

THE OCCURRENCE OF WADERS AT SUVA POINT, FIJI

By N. J. SKINNER

ABSTRACT

Regular and closely spaced counts of migratory waders were made at Suva Point, Fiji, over 15 months. Arrival and departure times were determined with fair accuracy for the four main species: Wandering Tattler (late August-early May); Least Golden Plover (early September-early April); Turnstone (late September-late April) and Eastern Bar-tailed Godwit (late September-early April). Comparisons with earlier counts in 1961/2 and 1969/70 show a large increase in the summering godwit population and perhaps a reduction in the number of Wandering Tattler.

About 15 species of migratory waders from the Northern Hemisphere and one from New Zealand visit the Fiji Islands (centred at 18°S on the 180° meridian) during their annual cycle. A favourite feeding ground is the expanse of sand and mud exposed at low tide near Suva Point, within the Suva City boundary. The shore is well protected by an offshore barrier reef at a distance of 2-3 km. The normal prevailing wind is from the south-east.

Regular wader counts were made on about 50 occasions at intervals of from 7 to 14 days between May 1981 and August 1982 at Suva Point. I made the counts on foot near low tide by walking the same transect of about 2.5 km on exposed mud and sand (see Fig. 1). Waders were normally well spread over the area and most of them reacted little to disturbance by the many fishermen and shell-gatherers crossing the area. I could usually approach to within 25 m of individual birds. I estimated that I counted nearly all birds on the seaward side of the transect but that I may sometimes have missed birds very near the shoreline south-west of the mangroves.

The results of the counts are presented as graphs in Figure 2 for the four most common species recorded: Wandering Tattler (*Tringa incana*), Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), Least Golden Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*), and Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*). In addition, Knot (*Calidris canutus*), Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*), Hudsonian (Black-tailed) Godwit (*Limosa haemastica*) and Banded Dotterel (*Charadrius bicinctus*) were seen at least once.

In the notes which follow, I make comparisons with observations made in the same area by Morgan & Morgan (1965) during September 1961 to September 1962 and Smart (1971) during January 1969 to June 1970. Because of the large number of counts, it is now possible

to give fairly accurate arrival and departure times for the various species.

WANDERING TATTLER *Tringa incana*

The numbers seen in local summer, 70 ± 15 , and in winter, 10-20, are approximately one-third of those quoted by the Morgans and Smart and thus may represent a real reduction in abundance compared with the earlier surveys. The counts probably include a small number of Siberian Tattler (*Tringa brevipes*). They were almost certainly present, but I could never convince myself that I was able to separate them from *T. incana* in the field. Tattlers were the first waders to arrive in large numbers in late August and the last to leave during the first week of May. They tended to feed in the softer mud at low tide on the shoreward side of the transect. At high tide they roosted on the stone breakwater and to a lesser extent on small boats moored offshore.

LEAST GOLDEN PLOVER *Pluvialis fulva*

Counts along the transect varied between 75 ± 15 in summer and 10 ± 5 in winter. Numbers built up slowly from late August to mid-October, thereafter remaining fairly constant until departure in the

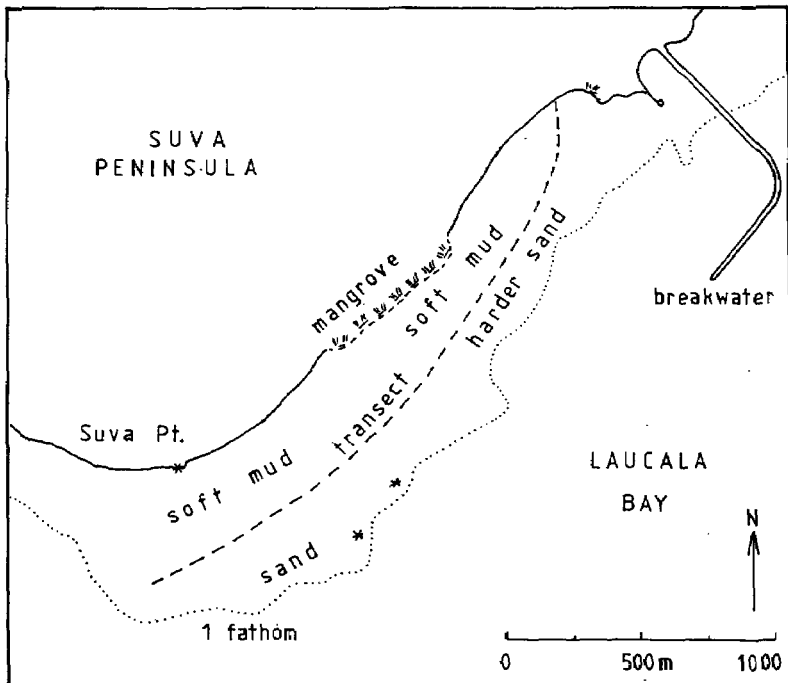


FIGURE 1 — The location of the transect at Suva Point

first two weeks of April. At high tides the plovers roosted in large flocks on a string of playing fields along the shore road immediately adjacent to their feeding grounds and I also made regular counts at these times. Numbers recorded on 23 visits between mid-September and mid-March were in the range 168 ± 50 . These roosts attracted plovers from a rather longer strip of coastline than that covered by the transect and the numbers are similar to those reported by Smart and the Morgans.

