebird that is found breeding in isolated subalpine areas with stunted forests exclusively in Siberia from Yenisei River and western Chukotka region (Brazil 2009). This species is highly migratory stopping on open fields and short grassland habitat during migration and the winter (O'Brien *et al.* 2006, Brazil 2009). During the fall migration the Little Curlew migrates overland as a fairly common migrant throughout Eastern China, and is a rare to scarce migrant through Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (Brazil 2009). When leaving eastern China in the fall, the Little Curlew flies non-stop over water to in the fall to winter in Australia, where this species will gather in groups of up to several thousand birds (O'Brien *et al.* 2006). This species has been recorded somewhat regularly in New Guinea, and as a straggler in the Celebes, Borneo and the Philippines (Vaurie 1965), as well as in Tasmania and New Zealand (Labutin 1982, Cramp 1983, O'Brien *et al.* 2006, Brazil 2009).

In North America, the Little Curlew is an accidental migrant vagrant along the entire West Coast from Alaska to California. There is a single record for Alaska of a bird found at St. Lawrence Island June 7-8, 1989 (Gibson and Kessel 1992). There is a single accepted sight record by the Washington Bird Records Committee for Washington State that was found at Leadbetter Point on May 6, 2001 (Mlodinow 2002, Wahl *et al.* 2005). In California, there are 4 accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee which all occurred in the fall (Lehman and Dunn 1985, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In British Columbia, there are three well described sight records for the Little Curlew that have all come from coastal shorebird hotspots (Toochin *et al.* 2014).

The Little Curlew is an accidental vagrant migrant anywhere in Europe with a couple of records from Great Britain (Moon 1983), and one from Norway (Andersson 1971), and one from Sweden (Message and Taylor 2005). The Little Curlew has also been recorded from the Seychelles Islands (Feare 1973, Cramp 1983).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Little Curlew is covered in many standard North American Field Guides. This is a small curlew species measuring 28-32 cm in length, with a wingspan of 68-71 cm, and weighing 118-221 grams (Brazil 2009). The Little Curlew is closely related to the now presumed extinct Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*) which was a little larger measuring 36 cm (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Eskimo Curlew was once incredibly abundant and bred in the high arctic from western Alaska to northwestern Canada and migrated to winter in the Pampas region of Argentina, and southern Brazil (O'Brien *et al.* 2006). This species was decimated by market and

sport hunting from the 1850-1875, and was nearly extinct by the mid-20th Century and is likely extinct today (O'Brien *et al.* 2006). A species that does occur in British Columbia and could look somewhat similar is the Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*) which is only slightly larger measuring 31 cm in length, with a wingspan of 66 cm and weighing 170 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Upland Sandpiper has a shorter bill, pale yellow legs, and at rest has a long tail that projects well past the folded primaries (Message and Taylor 2005). In flight, the underwings are white with dark spots (Message and Taylor 2005). Flight call is a Whimbrel-like “*quip-ip-ip-ip*”, and also a liquid “*pulip*” (Sibley 2000, Message and Taylor 2005). A good source reference on differences between Upland Sandpiper and Little Curlew can be found by reading Hayman *et al.* (1986), Lewington *et al.* (1992), or O'Brien *et al.* (2006). The Little Curlew also resembles a Whimbrel, but much smaller, which a proportionally shorter, thinner, and straighter bill (Lewington *et al.* 1992). The overall plumage is basically buffier, and underparts are less heavily patterned, and the flanks are almost unmarked (Lewington *et al.* 1992). The loreal stripe is incomplete, unlike on a Whimbrel, giving this species a more bare-faced expression (Lewington *et al.* 1992).

The Little Curlew is an obvious species that given good views should pose any identification issues for observers if encountered in British Columbia.

