

## NOTES

### IDENTIFICATION OF JUVENILE TATTLERS, AND A GRAY-TAILED TATTLER RECORD FROM WASHINGTON

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On 13 October 1975, Robert M. and Patricia Evans observed a juvenile tattler at Leadbetter Point, Pacific Co., Washington, that they thought was a Gray-tailed Tattler (*Heteroscelus brevipes*). A description was written, and six photographs of the bird were taken. As juveniles of this species and of the Wandering Tattler (*H. incanus*) were thought to be indistinguishable at that time, the record was tabled.

Now, 10 years after the sighting, it is possible to re-evaluate the record, based on my examination of tattler specimens in the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, University of California, Berkeley; the National Museum of Natural History, Washington; and the Burke Museum, University of Washington, Seattle. In addition, I have examined numerous photographs, both published and in my own collection, of both species in the field. It is especially fortunate that the photographs of the Leadbetter Point bird are available to examine now (Figure 1).

Parts of the original description are excerpted, as follows: "Plumage: Like a *very* pale Wandering Tattler. Light gray breast, white belly and undertail coverts. A little speckling on wings. No wing-stripe or tail pattern. Back, tail and rump appeared one solid color. (We did *not* notice the rump being lighter.) Light line above eye. Line through eye dark. black from eye to bill. Axillaries gray.

"Bill: Greenish-gray shading to black at tip. Legs: *Bright* yellow (not just yellowish). Voice: Mellow, ringing 3 note call: "too-doo-weet," repeated several times when flushed. Actions: Occasional tail bobbing. Habitat: Sand-mudflat. Comments: Seen with Killdeer and [Red] Knot. *Lighter* than the Knot. Voice *not* the same as the Wandering Tattler which was seen and heard the previous day and listened to on record. Realized the lighter rump is supposed to be a field mark of this species. Bird allowed approach to within about 25' and returned to same place after flushing."

Most field marks with which to distinguish juveniles of the two species are not absolutely diagnostic, but a combination of characteristics of this bird suffice to place a species name on it. The distinguishing characteristics (of *juveniles* only) are as follows, along with characteristics of the Leadbetter Point bird, taken from the description and photographs:

(1) *Gray-tailed* is *slightly paler* than *Wandering* on back and breast, with a slightly more brownish cast. Without being able to compare birds directly, this is a difficult characteristic, but the Leadbetter Point bird looks distinctly pale and brownish-tinged in the photographs, which appear correctly exposed. It is fortunate that the bird was compared directly with a Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*), as I was able to similarly compare juvenal- and basic-plumaged specimens of these species (3 Gray-tailed Tattlers, 12 Wandering Tattlers, 4 Red Knots) in the Burke Museum. The Gray-tailed Tattlers are about the same shade as the knots, the Wandering Tattlers distinctly darker. I doubt if a juvenile Wandering Tattler would ever be called paler than a juvenile Red Knot in the field.

(2) *Gray-tailed* has the tail *slightly paler* than the back, while there is no difference in Wandering. This difference has not been mentioned in the literature, and all field

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guides that I have examined illustrate Gray-tailed in flight as if it were uniformly colored above. The contrast is easily seen on specimens, the upper tail coverts and rectrices distinctly paler than the rest of the dorsal surface. When it could be seen, the tail was paler than the back in all photographs of juvenile Gray-tailed that I have examined. The tail does not show in the photos of the Leadbetter Point bird, and the description indicates the bird was uniformly colored above, but the contrast is subtle and may not be as visible in the field as it is in museum specimens. As the observers were looking for a contrasting *rump*, they may not have noted a slightly paler tail as such.

The whitish tips on rump and upper tail coverts in adult Gray-tailed, lacking in Wandering, have been emphasized as diagnostic in literature descriptions (Ridgway 1919, Pough 1957, Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959, King and Dickinson 1975, Prater et al. 1977) and may, along with the sometime common name of Gray-rumped Tattler, have been responsible for thoughts that Gray-tailed should have a paler rump. This characteristic is of little value in the field, not only because the wings normally cover the area, but also because adult Wandering Tattlers also may have a few pale-tipped upper tail coverts. Juveniles of both species have these markings, more abundantly on the average in Gray-tailed (see 5 below).

(3) *Gray-tailed averages more white on the supraocular stripes and forehead than Wandering.* The stripes are usually wider in Gray-tailed and regularly meet on the forehead, while they are usually narrower in Wandering and often are well separated by the dark forehead. This has been mentioned more than once in recent literature (King and Dickinson 1975, National Geographic Society 1983, De Schauensee 1984). I have looked at dozens of specimens and 10 or more photographs of each species, and I find this is only an average difference, with much overlap. The Leadbetter Point bird has conspicuously white supraocular stripes that do not quite meet on the forehead.