TURNSTONE *Arenaria interpres*

The Turnstone was the latest-arriving common wader with numbers building up steadily from mid-September to late October. Thereafter numbers were fairly static at 70 ± 15 until their departure at the end of April. Small numbers, 10 ± 5 , wintered in the area. Their preferred feeding areas were on patches of dead coral and on harder sand near the shoreline. Small numbers often roosted with Golden Plovers and Bar-tailed Godwits on the playing fields along the shore road, and after heavy rain large numbers (in excess of 50) often came on to these saturated fields at time of high tide. Numbers are a little larger than reported in the earlier surveys.

BAR-TAILED GODWIT *Limosa lapponica*

Numbers built up from a wintering population of about 5 during the second half of September to reach a fairly steady summer level of 65 ± 15 . They were the first waders to leave the area during the first week of April. Two of the wintering population were birds with leg injuries. Godwits preferred to feed in parties of 2-12 birds in pools on the harder sand, mainly on the seaward side of the transect. At high tide 20-60 birds often roosted with Golden Plover on the nearby playing fields. Breeding plumage became apparent from mid-February onwards and by mid-March was fully developed in most birds. The numbers reported here are 2-3 times larger than for the earlier surveys of Smart and the Morgans.

KNOT *Calidris canutus*

The first record for Fiji was reported in a footnote to Smart (1971) for the Rewa estuary in October 1971. I saw a party of 3 in eclipse plumage at Suva Point on 2 May 1981, and at least 1 was still present in late June. Further records of 1-2 were obtained between mid-November and mid-March. All the birds I saw were on relatively firm sand near the furthest point on the transect. They were noticeably more wary than the other waders present.

HUDSONIAN GODWIT *Limosa haemastica*

The first record for Fiji was from Suva Point on 2 May 1981 by Skinner & Langham (1981), who noted field characteristics which distinguished this bird from the Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa melanuroides*), which migrates to the Australian region but has