Adults have a distinctive buff and head pattern; with a dark brown eye-stripe formed a small triangle in front of the eye and a narrow line behind, from just beneath the eye (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Message and Taylor 2005). The rest of the lores are pale (Hayman *et al.* 1986). The upperpart feathers are darkish-brown, fringed and spotted pale buff; and the tertials are barred (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Message and Taylor 2005). The neck and breast are washed buff, with fine brown streaks ending neatly across a creamy belly; and the flanks are lightly barred. The legs and feet are dark (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Message and Taylor 2005). A partial molt into breeding plumage occurs in early spring, shortly before departure northward in April, and is sometime completed during migration (O'Brien *et al.* 2006). Complete molt into nonbreeding plumage starts before southbound migration in late July and August, and is completed on the wintering grounds (O'Brien *et al.* 2006).

Juvenile birds in fresh plumage can be separated from adult birds, by the conspicuous pale buff notches found on the brown tertial feathers (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Message and Taylor 2005). Birds molt out of juvenile plumage primarily on the wintering grounds, but some feathers are replaced before fall migration begins (O'Brien *et al.* 2006). This includes head feathers, mantle feathers, scapulars, chest feathers, and flank feathers (O'Brien *et al.* 2006).

The calls of the Little Curlew are a soft, rising “te-te-te” whistle, and also gives a low harsh “tchew-tchew-tchew” (Lewington *et al.* 1992).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Little Curlew is an accidental vagrant migrant species in British Columbia and is represented by 3 well described sight records (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The first sight record for British Columbia and for North America, was found by the late Brian Kautesk of an adult bird seen in the company of 2 Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) at Blackie Spit, in White Rock, Surrey on July 17, 1983 (Kautesk 1985). The bird was well described and written up by a very competent observer, but the record was not accepted at the time as there were no North American Records and no photographs taken of the bird (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). It is of note that the following year a juvenile Little Curlew, the first confirmed for North America, was found at Santa Maria Valley, in California and stayed from September 16 – October 14, 1984 (Lehman and Dunn 1985). Since the first record for California there have been three additional records that fall between the dates of August 4 – October 14 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The timing of these records fits well with the last 2 sight records for British Columbia. The second record for the province was of a bird thought to be an adult bird found by Adrian Dorst which was directly compared to 3-4 Whimbrel at Chesterman’s Beach, near Tofino on September 28, 1991 (Anonymous 1991a, Toochin *et al.* 2014). This bird was not refound the next day despite extensive searching by observers (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). The third record for British Columbia is a recent well-documented sight record by Peter Hamel of a presumed immature bird found in Masset, on Haida Gwaii on September 18, 2011 (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.).

Fall migration of Little Curlew takes place from late July to October (O’Brien *et al.* 2006). Post breeding flocks of adults and juveniles gather in late July and depart the breeding grounds in August to early September (O’Brien *et al.* 2006). These birds arrive in Australia from September to October (O’Brien *et al.* 2006). To date all sight records from British Columbia fit into this timing of migration perfectly and it is highly likely that any future records for the province will come from this time during migration. There is a spring record from early May along the west coast of North America for Washington State and therefore observers should be made aware of the possibility that this species could occur during this season again in the future. The spring migration of Little Curlew takes place between April and early June (O’Brien *et al.* 2006). Birds likely leave the wintering grounds in April and begin arrival on the breeding grounds in May (O’Brien *et al.* 2006). Though incredibly rare in North America, the fact that the Little Curlew is a highly migratory species means it is possible another one could occur in British Columbia in the future, most likely at shorebird hotspots found along the coastal regions.;

Table 1: Records of Little Curlew for British Columbia

- 1.(1) adult July 17, 1983: Brian M. Kautesk: Blackie Spit, White Rock, Surrey (seen with 2 Whimbrel)(Kautesk 1985, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 2.(1) adult September 28, 1991: Adrian Dorst: Chesterman's Beach near Tofino (seen with 3-4 Whimbrel) (Anonymous 1991a, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 3.(1) immature September 18, 2011: Peter Hamel : Masset, Haida Gwaii (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

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