



The North American scene

P. A. Buckley and William C. Russell

PAUL BUCKLEY is Chief Scientist for the US National Park Service's North Atlantic Region, Past President of the Colonial Waterbird Group, and Research Professor of Ecology at Rutgers University. A student of the ecology and behaviour of colonially breeding waterbirds, he has been a keen birder for the last 32 years, and a former Regional Editor for American Birds. His recent field experience includes visits to Pakistan, India and Nepal, as well as coastal Alaska. In mid 1982, his North American list was 'about 702'.

WILL RUSSELL is President of 'Wings', the American birdwatching tour organisation, which keeps him in touch with field ornithologists all over the US and takes him on birding trips all over the world. Author of several articles on bird identification and distribution, he has been Field Identification Editor of *Birding*, Consulting Editor for American Birds, and Lecturer in Ornithology at the College of the Atlantic. Deeply interested in Palearctic birds, he feels that a major achievement over the past decade has been the strengthening of contacts between American and British bird-watchers.

In 1979, Tim Sharrock asked us if we would collaborate on a column to be run in *British Birds* at irregular intervals, treating those items we ran across in our work in North America that would be of interest to *BB* readers. We agreed, despite some misgivings concerning our work-schedules; and, although we held several discussions between ourselves, and with Tim, we had 'initial inertia' that on several occasions seemed to doom the idea to a stillborn death. Nonetheless, we persisted, and, while our grand designs for a massive updating for *BB* readers of what has been happening in North America in, say, the last ten years proved daunting in the extreme, we have tried to backfill a bit. Our first effort follows, and we welcome comments and suggestions for future items. Reader enthusiasm and forbearance are appreciated. Please write to us at the address at the end of this feature, telling us your views.

Books Recent excitement has been caused by the appearance of the long-awaited 4th edition of Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies*, the first edition of which started it all in 1934. The dust has settled a bit, and the reviews by knowledgeable folk are remarkably consistent. Some of the new plates are fine, some OK, and some a step backwards; the range maps in the rear are a firm plus and are generally accurate; depiction of exotics (parrots, etc.) left divided camps: some applauded showing what is likely to be encountered, others abhorred perceived tacit support for introductions. Virtually unanimously, reviewers deplored the loose use of 'immature' and 'winter' plumages, especially with waders, and the essential ignoring of the advances in field identification made since the 1947 edition, and especially in the last ten years in North America. Our personal advice is to buy up copies of that 3rd edition (1947) before they enter the realm of antiquarian books.

For those following the field guide scene closely, a revision of Robbins *et al.*'s *Guide to Field Identification: Birds of North America* is in preparation. The National Geographic Society is planning a 'definitive' guide to North American birds, illustrating many plumages rarely shown (correctly), and they aim for December 1983 publication. Withal, it is our unswerving opinion that the *sine qua non* of North American field guides remains the three-volume set with text by Pough and plates by Eckelberry, the so-called 'Audubon Bird Guides', published by Doubleday in 1946 (eastern land-birds), 1951 (eastern water-birds) and 1957 (western land- and water-birds). The first two, reprinted several times, are readily available; the last has been out of print some years. But the plates of all three are nonpareil, and the last especially well illustrates some Alaskan/Siberian vagrants of interest to European readers.

Of quite a different sort is Robert H. Armstrong's *Guide to the Birds of Alaska* (1980; in paper only). It provides excellent colour photos of many Alaskan specialities and notably of Siberian strays and migrants not well depicted elsewhere or in easily obtainable books. Although some species of particular interest are illustrated in Armstrong only by variously useful colour paintings (among others, Lesser Sand Plover *Charadrius mongolus*, Long-toed Stint *Calidris subminuta*, Pechora Pipit *Anthus gustavi* and Pallas's Reed Bunting *Emberiza pallasi*), this is counterbalanced by excellent colour photos of many others, including Yellow-billed Loon [White-billed Diver] *Gavia adamsii*, most of the Nearctic waders, all the auks (Alcidae), *Catharus* thrushes, Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*, and Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis*. The two painted plates are packed with additional vagrants including Sooty Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica* and Grey Bunting *Emberiza variabilis*.

Yet another recent offering of great potential use to the keen *BB* reader is Roberson's *Rare Birds of the West Coast* (of North America). Patterned on the Sharrocks' two volumes on *Scarce Migrant Birds* and *Rare Birds in Britain and Ireland*, it follows essentially the same format for Alaska to California with two significant additions: (1) extensive discussion of species/group identification (about which there has not always been reviewer agreement) and (2) some 11 colour plates commissioned for this work, plus one of colour photos taken *in situ* of such North American irregulars as juvenile Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*, adult Little Stint *Calidris minuta* and adult Lesser Sand Plover. The painted plates range from not-at-all-bad, in the style of Barruel, to better-let-undone (plates 7 & 10). They depict many of the same species Armstrong does, some better, some worse, and the stint plate is reminiscent of D. I. M. Wallace's but not nearly so informative. The text is shot through with black-and-white photos, often of tiny size, some that were too poor for printing, and with a few where we truly could not discern, let alone identify, the bird. Notwithstanding, it is a useful book, a splendid introduction to rarities along the west coast of North America, many of which are likely in Britain and Ireland.

