

The enigma of the Dowitcher (*Limnodromus sp*) at the San Pedro del Pinatar Salinas in Murcia, 9th March to at least 13th March 2013

written by Richard Howard, 13th March 2013.

In the late afternoon of Saturday, 9th March 2013, local birdwatchers Francisco Javier Palacios Garcia and Isabel Peñalver photographed a wader unknown to them when walking around the Salinas at San Pedro del Pinatar, Murcia. I was at the Salinas at the time and they asked me my opinion of the bird. Although I couldn't immediately identify it from the pictures in the camera viewfinder, I knew it was something different and asked Javier to e-mail them to me so that I could view it on my computer. When I got home, I did some investigation, and immediately identified the bird as a Dowitcher species and relayed this to Javier.

The following morning, Sunday 10th March, I went to the area where they had seen the wader, on a sunny, almost windless morning (although the wind did pick up later from the south west), and with the sun behind me. The bird was feeding together with Common Redshank (*Tringa totanus*) and Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*) in the corner of one of the Salinas lagoons. I remained watching the wader and photographing it for around 2 hours, in which time I saw it down to a distance of less than 10 metres.

In the afternoon, apart from sorting the photos I had taken in the morning, I set about trying to identify the Dowitcher.

The dowitcher is a wader superficially appearing intermediate between a godwit (*limosa*) and snipe (*gallinago*). There are three dowitcher species, Short-billed (*Limnodromus griseus*), Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) and Asian Dowitcher (*Limnodromus semipalmatus*). Short-billed Dowitchers are further divided into 3 sub-species, *griseus*, *hendersoni* and *caurinus*.

The Asian Dowitcher could be discounted immediately, as apart from the fact it has never been recorded in the Western Palearctic, it is the size of a godwit, with long grey legs and a straight all dark bill.

General Description:

The bird seen was bodily slightly larger than a Sanderling (which it could be compared with directly as they were nearby for comparison), rounder, with longer legs and a longer bill.

Softparts: The bill at times appeared to droop down slightly over the last third. The base was a yellow with a slight greenish tint at the base, darkening towards the tip. The legs were also yellow with a slight greenish tint.

Upperparts: Generally grey, individual feathers having a brown shaft; lesser and median coverts appearing browner.

Underparts: Generally light grey 'blotchy' chest merging into a white belly. Flanks with darker grey-brown back facing chevrons.

Tail: Barred, dark and white across the feathers.

Head: Slightly darker grey crown than back, with dark eyestripe to eye and broad white supercillium from bill arching over eye and curving back around the ear-coverts.

Underwing: With wings open (in flight), underwing median and lesser underwing coverts and axillaries with dark(black?) subterminal bands; greater underwing covers with light grey subterminal bands.

Upperwing: With wings open (in flight) secondaries with broad white tips and secondary greater coverts showing some patterning on the tips. Some lesser coverts appeared brown with dark tips.

Voice: Unfortunately, in all the time I watched the bird, both on the 10th of March and subsequently, it was neither seen to call or was it heard.

Identification:

The two species of Dowitcher (Long-billed and Short-billed) are notoriously difficult to separate when in winter plumage, needing to be seen close and well. There is no one single identification feature to tell them apart. However, as I had taken some reasonably close and reasonably clear photos of the bird, I had high hopes that it would be possible to identify.

I could not use personal knowledge as the only Long-billed Dowitchers I had seen were in the Scilly Isles (UK) in October 1975 and at Abberton Reservoir, Essex (UK) in October 1979, over 30 years ago, and I had never seen Short-billed Dowitcher. The field guides I had to hand were the Collins Bird Guide (2nd Edition, 2009), the Helm Field Guide 'Waders of Europe, Asia and North America' (1st Edition, 2005) and the Advanced Bird ID Guide to the Western Palearctic (1st Edition 2010). I also used the Birdguides 'Birds of the Western Palearctic *interactive*' (2006). I found that the Collins guide didn't go into the detail I needed for the plumage of the bird. The Helm field guide seemed to indicate Short-billed as did the Advanced Bird ID Guide. The BWP*i*, similar to the Collins Guide, didn't have enough detail to help with the identification. I was certainly starting to get the feeling that the bird was a Short-billed Dowitcher.

As both birds are rarities in Europe, I wanted to get the help of people who had seen plenty of the two species to give me their comments. I therefore sent a selection of the best photos to the secretary of the SEO Spanish Rarities Committee, Ricard Gutierrez (I knew that some photos taken by Javier the day before had also been sent to him), and also put them into the 'Surfbirds' website in the 'Bird Identification Q&A forum'.

I noticed in the 'Surfbirds' Birding I.D. Articles section that there were a couple of articles detailing advances in the identification of Dowitchers ('New advances in the field identification of dowitchers' by Cin-Ty Lee and Andrew Birch, and 'New ID Notes of Dowitchers Bills' by Pekka Sarvela), so I also studied these and also wrote to the authors asking their opinions.