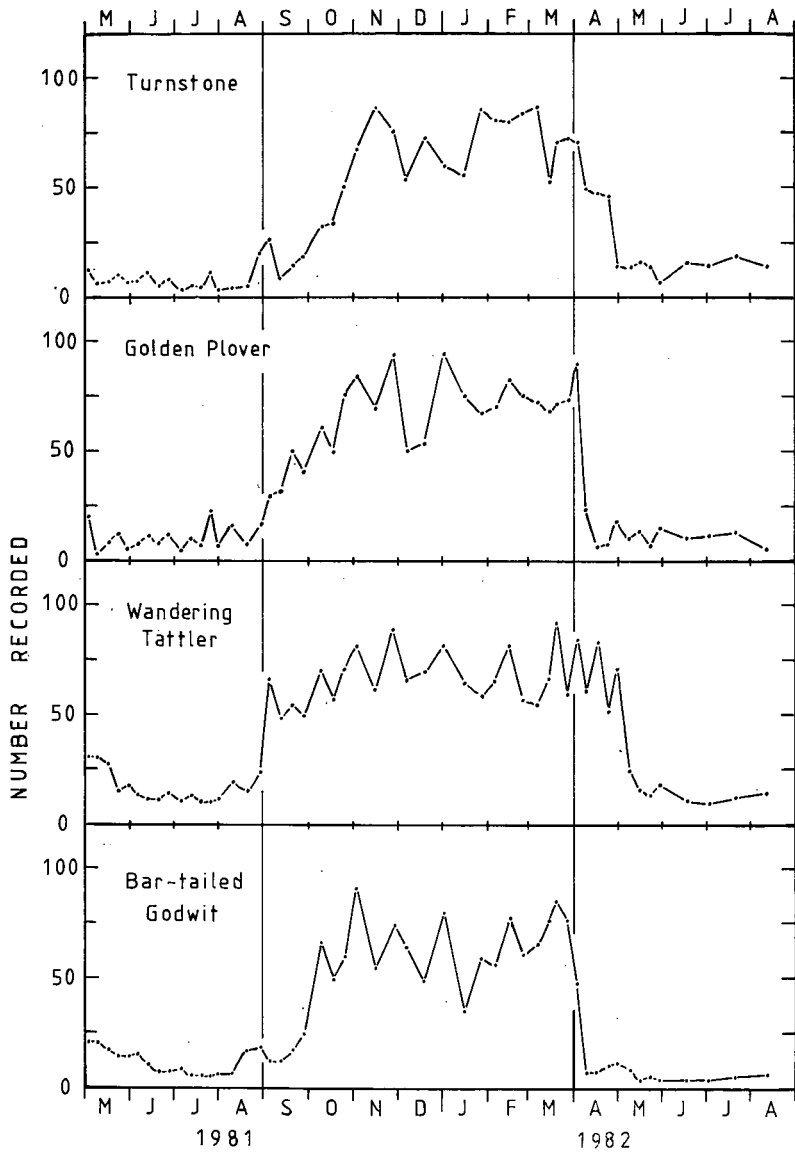


FIGURE 2 — Results of wader counts at Suva Point, May 1981-August 1982

not been recorded from Fiji. The Hudsonian Godwit was subsequently recorded on every visit until 29 August 1981. With increasing familiarity it could be picked out from the Bar-tailed Godwits when feeding on the ground by the slightly darker and less mottled plumage.

Two further records of one bird were made on 17 and 24 April 1982. This godwit had the belly blotched with chestnut and was presumably on northerly passage.

ASIATIC WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus variegatus*

Parties of 1-3 whimbrels were recorded on six occasions between 10 October and 17 April. All whimbrels seen at Suva Point had whitish backs and were presumably the Asiatic race *N. p. variegatus*. They were wary and hard to approach. Smart thought this to be the latest of the regular migrants to arrive in Fiji and my records are consistent with this statement, although the Morgans had a record for the 'east coast' on 17 September 1961.

BANDED DOTTEREL *Charadrius bicinctus*

Single birds in eclipse plumage were seen at Suva Point on 15 March and 14 May 1982. They were common at Vatuwaqa Beach, 4 km ENE of Suva Point, where the exposed sand is much firmer, as also noted by Smart. At Vatuwaqa, in five visits between 21 March and 7 August 1982, my counts were between 3 and 7 with a maximum in late June. On 20 June, 2 out of 7 birds had assumed sufficient breeding plumage for positive identification and on 24 July all 5 birds seen were in full breeding plumage. Three were still present on 7 August.

The Banded Dotterel breeds in New Zealand and the main external migration, in February-March, is to the shores of southern and eastern Australia, where they are found as far north as southern Queensland. The birds reaching Fiji are presumably stragglers from this main migration route.

In eclipse plumage the main problem in identification is to distinguish them from the Mongolian Dotterel (*C. mongolus*), which has also been recorded in Fiji by Smart and the Morgans. I found the table in McGill & Keast (1945) very useful in this regard and a further helpful field feature not noted there is the yellowish-green leg colour of *C. bicinctus*.

The following waders seen by either Smart (1971) or Morgan & Morgan (1965) at Suva Point were not seen by me:

Mongolian Dotterel (*Charadrius mongolus*)

Far-eastern Curlew (*Numenius madagascariensis*) (however, I recorded two at Nukulau reef on 20 April 1981)

Bristle-thighed Curlew (*Numenius tahitiensis*)

Siberian Tattler (*Tringa brevipes*) (but see earlier note under Wandering Tattler)

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*)

In addition, the following have been recorded from the Rewa estuary by Smart (1971) and are likely to turn up at Suva Point occasionally:

Sanderling (*Calidris alba*)

Red-necked Stint (*Calidris ruficollis*)

Terek Sandpiper (*Xenus cinereus*)

American Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus*)

Little is known of the migration routes of holarctic waders to the Southern Hemisphere. The absence of September and April peaks in the counts perhaps suggests that Fiji is a terminus rather than a staging point for the four main species recorded.

LITERATURE CITED

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SHORT NOTE

THRUSHES AND BLACKBIRDS IN CITY PARK

Queen's Park in Invercargill covers an area of 80 ha and contains gardens, playing fields and a 9-hole golf course. It is surrounded by city and residential suburbs. The evening of 29 November 1982 was damp, calm and clear after two days of wind and cold temperatures, and many birds were feeding on lawns and playing fields. I counted 707 *Turdus* spp. on about 53 ha, until fading light caused me to abandon the exercise. The birds appeared to be equally distributed on the remaining 27 ha, and I estimated that at least 1000 *Turdus* spp. were on the park that evening. Three sample groups contained T.26, B.18; T.36, B.22; and T.20, B.12. The proportion of Thrushes to Blackbirds was therefore about 3 to 2.

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