

Hudsonian Whimbrel Flock Turns Up Gold! Well, Siberian Gold

Asian visitor stuns local birding community

By Lucas Stephenson and Tony Kurz (photos by Tony Kurz)

When Lucas Stephenson was scoping for birds off Point Saint George in Crescent City in early June, he spotted an anomaly among a group of whimbrels flying by. On closer inspection, he determined it was a Siberian Whimbrel, a distinct migratory subspecies of the Eurasian Whimbrel. This rare sighting drew visits from birders far and wide, with 88 different people contributing eBird reports. Here is a report from the original spotter, Lucas Stephenson, an avid birder in our region who began his birding journey at the age of eight, and Tony Kurz, a field ornithologist, long-time RRAS Board member, and inveterate local Christmas Bird Count leader.

The find -- Lucas: At 3:40 p.m. on June 2, I was standing at the tip of Point Saint George in Del Norte County conducting a concentrated seawatch effort, hoping for a Horned Puffin or something similar. After about fifteen minutes, I heard a flock of whimbrels and carefully screened through all of them. I was scanning left-to-right when a bird that I have seen in thousands of eBird photographs but never been lucky enough to actually see, popped out among the rest of the whimbrels. This one had an extensive white lower back. My first thought was that, of the countless checks of Hudsonian Whimbrel flocks along the Northern California coast, this was actually happening! The sight of that pristine white lower back was almost surreal as it bombed past the tip of my most loved spot in Del Norte. I immediately sent a message via the local rare bird WhatsApp network, hoping somebody with a camera would come quickly, as mine had a broken sensor. I worked hard to keep an eye on the bird. The flock quickly looped back and plopped down on the rocks at the tip of Point Saint George with nearby gulls. In flight, its striking white underwing was very evident, another characteristic of Eurasian Whimbrel.



Luckily, Tony Kurz happened to be on the beach nearby doing his Snowy Plover nest monitoring survey when he got the alert! He strode up the beach toward me and located the whimbrel north of the point. Soon thereafter, the flock picked up and landed further north on the beach. We pursued them, joined by Lucas Brug and Patti Jewel. After getting appreciably closer, the flock picked up once again, but this time Tony took photos and sufficiently documented the Eurasian Whimbrel. Later in the day, Aidan Brubaker joined us on the beach and found the bird just south of where I was at the time. With these looks, I was able

to get prolonged closer looks at the bird and see its more heavily marked/checkered brown underside and ever-so-slightly subdued facial pattern. I also discovered that the bird had been banded.

Documenting the find -- Tony: The June 2 sightings were the start of a long-sustained summer presence of this very rare Eurasian vagrant. And, if one was not enough, a second one was discovered on the same beach within the same month. How did we know it was a second one? Lucas had noted a band on the first one, with none on the second.

The rare status of these birds certainly would bring many birders from out of the area in search of this Eurasian shorebird. Ezekiel Dobson and Kaydnn Hatfield drove from Arizona, successfully finding the bird on June 5. Interestingly, they learned the bird they found was actually the second Eurasian Whimbrel. This whimbrel was in the area for a shorter period of time and was easily identified with no bands on the legs.

The banded Eurasian Whimbrel first discovered by Lucas on June 2 was last seen on July 31. That is a total of 60 days spent in the area. The unbanded Eurasian Whimbrel was present only 6 days total. First discovered on June 5 and last seen on June 9, with one eBird report of an unbanded bird from

June 18. Amazingly, these two birds were never documented at the same time. Through the portion of summer, we had an estimate of 70 Hudsonian Whimbrel using the beach.

Using eBird, I concluded a combined total of 88 reports of people that came to chase the whimbrels. Why such interest? The Eurasian Whimbrel was split into its own species earlier this year. Birders very much being listers, this just makes the bird much more appealing. We can't ignore the fact that the physical characteristics are subtle, but also quite diagnostic. And the fact that this bird came from another continent really makes you think about how it ended up here. Lastly, if you're a record type person there are only 6 prior records for California, and those aren't all confirmed. What makes this bird extraordinary is the fact it's the first banded Eurasian Whimbrel documented in North America!

The band – Lucas & Tony: After many attempts to photograph the banded whimbrel a few of us were able to get photos that make out the band information, band “8A 44536.” After several emails we learned the story behind this bird. The bird was banded on April 24, 2024, at Lake Torinoumi (鳥の海 “torinoumi” translates to “sea of birds”), Watari, Miyagi Prefecture, Japan (38.034, 140.911), by Jun Hosoya of the Japanese Bird Banding Association (Noboru Nakamura in litt.). This adds even more



fascination to the original encounter, as it establishes the distance between the banding site in Watari and Crescent City is roughly 4,700 miles, a staggering distance, needless to say.

The whimbrel was aged as an adult at the time of capture and was fitted with a metal band on the right leg and two flags on the left leg—a white and a blue flag on the left tarsus. The blue flag broke off prior to the bird's detection in California, leaving only a white faded flag turning yellow. Given the location of this bird with the combined physical characteristics, this puts the whimbrel as part of the Siberian subspecies (*Numenius phaeopus variegatus*) of Eurasian Whimbrel. (Left: Look closely,

you can see the band.)

Lessons from resilience – Tony: A quite astonishing bird that spent a summer in Northern California! The Del Norte Eurasian Whimbrel will go into the records just adding to the complexity of its head-scratching migration. Without a doubt, the presence of this whimbrel created stories and put smiles on people's faces. And I can't help but feel for the unfortunate folks that missed the bird not once but twice. For so much effort you'd think, at the end of that drive is a reward to glimpse the bird. Lastly, to re-illustrate the banded whimbrel and the importance of banding: Research and conservation can tell us so much about migration, population trends, and habitats of these magnificent birds. I am pleased to know that other countries are contributing to this research. With many species declining, I feel it's more important than ever to conduct this work. If anything, this Asian visitor can teach us how resilient birds are and give us hope for the future.

