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## Nearctic vagrant waders in the Cap Lopez area, Gabon

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### Summary

Observations of three species of vagrant Nearctic wader are reported from the Cap Lopez area, Gabon: Upland Sandpiper *Bartramia longicauda*, Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* and Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*. The possible sighting of a fourth Nearctic species, American Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*, is recorded.

### Résumé

Les observations de trois espèces errantes de limicoles néarctiques dans les environs du Cap Lopez, Gabon, sont présentées: la Bartramie à longue queue *Bartramia longicauda*, le Bécasseau tacheté *Calidris melanotos* et le Bécasseau rousset *Tryngites subruficollis*. L'observation possible d'une quatrième espèce néarctique, le Pluvier fauve d'Amérique *Pluvialis dominica*, est notée.

### Introduction

Cap Lopez is the westernmost point of Gabon. This peninsula, jutting into the Atlantic Ocean, has been found to attract many species of migrant birds. In particular, several rare Palaearctic and intra-African migrants, as well as Nearctic vagrants, have been seen in an area around a pig and sheep farm situated 12 km south of the cape (0°44'S, 8°44'E). This paper reports the sighting of four vagrant Nearctic wader species at this locality, none of which has previously been reported from Gabon.

The terrain consists of old beach ridges which support a vegetation of predominantly short grasses and herbs, scattered *Phoenix reclinata* palms and clumps of *Dalbergia*, alternating with marshy depressions which are flooded during the rains (October to May).

Other observers, Geneviève Chamagne, Patrice Christy and Dave Sargeant, are identified by their initials.

### Observations

#### **Upland Sandpiper *Bartramia longicauda***

On the morning of 23 October 1988, GC and I flushed a bird from a log behind the beach. It fed in dried-up vegetation (up to 30 cm high) in an active, restless manner; often only the head was visible. It flew high and fast, several hundred metres each time, often accompanying two Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* and a Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*. It was nervous, not permitting approach within 100 m. I relocated it in the afternoon and obtained good views, and it was seen again briefly on 1 November. In flight, the longer body, dark wedge on the upper surface of the primaries and the narrow white sides of the tail distinguished it from Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*. On the ground, the small buffy head with distinctly darker-streaked crown and the more faintly streaked greyish brown breast distinguished it from Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* while the larger size and longer legs and neck prevented confusion with Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*. These characteristics identify the bird as an Upland Sandpiper (Peterson 1980, Hayman *et al.* 1986).

This species has been reported only once before from the African continent, in Mauritania in 1986 (Meininger *et al.* 1990). It has been recorded as a vagrant on Tristan da Cunha (Hayman *et al.* 1986).

#### **Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos***

On 12 November 1988, DS and I observed a small wader feeding on mud at the edge of a marsh. Our first impression was of a small Ruff but the centre of the tail was blackish (similar to Dunlin *Calidris alpina*) with pale areas on the basal parts of the outer tail-feathers. There was no obvious wing-bar in flight; the flight call was a high-pitched "prrit". On the ground, good views were obtained of the finely streaked breast, sharply demarcated from the off-white belly. From these characters the bird was identified as a Pectoral Sandpiper.

There are several records of this species from North, East and southern Africa, including Namibia (Urban *et al.* 1986). In West Africa, it has been recorded from Príncipe (Frade 1958, 1959) and Ivory Coast (Fishpool & Demey 1991). Since the species breeds in the easternmost part of the Palaearctic region as well as in the Nearctic, Pectoral Sandpipers wintering in Africa are not necessarily of Nearctic origin (Zonfrillo 1981), though this seems more probable for individuals seen in West Africa.

#### **Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis***

On 26 December 1987, I flushed a medium-small wader from a sand track in the grassy area behind the beach. The bird was not shy and allowed approach to about 20 m by car, from which good views were obtained. The nondescript flight pattern, with no white in wings or tail, was reminiscent of a small Pacific Golden Plover. The "fat" head on a thin neck, prominent dark eye and plain, warm buff face, neck and breast were the diagnostic features identifying it as Buff-breasted Sandpiper. This individual stayed in

the same area until 26 March 1988 and was seen almost every week. It was photographed in December 1987 and January 1988 and good views of it were obtained by GC on 31 January and by PC on 13 February 1988. In February it was seen associating with a group of four Ruff.

There are records of this species from Egypt, Tunisia, Kenya (Urban *et al.* 1986), Senegal (Morel & Morel 1990), Sierra Leone (Field 1974), Ghana (Grimes 1987) and South Africa (Hayman *et al.* 1986).

#### **American Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica***

Christy (1990) and Fishpool & Demey (1991) have referred to my sightings of a possible American Golden Plover in this area on 26 December 1987 and 3 January 1988. This bird was distinctly grey-brown all over, including the belly, and lacked the golden feather-edgings of Pacific Golden Plovers observed nearby on the same day. Although the general appearance matched the description in Hayman *et al.* (1986) of American Golden Plover in winter plumage, the distance and brevity of the sightings did not allow assessment of the projection of the primaries beyond the tertials, indicated by Dunn *et al.* (1987) as a more reliable distinction between *dominica* and *fulva*. The bird in question cannot therefore be identified with certainty as *dominica*.

Other records of American Golden Plover from West Africa have recently been reviewed by Fishpool & Demey (1991). It has also been reported from southern Africa (Newman 1989).

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