







Willet (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*) Susquehanna River - Cumberland and Dauphin Counties

August 16- 18, 1997

On Saturday, August 16, 1997, Ramsay Koury and I, along with my wife Robyn, discovered a Willet (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*) just after 8:00 am, working along the west bank of the Susquehanna River just south of the West Fairview Boat Launch. The initial observation of the bird on the bank of the river placed it in Cumberland County. We observed the bird throughout most of the morning. It spent most of the time foraging from exposed rocks out in the river in Dauphin County. (The county line follows the west bank of the river). At one point Deuane Hoffman, Ramsay and I waded out into the river to get closer to the bird for better observation and photographs. Deuane and I were able to approach to within 50 feet of the bird. The Willet was seen in direct comparison with Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*). It was observed working along the exposed rock spits in the river, which was very low on that date and also observed briefly 2 or 3 times in flight. Other species of shorebirds that were seen in the area were 1 Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*), 2 Spotted Sandpipers (*Actitis macularia*), 3 Least Sandpipers (*Calidris minutilla*) and 3 Pectoral Sandpipers (*Calidris melanotos*).

Robyn and I observed the Willet again on the afternoon of Monday, August 18. After that day the river level rose and most of the mud flats and rocks were no longer exposed, leaving very little habitat for any shorebirds.

Description:

Large long-legged shorebird. The overall impression was of a godwit like bird. In direct comparison it was twice the size of Lesser Yellowlegs. The upper side was pale gray, the under parts including the breast and belly were white, with just a small amount of pale gray smudging extending onto the sides of the upper breast. At close approach even paler edges were visible on the mantle and scapular feathers, indicating fresh plumage of an immature bird. The bill was dark and long - longer than the depth of the head (the distance between the base of the bill to the back of the nape). The bill was thicker than the bills of nearby yellowlegs. The legs were longer than the legs of a close Lesser Yellowlegs. In flight the bird displayed a conspicuous white wing bar both above and below. From above the secondaries and secondary coverts were pretty much the same light gray as the upper parts. Underneath, the axillaries and secondary coverts were black. The primaries and primary coverts were black above being separated by the white wing bar. No vocalizations were heard.

Discussion:

Two subspecies of Willet are recognized - the nominate *semipalmatus* ('Eastern Willet') and *inornatus* ('Western Willet'). I have no personal experience with *inornatus* and must admit that although I have observed many *semipalmatus* on the Atlantic coast, I have not really studied them enough to be comfortable in making a subspecific identification. There has been some discussion about the separation of the two in the field, on the Internet discussion group 'Frontiers of Field Identification' (birdwg01@listserv.arizona.edu). I have included a copy of a post from Michael O'Brien of Cape May Point, NJ in which he lists several points that he feels are key to separating the two subspecies. Based on O'Brien's notes, I would lean toward the identification of the West Fairview bird as *inornatus* based on the long-billed and long-legged appearance, the overall paleness and the "godwit" like jizz of the bird.

References:

- Hayman, P, J. Marchant and T. Prater. 1986. *Shorebirds: an identification guide*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA
- National Geographic Society. 1987. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, 2nd ed. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.
- O'Brien, Michael. 1997. *Winter Willets*. from the e-mail discussion group Frontiers of Bird Identificaton <birdwg01@listserv.arizona.edu>

Submitted by:

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Subject: [BIRDWG01] winter willets

Date: Sun, 16 Feb 1997 23:23:56 -0500

From: obrienm <obrienm@ALGORITHM.S.COM>

To: BIRDWG01@LISTSERV.ARIZONA.EDU

On Feb. 14, Greg Hanisek wrote:

> A Willet was found on the New Haven (CT) CBC and was seen for a bit
> shortly thereafter. It was believed to have departed, but then was
> relocated this week where it was originally seen, at the mouth of the
> Oyster River in West Haven. I saw it this morning (14 Feb 97). A quick
> and incomplete search of references shows NY and Mass have some December
> records, but this may be the first overwintering record north of
> southern NJ, where there are a few records beginning this decade. Does
> anyone know of any other northeastern records (Long Island recently,
> Rhode Island etc)?
> The literature has always suggested that fall migrants/lingerers
> would probably be the western race. Any suggestions on or caveats
> against ID of inornatus in the field? What does the nominate look like
> at this time of year?
> The West Haven bird offered no opportunity for size or bill length
> comparison, but it did seem very pale overall (especially so on tail)
> and only obscurely marked (some light barring on coverts/scapulars
> during fairly close binocular views in dim light).

I must preface my comments by pointing out that I have never knowingly seen an Eastern Willet (*C. s. semipalmatus*) between late August and early April. Further, I find most characters between the two races to be variable and somewhat subjective. However, in spring, summer, and early fall, I find *semipalmatus* and *inornatus* to be distinguishable most of the time with a combination of characters. In late fall and winter, all the birds I see (they are common on the Atlantic coast from Virginia south but surprisingly scarce to the north) seem to fit *inornatus* very well. Greg's description of the Connecticut bird as pale would certainly fit *inornatus* though that character, by itself, may not be enough to establish the race. The light barring on the wing coverts would suggest first winter plumage. I will list below (in rough order of importance) what I think the best characters are to distinguish the two races of Willet in non-breeding plumage.

- 1) bill shape - Proportionally thinner and longer on *inornatus*, shorter, thicker on *semipalmatus* (more variation in length than thickness).
- 2) upperpart color - Paler and more neutral gray (even tending toward blue-gray on the tertials) on *inornatus*, darker and more brownish-gray on *semipalmatus* (but some birds ambiguous).
- 3) leg length - Longer in *inornatus*, shorter in *semipalmatus* (this difference surprisingly variable, at least in juveniles, but the really long-legged birds are probably always *inornatus*).
- 4) head and underpart shade and pattern - Crown, face, neck, and breast darker, more extensively smudged with gray, and more contrasting in *semipalmatus*; paler, less extensively smudged with gray, and less contrasting in *inornatus* (some overlap). Some *inornatus* strikingly white on breast, neck and face, contrasting with the mostly dark bill more than in *semipalmatus* (these very pale birds probably always *inornatus*).

5) body shape - Longer neck, more bulging chest and concave sternum, more attenuated tail end (perhaps marginally longer primaries and tertiaries compared to tail), and more graceful S-curve to back in inornatus; chunkier, more evenly egg-shaped body and shorter neck in semipalmatus (some overlap).

6) head shape - higher, puffier crown in inornatus; flatter crown in semipalmatus (much overlap).

7) juv. wing covert/tertiary pattern - paler, more delicate, less extensive markings in inornatus; darker, coarser, more extensive markings in semipalmatus (some overlap but extremes are distinctive).

8) jizz - Combination of bill shape, leg length, and body shape give inornatus generally more godwit-like proportions than semipalmatus.

9) voice - All calls lower-pitched, hoarser, and slightly more slurred in inornatus; higher, shriller, and more clearly articulated in semipalmatus.

Any comments on the above characters would be most welcome. Also, I would like to know where, if anywhere, does semipalmatus winter in North America (in Florida or the Gulf Coast perhaps?).

Michael O'Brien
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Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: Willet (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*)

Date of Sighting: 16 August 1997 to 18 August 1997

Location: WEST FAIRVIEW

County: DAUPHIN

Observer(s): Don Henise

Ramsay Koury

Date of Submission: 1997

Submitted by: Don Henise

Written Description: YES

Photo: YES

Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas	X							
P. Schwalbe	X							
K. Parkes	X							
R. Ickes	X							
P. Hess	X							
J. McWilliams	X							
T. Floyd	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

F. Haas

Date:

4-19-99