(4) *Gray-tailed has white sides; Wandering has gray.* This characteristic has not been mentioned in the literature but was pointed out to me by Urban Olsson, who studied both species in September 1984 in Japan. The difference was illustrated but not mentioned in National Geographic Society (1983) and Robbins et al. (1983). From examination of all the photographs of juvenile tattlers available to me (13 Gray-tailed, 6 Wandering) and a small series of specimens, this characteristic seems to hold up and is probably the best plumage attribute to use to separate juvenal- and basic-plumaged tattlers. The Leadbetter Point bird has white sides.

(5) *Gray-tailed averages more heavily marked above.* The scapulars, wing coverts, tertials, upper tail coverts and rectrices of juvenile Gray-tailed usually exhibit pale tips and/or dots along their edges. Juvenile Wandering vary from almost unmarked to rather extensively marked but averaging less than Gray-tailed. The Leadbetter Point bird is quite extensively marked above, as much so as typical Gray-tailed and certainly more than typical Wandering.

(6) *Nasal groove is shorter in Gray-tailed.* The deep groove on each side of the bill into which the nostril opens is shorter in Gray-tailed, not reaching one-half the bill length; in Wandering it reaches to somewhat over one-half the bill length. This difference is very clear on a considerable number of close-range photographs I have examined. No photograph of the Leadbetter Point bird shows the nasal groove very clearly, but in one of them I have the impression that the groove is short.

(7) *Gray-tailed typically has a two-noted call, the Wandering a multiple-noted call, very often with 10 notes.* The Leadbetter Point bird had a three-noted call, the description of which sounds much like literature descriptions of Gray-tailed calls, with the exception of an additional note in the front (or the first note rolled). Falla et al. (1979) listed the call as either two- or three-noted, their three-noted description essentially like that of the present bird. I have never heard a Wandering Tattler give a two- or three-noted call.

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(8) *Gray-tailed* shows a wider habitat preference than Wandering, commonly foraging on mudflats. Although disappointingly sketchy, habitat descriptions of the two species indicate Wandering tends to keep to rocks in most areas in which it occurs, as it clearly does on the Pacific coast of North America. Gray-tailed, on the other hand, commonly forages on mudflats as well as on sand beaches and in rocky areas (Baker 1951, Smythies 1981, Johnsgard 1981). It was the Leadbetter Point bird's presence on a mudflat, very unusual in Washington, that caused the observers to scrutinize it more closely.

Parenthetically, in 18 years of observing shorebirds in Washington, with dozens of tattlers observed every year, I have only twice seen tattlers on mudflats. Both of them were Wandering, as determined by call notes.

## DISCUSSION

Of this list of eight characteristics, the Leadbetter Point bird matches Gray-tailed in five and Wandering in one, and two are inconclusive (forehead color and nasal groove length). The back/rump contrast, the only characteristic in favor of Wandering, might have been missed and is not striking in any case. Only two of the characteristics appear to be definitive, the side color and the call note, and in both of these the bird was clearly a Gray-tailed.

Although Gray-tailed Tattlers are seen annually in the western Aleutian Islands, they are considerably rarer anywhere to the east of that area. Roberson (1980) listed about 20 spring and about 40 fall records from Alaska, indicating fall as a time of greater likelihood of occurrence (there has been more field work in spring than fall). The farthest southeast records in Alaska came from Unalaska Island, with three on 24 September 1974 (Roberson 1980), and Middleton Island, with one on 24 September 1982 (Gibson 1983). These occurrences are perfectly timed to produce a bird at Leadbetter Point in early October.



Figure 1. Gray-tailed Tattler (*Heteroscelus brevipes*), Leadbetter Point, Washington, 13 October 1975. The photo shows the distinctive white sides, the pale dorsal coloration and the extensive markings on coverts and tertials typical of this species.

*Photo by Robert M. Evans*

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The only other record south of Alaska was furnished by an alternate-plumaged adult Gray-tailed that was photographed and heard at Lancaster, California, on 23 July 1981 (McCaskie 1981).

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Pat and Bob Evans for their notes and photographs. Bob was fairly sure of the identity of this bird ten years ago, and I wish he had lived to see it formally confirmed. I much appreciate the input of Urban Olsson; the note would not have been written had the "new" field mark not been pointed out by him.

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