

HUDSONIAN GODWIT**Donald Shephard**

In this series of articles on the birds that frequent our shore, we covered Whimbrels in June and will deal with Willets in October. In between we have the less well-known *Limosa* Sandpipers or godwits: the rarely seen here Hudsonian Godwit and the Marbled Godwit. The other members of the *Limosa* Sandpipers are Black-tailed Godwits and Bar-tailed Godwits, both found on British coasts. All four of the world's godwits once appeared together in New Jersey. These long-distance migratory birds sometimes turn up in unusual places.

On August 26, 2009, Dorothy Tobkin spotted four smaller godwits feeding with a Marbled Godwit and a Whimbrel on a kelp bed at Glass Beach. The smaller size and the white rump contrasting with a black tail suggested they could be Hudsonian Godwits. This was not a likely identification because only 21 had been seen individually in California, no one had previously seen a group of them. Toby consulted her book. Fortunately, she had seen this species in Texas some years before. Experience and her guidebook cemented the identification as Hudsonian Godwits.

The following week, Matthew Matthiessen saw three Hudsonian Godwits at Virgin Creek, north of the previous sighting. Were these different birds or three of the original group circling the neighborhood? Bob Keiffer subsequently analyzed many photographs taken by the flocks of serious birders that descended on the area and concluded the Glass Beach godwits and those at Virgin Creek were one and the same birds.

Tob says she became excited when she made the identification; though it was not a life-list

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continued

bird for her, it was a new county record. She had previously discovered Bar-tailed Godwits for the first record in this county. That had happened on the same day, August 26, thirteen years earlier.

Normally, Hudsonian Godwits migrate from their breeding grounds in Hudson Bay and Alaska through the center of the United States to the Gulf Coast.

Although it is not likely you will see this rare visitor to our coast, it is not impossible. As Bob Keiffer wrote in *MendoBirds* "When considering the identification of Hudsonian Godwits make sure that you look for key characteristics, such as the black and white tail, black underwing linings, black and white primaries and secondaries seen in flight, distinct supercilium (eyebrow) especially at the fore-eye, small (for godwits) size, and drabber, grayish colors as compared to Marbled Godwits."

Adults have long dark legs and a long pink bill with a slight upward curve and dark tip. The upper parts are mottled brown and the under parts chestnut. In flight, they show black wing linings.

Hudsonian Godwits live at the extremes of North and South America, and hustle between them to breed in summer and feed overwinter. They reveal their life history only to persistent and lucky observers. In preparation for their possibly non-stop 2,800-mile migration each fall, these large sandpipers gorge on aquatic plants, an unusual diet for a shorebird.

Because they spend much of their life in remote areas, little is known of their life history. The species is highly vulnerable, with a population of only 50,000-70,000 birds, the majority of which occur at a handful of sites during the non-breeding season.

Curiously, a group of godwits is known as a "prayer". You may consider you do not have a prayer of a chance to spot Hudsonian Godwits. August 26 might be a good day to test your hypothesis. I am certain Toby Tobkin will have godwits on her mind that day.

Hudsonian Godwit photo
Ron LeValley
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