

Subject: Marbled Godwit description

295-01-2002

Date: Wed, 01 May 2002 01:36:01 -0400

From: Ben Coulter <aeridia@velocity.net>

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Marbled Godwit at Gull Point, Presque Isle State Park, 4-28-02

Jerry McWilliams and I observed a Marbled Godwit on the morning of April 28, 2002 at Gull Point, on Presque Isle State Park. I was using 8.5x42 Swarovski ELs and a Leica Televid APO straight scope. At the closest, the bird was perhaps 125 ft distant, but this is a very rough estimate. Conditions were overcast, eventually becoming sunny and warm.

Jerry and I were at Gull Point to do the shorebird count for the International Shorebird Survey. As we got to the observation platform, we heard an odd two-syllable call that we didn't recognize, but decided it was probably a gull. Neither of us recognized it as a godwit at that time.

At about 8:15, we were out on the outer beach counting when we heard an odd call from above. We looked up and a large shorebird was in the air almost directly overhead, a hundred or two hundred feet up. I really can't be more precise about the altitude. It was a godwit, and Jerry called out that it was a Marbled. The bird was a buff or tan color, with noticeable cinnamon underwings. The bird was giving a call that I can best describe as kweeee-kwer. It flew off in a westerly direction, and we lost sight of it. In a few minutes, we heard the call again, and the bird circled above us several times before flying over to land on the near sandspit near the observation platform, beyond some small trees out of view from us. The bird continued to make calls.

From both encounters, the bird seemed broad-winged and heavy. Its flight was fairly swift, and the beats were snappy. The overall body was a buffy color, and the underwings were more or less uniformly of this color. The rump and uppertail coverts appeared as a plain brownish. The feet projected beyond the tail.

We made are way over towards where we had watched the bird land and found it on the shoreline by a male Red-breasted Merganser lying on the ground, and a Canada Goose further away. There were Greater Scaup in the water nearby. The godwit was noticeably smaller than the merganser. After a little while, a first year Ring-billed Gull swooped down and chased the Marbled Godwit from that spot, and it flew over to the beach closer to us, near two male and two female Green-winged Teal.

The overall bulk of the bird was similar to the teal, but the long bill and legs made it seem lankier. The background color of the body was a buffy color, with brownish markings on the upper- and underparts. The legs were a bluish-gray color, varying in darkness depending on whether it was overcast or sunny. They seemed much darker when it was cloudy. These were long, making the godwit appear tall compared to similar sized birds. The four toes were also long. The bill was upturned and bicolored, pinkish on the basal half, and blackish on the distal half of the bill, with dark extending up along the culmen to the base of the upper mandible. The nostril was close to the base, and about a tenth of the length of the bill. When it was overcast, the eye appeared dark, but when sunlight shown on the eye, the iris could be seen to be a brown color.

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The head color was a light brown or tan color, with a darker brown line extending in front of the eye sloping down the lores to the base of the bill, widening slightly at the bill. There was a pale supercilium extending from the supraloral back behind the eye. It was a whitish immediately in front and above the eye, and a little darker and faintly streaked ahead of and behind this spot. The supercilium narrowed slightly and faded behind the eye. The forecrown and crown were a darker brown than the base color, and had paler streaked markings. The dark lores, pale supercilium, and dark crown created a distinctive and striking facial pattern. The nape was also darker, and had pale markings as well. The auriculars were slightly darker than the surrounding feathers, creating the effect of a diffuse ear spot. The rest of the face was faintly streaked with a darker brown color.

The mantle was a brown like the nape, with pale buff barring or spotting. The scapulars were dark brown with variable notching or barring with a pale buff. The primaries, visible when the bird stretched, were a gray-brown color on the outer web, and a rufous orange on the inner web, which became brighter and more extensive on the inner primaries. The feather shaft of the outermost primary was a pale straw color. When the primaries were folded, no rufous was visible on the portion that was not covered by the tertials. The primary coverts were a dark brown, with no rufous visible. The secondaries were a buff brown, with some faint brown barring. The tertials were notched in the same manner and colors as the scapulars. Underwing coverts and axillaries were a bright cinnamon. The tail was brown, with pale barring. The outer rectrices had more of a rufous shade to the barring. The uppertail coverts had dark barring.

The underparts had darker brown barring, varying depending on the tract of feathers. On the upper breast, faint brown spotting turned to more of a barring. The breast had faint barring, creating a breast-band. The belly was mostly a clear buff. The thin barring from the breast extended down onto the flanks, and became more conspicuous. The barring was wavy with a dark streak along the shaft of some feathers. The vent was off-white, with no visible streaks. The undertail coverts were also off-white, with faint dark barring.

Jerry and I were amazed at how well the bird blended into its surroundings, and it was very difficult to locate in a rapid pan, or in a quick pass through binos. The coloration and patterning probably served to break up the bird's outline at a distance. Jerry was able to take photographs of the bird.

The Marbled Godwit was very nervous on the ground, and quite frequently turned its head to either side to peer up at the sky for raptors. A harrier in the area frightened it several times, and the bird would cower very low to the ground, once even with its belly submerged in shallow water. When the bird flushed once for no apparent reason, it flew around and landed near where it started. As the bird flew past, it sent up a wave of gulls in its wake.

When the bird was feeding, it approached the water's edge, and probed around, often wading into the water. At least twice, the bird picked at the vegetation at the shore with its bill. The bird had a distinctive, graceful gait. Size comparison was possible with the four Green-winged Teal nearby, and also with the male Red-breasted Merg, the Ring-billed Gull, and a nearby Killdeer.

The kweeee-kwer calls, or variations, were given often, with the bird opening its mouth to about a thirty degree angle.

After a while, we meet a group of five more birders, and got them on the godwit. It wandered around on the near sandspit for a while. While we

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were watching it from the observation, the Marbled Godwit flew, and headed away in the direction of the lake. I lost it behind the trees way out on Gull Point. The last observation was sometime after 10:00 AM.

Hudsonian Godwit was ruled out by the color of the underwings (cinnamon v. blackish), by the rump color (uniform brownish rather than black and white), and overall appearance. Black-tailed Godwit was ruled out by color of the underwings (cinnamon v. white), color of tail and rump, and overall appearance. Bar-tailed Godwit can be also be ruled out by flight feather and underwing appearance (plain cinnamon, not barred), and leg proportions. Long-billed Curlew can be most easily discounted by shape of the bill, and also to some extent by the difference in size.

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Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Tabulation Form - Round One

Species: Marbled Godwit (*Limosa fedoa*)

Date of Sighting: 28 April 2002 to 28 April 2002

Location: PRESQUE ISLE STATE PARK

County: ERIE

Observer(s): Ben Coulter, Jerry McWilliams

Date of Submission: 2002

Submitted by: Ben Coulter, *J. McWilliams*

Written Description: Yes

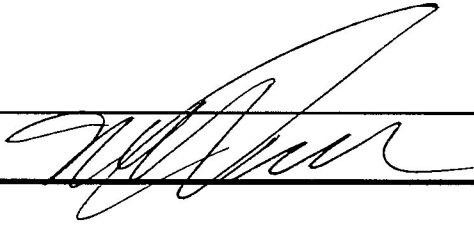
Photo: ~~No~~ Yes

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
G. Armistead	X							
D. Heathcote	X							
P. Hess	X							
J. Stanley	X							
E. Witmer	X							
R. Leberman	X							
M. Sharp	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments: 7/0

Signature (Secretary): 

Date: 2/5/03