

A Sight Record of Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Peter Hamel. Submitted: April 15, 2018.

Introduction and Distribution

The Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) is a large shorebird that is found throughout the Old World (Message and Taylor 2005). This species breeds in wet meadows, swamps, and lake margins of forested areas from Iceland, Faeroe Islands, Shetland Islands, from Great Britain, east throughout Northern Europe, Scandinavia, east throughout Russia, Kazakhstan, and the Far East from Lake Baikal, and the Lena River to Sakhalin Island, the Kamchatka Peninsula, and as far east as the Chukotka region of Siberia (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Message and Taylor 2005, Brazil 2009). The Black-tailed Godwit is a migratory species that migrates throughout its range (Hayman *et al.* 1986). This species winters from Great Britain throughout southwestern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, India, Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Australia (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Message and Taylor 2005, Brazil 2009). Many non-breeders remain on the wintering grounds all year (Hayman *et al.* 1986).

There are 3 subspecies of the Black-tailed Godwit that could in the future represent separate species (Clements *et al.* 2016). The nominate subspecies of Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa limosa*), sometimes called Western Black-tailed Godwit, is found as a widespread breeding species in Europe and the western Palearctic (Clements *et al.* 2016). This subspecies of the Black-tailed Godwit winters in sub-Saharan Africa and India (Clements *et al.* 2016). The second subspecies of the Black-tailed Godwit is (*Limosa limosa islandica*), sometimes referred to as Icelandic Godwit, and is found breeding in Iceland, the Faeroe and Shetland Islands (Clements *et al.* 2016). This subspecies winters mostly in southwestern Europe (Clements *et al.* 2016). The Black-tailed Godwit is a casually occurring species along the east coast of North America with records widely scattered from Ontario, south to Louisiana and Florida (Paulson 2005, O'Brien *et al.* 2006, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The identification of east coast records subspecies is unclear as only adult males in breeding plumage are easily separated in the field without capturing and measuring birds in the hand (Paulson 2005). Either subspecies is out of the scope of this species account and will not be discussed any further.

The focus of this article is on the third subspecies of the Black-tailed Godwit which is (*Limosa limosa melanuroides*), sometimes referred to as Eastern Black-tailed Godwit, is found breeding in the Far East from Lake Baikal, and the Lena River to Sakhalin Island, the Kamchatka Peninsula, and as far east as the Chukotka region of Siberia (O'Brien *et al.* 2006, Brazil 2009). This subspecies has a long migration route with birds wintering from Taiwan, throughout Southeast Asia, Indonesia, The Philippines, and Australia (Brazil 2009). This subspecies occurs in Alaska as a very rare spring migrant in the Western Aleutian Islands and is a casual vagrant

migrant in the Central Aleutian Islands (West 2008). The Black-tailed Godwit subspecies (*Limosa limosa melanuroides*) is an accidental vagrant anywhere in the Bering Sea region and at Prudhoe Bay, the Colville River Delta, and at Kodiak Island (West 2008). There are no photographed records south of Alaska, but there is a recent well documented sight record for British Columbia of an adult in breeding plumage from Sandspit on Haida Gwaii from June 17, 2010 (Toochin *et al.* 2014).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Black-tailed Godwit is covered in most standard North American Field Guides. This is a large species measuring 36-44 cm in length, with a wingspan of 70-82 cm, and weighing 160-440 grams for adult males and 244-540 grams for adult females (Brazil 2009). The most likely species that could cause confusion in British Columbia is the similar sized Hudsonian Godwit which measures 36-42 cm in length, with a wingspan of 74 cm, and weighs 196-266 grams for adult males and 246-358 grams for adult females (Brazil 2009, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). At all ages the Hudsonian Godwit in flight has more pointed wing tips than Black-tailed Godwit, and has black axillaries and underwing-coverts, and a narrow white underwing bar (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The underside of the wing in flight on a Black-tailed Godwit is white with a dark trailing edge from the secondaries to the primaries (Brazil 2009). On Hudsonian Godwit, the feet just barely project past the tail, unlike Black-tailed Godwit which has much of the leg and all of the feet projecting past the tail. The bill of the Hudsonian Godwit has a slight upcurve, whereas the Black-tailed Godwit has a fairly straight bill (Brazil 2009, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In flight, there is a narrow white stripe along the entire length of the upperwing (Hayman *et al.* 1986). Other important features of the Black-tailed Godwit is that it is a large, tall, long-legged, long-necked, and long billed species (Brazil 2009). For detailed information on Hudsonian Godwit identification and separation from Black-tailed Godwit it is recommended reading Paulson (1993), Paulson (2005), O'Brien *et al.* (2006), Brazil (2009), or Mullarney and Zetterstrom (2009).

Adult breeding plumaged male has a rufous or chestnut head, with a dark crown, rufous or chestnut neck, and breast, with a prominent white supercilium from the bill to the black eye (Brazil 2009). The long straight bill is pale-pink at the base, but black at the tip (O'Brien *et al.* 2006, Brazil 2009). Birds in this plumage have a pale chin, with heavy black barring on the lower breast, flanks and belly (Brazil 2009). The vent is whitish with dark bars (Brazil 2009). The mantle has rufous-gray and black spots (Brazil 2009). The wing-coverts are rounded with pale fringes (Brazil 2009). The legs and feet are black (Jonsson 1992, Hayman *et al.* 1986). Adult females are similar looking, but are duller overall (Brazil 2009).

Non-breeding birds are plain gray-brown above, with a gray-brown breast, white belly and vent (Paulson 1993, Brazil 2009).

Juvenile birds are richly coloured overall (Paulson 1993). Juvenile birds have a warm peach-orange-buff wash on the breast and neck (Brazil 2009). The back is strongly patterned, with black-centered scapulars and coverts and more brightly notched and fringed tertials (Paulson 1993). Juvenile molt out of this plumage begins in late August and is normally mostly completed by November on the wintering grounds (O'Brien *et al.* 2006).

The call notes of the Black-tailed Godwit are a short quiet “tuk” or “kek”, often repeated (Hayman *et al.* 1986). In flight, gives a nasal, creaking “ke-weeku”, this is usually repeated (O'Brien *et al.* 2006).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Black-tailed Godwit is an accidental vagrant migrant species in British Columbia with a recent well described sight record found by Peter Hamel of an adult in breeding plumage at Little Spit, at Sandspit, on Haida Gwaii on June 17, 2010 (Toochin *et al.* 2014). Other shorebirds on the tidal flats at this time were 5 Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*), 1 Wandering Tattler (*Tringa incana*), 11 Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus*), 1 Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*), and 1 Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*). Three days earlier here had been 12 Whimbrel including 1 Whimbrel of the Asian subspecies (*Numenius phaeopus variegates*) (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.).

On migration this species is found at coastal wetlands and mudflats, as well as margins of rivers and lakes, wet fields, and typically feeds in deep water (Brazil 2009). The Black-tailed Godwit migrates in East Asia in the spring between the months of April and May, and in the fall from August through October (Brazil 2009). It is most likely that the bird found at Haida Gwaii was a spring overshoot that came from Asia, came across the Aleutian Islands and ended up at Sandspit before heading southward down the west coast of North America (Howell *et al.* 2011). It is most likely this bird overshoot into Alaska from northeast Asia in the late spring and was detected at the beginning of its southbound migration (Howell *et al.* 2011). Haida Gwaii is perfectly situated to get birds such as this one and has a history of turning up Asian vagrants (Howell *et al.* 2011). It is highly likely that this species will turn up again in British Columbia, and down the west coast with the most likelihood of being found at the many shorebird hotspots that are found along the coast.

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