

## SUSPECTED DUSKY, OR SPOTTED REDSHANK AT TINICUM

On July 30th, 1960 at about 6 p.m., when unfortunately all other observers had left Tinicum Wildlife Preserve south of Philadelphia, my wife and I were about to leave when opposite the "look-out" observatory she called my attention to a rather large "wader" (as we say in England, but "shore bird" according to the usual American usage) which she did not think could be a Yellowlegs. Several of the latter (*Totanus flavipes*, I think) were on the mud and in the shallow water, quite near, so that comparison was easy. The unusual bird was quite as speckly on the upper parts as a Yellowlegs, but the underparts were much darker, fairly uniformly buffish with dark spots, whilst the belly was almost black. I thought at first possibly the bird was oiled.

We set up the telescope with optic of 30X. As the bird was not more than thirty or forty yards away this brought it into very clear vision. Moreover, the sun was right behind us, so the light was excellent. Whilst we were getting the telescope ready I suddenly heard the unexpected call of a wader, a call familiar to me but quite unexpected here in North America. It was repeated three times. I had to pull myself together to realize what it was. Then I said, "Dusky Redshank". During the next ten or fifteen minutes while we continued to watch the bird, I heard this distinctive call at least a half a dozen times. I never actually saw it open its bill to call; all the time it was actively feeding. It never stopped to call persistently, but I cannot doubt that the bird we were interested in was the bird that made these calls. Once the call-note was practically a single note; every other time it was a typical Dusky Redshank call.

Here it may be worth noting that whereas both Greenshank and Redshank have calls that might easily be confused with the Yellowlegs; indeed, personally I can hardly notice any difference between the calls of the Yellowlegs and the Greenshank; yet the Dusky Redshank's call is very distinct, one of the easiest wader cries to distinguish. It is more of a diphthong than a double note; it is higher in tone than any of its near relatives; and the second half of the note is a good deal higher in tone than the first. The European Field Guide by Peterson and others describes it as a loud, distinctive "tchuit"; Dresser in "Manual of Palaearctic Birds" as a clear, loud "tjuti".

Plumage, — on the basis of the plumage alone, I should not have felt at all certain that we were looking at a Dusky Redshank, though I think I should have concluded that it was nearer to it than to any other species known to me. The upper plumage was generally similar to the Yellowlegs which were moving about in the same area, though rather browner; the dark

spots were much smaller than the dark markings on the mantle of the Ruff. As I have already said, the underparts were dingy, but I was prepared to believe that this was the result of oil. The summer plumage of the Dusky Redshank is completely black on the underparts; in winter, it is almost white. In England the bird is a fairly common passage migrant in late summer and autumn. In late summer, if you have eight or ten under observation, probably one or two may be still in full summer plumage, that is to say, quite black below; one may be in winter plumage; the rest will be somewhere in between. I cannot say for certain that I have ever seen one in exactly the plumage of the Tinicum bird; on the other hand it is quite likely I have.

Neither the size nor the colour of the bill and legs was too satisfactory. I should have expected both bill and legs to look longer than those of the Yellowlegs; but in fact they looked just about the same. Actually, however, there is a good deal of variation in the size of these *Tringas*. Although the Dusky Redshank is normally larger than the Common Redshank, in India where both species are common in winter, I have found sometimes it is impossible to identify them on the ground in mixed flocks unless they either become vocal or take to flight (the wing pattern of the two species is quite distinct). On the other hand, the long thin bill ruled out the possibility of a Ruff, one of the species that had to be considered; it was also ruled out, as noted above, by the small dark spots on the upper parts.

The bill was entirely dark; I especially looked for any reddish colour on the base of the lower mandible but could see none. The legs were largely dark, but there was a conspicuous dull orange chiefly around the joint which showed when the bird flexed its legs when walking. It is possible that the lower legs were muddy, but the Yellowlegs nearby with which I made frequent comparisons, showed a much larger area of yellow than the dingy bird showed orange. I have written "dull orange", but this not exactly true, for when the legs were flexed the colour near the joint was really a rich orange; dull orange applies to the general impression of the leg colour.

My impression is that all the above may fit a bird of the year, but the books available to me only describe the summer and winter plumages, nor do they indicate what seasonal changes, if any, take place in the colour of the soft parts. But my recollection is that in India in winter I have often felt that Dusky Redshanks, and perhaps also Common Redshanks, are a good deal less conspicuously red than they appear in the breeding season in Europe. In any case, Dresser describes the legs of the Dusky Redshank as "dull reddish orange".

We did not see the bird in flight at all. I telephoned to Messrs. Charles Price and George Lamb as soon as we got home. I understand that there was careful search for the bird, but it was not found again.

If it was a Dusky Redshank, *Tringa erythropus* (called Spotted Redshank in the Peterson, Mountfort and Hollom "Field Guide"), and on this

evidence I do not feel able to claim it as a satisfactory record, it would seem to me much more likely to have arrived from northeast Asia rather than from Europe. In this connection it is perhaps of some interest to note what may well have been a Spoonbill Sandpiper, *Eurynorhynchus pygmaeus*, was watched at the same place a few days earlier. I believe the breeding ranges of these two species overlap in northeast Asia.

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*Editor's note.* Mr. Alexander has since written: "Ian Nisbet, in a recent letter, writes, 'Did you know that a Spotted Redshank was seen (I think by Roland Clement) in Rhode Island in May 1955? I was once told that a similar bird was seen in Maryland ten days earlier, but I could never trace this to a definite source'. So, it would seem that even if our Tinicum bird was a Spotted Redshank, it was not the first for North America."