

A first record of Curlew Sandpiper in California's Central Valley

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During the Spring of 1996, I was checking, at 1-3 day intervals, shorebird use of the Cache Creek Settling Basin (more familiar to many local birders as the "Trestle Ponds") north of the wooden railroad trestle that spans part of the Yolo Bypass about 4 miles east of Woodland, Yolo County (see Beedy, E. C., 1993, *Checklist of the Birds of Yolo County*, Yolo Audubon Society, Davis CA, for a description of the area).

Prior to 5 May, 3300 dowitchers (*Limnodromus* spp.), 1100 peeps (*Calidris* spp.), 100 Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*), 10 Black-bellied Plovers (*Pluvialis squatarola*), 15 Whimbrels (*Numenius phaeopus*), 6 Marbled Godwits (*Limosa fedoa*), and 2 Wilson's Phalaropes (*Phalaropus tricolor*) were using the ponds. I had noted a major influx of dowitchers in the two days before 5 May and many peeps had moved on, down from as many as 8,000 individuals earlier in the spring. During this transition period I found 2 Baird's Sandpipers (*Calidris bairdii*) 2 Pectoral Sandpipers (*Calidris melanotos*), a Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) and 2 Snowy Plovers (*Charadrius alexandrinus*). Water levels were dropping and the habitat seemed to be getting better for shorebirds.

During a visit to the ponds on 5 May 1996, at 1353, I saw a Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*) in full alternate plumage. It was foraging 50 yards north of the trestle. I was wearing hip waders and using a Swarovski HD 80 spotting scope and 10x 40 Optolyth binoculars to observe the bird. The sun was shining from the side of my line of sight.

I knew it was a Curlew Sandpiper from seeing the bird's back pattern and color, and its long legs as it was going away from me. The back, noticeably different from the other shorebirds present, was mottled black mixed with red and some lighter flecking. Compared to the Dunlin present, the legs were less robust and longer. At first, it fed with its head down, picking and gleaning off the surface rather than probing. Occasionally it flicked its tail, and would run from one spot to another as it fed. It mostly associated with the peeps and Dunlin but kept to the higher (i. e., drier) spots in the ponds.

The bird was more erect and plumper than a Dunlin. The overall color of the underparts, the head and nape was a deep chestnut-red. Whitish feathers encircled the base of the bill and there was a partial white eyering. Some feathers in the area of the breast and upper belly were fringed whitish and flecked with black. The bill was long and deeply curved throughout and was more slender and finer-tipped than a Dunlin. The undertail was not pure white but had some blackish chevrons like that which appear on some Western Sandpipers. The feet and legs were black.

In flight it showed a white wing bar and, at one point when it flew fairly close (about 30 yards), I saw the rectrices were black and the tail coverts formed a solid white band. When it was flying at eye level I saw the toes dangling just barely behind the tail.

I drove to a pay phone in Woodland and called several birders, including Ted Beedy, Hugh Dingle, Gil Ewing, and Joan Humphrey. The word got out and that day the Curlew Sandpiper was seen by numerous birders, including Ted Beedy, Ed Greaves, Gil Ewing, Marcel Holyoak, Joan Humphrey, Tim Manolis, Mike Perrone, John Trochet, and Bruce Webb.

The next day I checked the ponds and found that shorebird numbers had dropped. Almost all the dowitchers were gone. So was the Curlew Sandpiper.

I had previous experience with Curlew Sandpipers in Russia during a stay there from May through September 1995. Of probably fifteen different observations, I recall seeing 3 or more birds together, but never a single bird. Those Curlew Sandpipers always had their feet in water, probing and picking dowitcher-like.

This record is currently under review by the Sacramento Bird Records Committee and by the California Bird Records Committee.