The replies I received both in the Surfbirds forum and from the authors of the articles were unanimous – the bird was indeed a Short-billed Dowitcher.

Reasons:

From Cin-Ty Lee:

‘No single field mark is diagnostic alone, but the arched supercilium, somewhat flared at the front and higher loreal angle hint at SbD. Retrice (tail) pattern leans more to SbD. Bill is short and slightly drooped, sides are somewhat light, suggesting SbD. Also, in flight there’s quite a lot of white in the trailing edge of the wing, not something discussed in our paper, but LbD tends to have less white in flight.’

From Pekka Sarvela:

‘This is never an easy pair, but the pictures are fine, and therefore my opinion is clear: Short-billed Dowitcher, female, winter plumage, 1st or possibly 2nd winter.’

The reasons are:

- Bill length is 1.81 times head length, which is relatively long, but within the limits (same as the highest measurement in my study – indicates female, photo 887).
- Bill base is relatively high. Not as high as it can be, but definitely higher than Long-billed Dowitcher (indicates a young individual, photo 887).
- Loreal angle is more than 10° (photo 887).
- General colouring is very pale (light) – all photos).
- Breast is light grey with some white ‘stripes’ (Long-billed has a darker, evenly coloured grey – photo 972)
- Breast’s grey colouring turns gradually into white belly (Long-billed has clear change from grey to white – photo 972)
- Tail’s white stripes are broader than black (photo 905)
- The back is very light grey – fits to 1st winter Short-billed.

Note that the bill has a slight curve downwards. This feature is described contradictorally in literature. Some authors define it for Long-billed, some for Short-billed. I don’t regard that as an identification mark (fits both). Both Dowitchers have a flexible bill top with special muscles. This can turn the top both up and down, and even open the top only.

I have tried to find some contradictory marks but did not succeed. My first impression was Short-billed Dowitcher with a too long bill. As after the measurements the length is within the limits, I have no more doubts.

From Surfbirds forum – Adriens

This looks like a clear example of a Short-billed Dowitcher!

- The rather pale plumage;
- The whitish flanks with sharply demarcated dark bars (greyer and smudgier in winter plumaged LbD);
- Rather pale breast, with discernibly streaked and spotted pattern (darker and more uniformly grey in LbD);
- Distinct white fringes to wing coverts (absent in winter LbD);
- Plain grey scapulars, with just a thin dark shaft streak (more extensive dark centres of scapulars in LbD);
- Bright, mustard-like colour of bill base;
- General shape: rather slim body with flat back; thick bill base; bill shows distinct downward kink near tip (Long-billed often looks more like a rugby ball on legs, with thinner bill base and straighter bill);
- Also the flight shot reveals extensively patterned underwing coverts, including the whole leading edge right up to the body. In Long-billed, there is often an unmarked white patch on the leading edge of the underwing, close to the body.

Hearing it call would be even better, but I think that in winter you cannot ask for a more typical Short-billed Dowitcher than this.

From Ricard Gutiérrez (Secretary, SEO Spanish Rarities Committee)

Characteristics of tail, flanks, breast and mantle give this record the status of being the 1st Short-billed Dowitcher for Spain.

Conclusion:

So there it is, a Short-billed Dowitcher. Identification couldn't be taken further (to sub-specific level) as in winter plumage, all the sub-species of Short-billed Dowitcher appear similar. My reason for putting so much detail into this report is that it may at some time in the future be of use to someone else faced with the same identification challenge.

Acknowledgements:

My grateful acknowledgements to all who have contributed to this report:

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Pekka Sarvela (*Author of the paper 'New ID Notes of Dowitcher Bills'*)

Ricard Gutiérrez (*Secretary of the SEO Spanish Rarities Committee*)

Surfbirds

Surfbirds forum Bird Identification Q&A contributors, Andy Adcock and Adriaens

And last but not least the two people who brought the bird to my notice in the first place,

Francisco Javier Palacios Garcia

Isabel Peñalver

Appendix - Identification photos:



*Photo 022: Size comparison with Sanderling (*Calidris alba*)*



Photo 346: Having longer legs and a longer bill, it could get further into the 'surf' to feed



Photos 447, 456 & 621: Three photos showing the flexibility of the bill



Photo 896: Used as the basis for the 'loral angle' measurement and bill height



The same photo showing the height of bill ration and loral angle



Photo 904: The bird in flight, showing the underwing covert, flank and tail markings



Photo 905: Out of focus, but showing the tail marking spacing, extent of white on the trailing edge of the secondaries, and retained tertials



Photo 972: Showing the lack of clear demarcation between the grey breast and white belly

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For details of birds in the province of Murcia, Spain, visit my blog at:

www.murciabirder.blogspot.com.es