Alaska For about the last seven years, attention has been riveted each spring on the Alaskan 'out-islands': on Gambell, St Lawrence Island, only 45 miles (72 km) from Siberia; on St Paul in the Pribilofs (where a little-appreciated tradition of Asiatic bird occurrence goes back many years); and finally, in the last five or six years, on the far Aleutians, especially Attu, the last and only 210 miles (336 km) from the Commander Islands off the Kamchatka Peninsula. The list of Eurasian species has been impressive indeed (see Roberson's book), and 1981 was typical, although veteran Alaska hands termed it 'poor'. Notwithstanding, Gambell produced Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*, Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*, Red-necked Stint *C. ruficollis*, Polynesian Tattler *Heteroscelus brevipes* and Ivory Pagophila *eburnea* and Slaty-backed Gulls *Larus schistisagus*; St Paul came in with a Bristle-thighed Curlew *Numenius tahitiensis* standing alongside a Whimbrel *N. phaeopus*. But, even in an off year, Attu outshone them all, offering a spectacular variety including White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*, 12 Palearctic wader species, Slaty-backed Gull, Skylark *Alauda arvensis*, Olive-backed *Anthus hodgsoni* and Red-throated Pipit *A. cervinus*, Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*, Oriental Greenfinch *Carduelis sinica*, and many others. Perhaps of greatest interest is that Attu is *the* locus for that elusive and little-known wader, the Long-toed Stint: in 1981, which was typical in this regard, they were seen on 11 of 22 days, with a maximum of nine. The possibility of seeing truly rare waders such as Nordmann's (=Spotted) Greenshank *Tringa guttifer*, Asiatic Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus*, and Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmaeus* (one occurred on nearby Buildir Island on 2nd June 1977) is uppermost in everyone's mind in spring on Attu, now recognised as one of the world's premier locales for wader enthusiasts. Other interesting Attu birds in the last few years: Laysan Albatross *Diomedea immutabilis*, Falcated Teal *Anas falcata*, Steller's Sea

Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata*, Black-tailed Gull *Larus crassirostris*, Kamchatka Gull *L. (canus) kamchatchensis*, Grey-spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa griseisticta*, Dusky Thrush *Turdus naumanni*, Siberian Rubythroat, Pechora Pipit, Grey Bunting and Pallas's Reed Bunting. Perusing Roberson's book will set even the most jaded observer off on trails of mental delectation.

Range extensions Whether the increase in records of Ross's Gull *Rhodostethia rosea* in North America and in Europe is related to the species' (sudden?) expansion of its breeding range is still unclear. Now unequivocally apparent, however, is that the place to see the species in its exquisite breeding plumage is Churchill, on the western shore of Hudson's Bay. In 1980, to everyone's astonishment, three pairs nested at Churchill, and, while several young hatched from all three nests, their ultimate productivity remains unknown as observers commendably avoided subsequent disturbance. In 1981 (the same?) three pairs again bred, although no nests were known to have been successful (perhaps due to egg-collectors: *Brit. Birds* 75: 187-188). Natural predation on tundra and taiga birds in this area is high, however, and some people have speculated that it was increased by the attention of those wishing to see the gulls. A scintillating colour photo of one of the incubating adults (alas, exhibiting no pink breast bloom) appeared on the cover of the November 1980 issue of *American Birds*, whose lead article reported on the 1980 nestings. This occurrence seems to have been presaged by likely breeding (confirmed only in 1976 and 1978) during 1974-78 on the Queen Elizabeth Islands, in northern Canada (see abstract in *Proc. 1978 Conf. Colon. Waterbird Grp* 2: 16), so the range expansion, if correct, has been underway for some time.

Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri* moved northward as an Atlantic Coast breeder by almost 150 miles (240 km) in 1981, to Long Island, New York, following its southern congener, Gull-billed *Gelochelidon nilotica*, which made the same move in 1975. Royal *S. maxima* and Sandwich *S. sandvicensis*, each regularly breeding no farther north than the Maryland-Virginia border, have been behaving suspiciously in some Long Island colonies of Common Terns *S. hirundo* in the last few years, and may be next. Both now occur annually to at least Massachusetts, the former in small flocks, and both without benefit of tropical storms. Wilson's Phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor* has established a tentative toehold as an Atlantic-coast breeder in two locations in Massachusetts (Plum Island and Monomoy Island National Wildlife Refuges), and although summering adults have lately been seen south to Long Island and New Jersey, properly skulking about large wildlife refuges, no other sites are known. Thirty years ago, the species was a rare fall and an all-but-unknown spring migrant on the Atlantic coast.

S seabirds The gadfly-petrel *Pterodroma spectacularis* discovered about ten years ago continues unabated off the Outer Banks of North Carolina, where one trip in October 1981 had over 40 Black-capped Petrels *P. hasitata*, some sitting on the water in large flocks of Audubon's Shearwaters *Puffinus lherminieri*. An apparently previously unreported field-mark is behavioural: Black-caps jump from calm water when flushed, like dabbling ducks, while most shearwaters we know lumber off, paddling like sea-ducks. Is this a useful generic distinction? Another recent report was of a flock numbering between 1,000 and 1,500, also in the Gulf Stream off the Carolinas, perhaps over half the species' total breeding population. In any event, European sea-watchers might consider factoring in Black-capped Petrel as a possible vagrant, restricted as it seems to be to Gulf Stream waters, where it has now been recorded as far north as near Nova Scotia. Cyclonic and anticyclonic eddies regularly pinch off from Stream waters, taking with them flora and avifauna typical of the main stream, proximity to which is thus not essential for occurrence of Black-cap, Audubon's, and Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*, the three species that seem to typify blue waters north of the tropics in the western Atlantic.

Pterodroma petrels are causing a major stir in California as well. In late 1979, an oceanographic research vessel reported Cook's Petrel *P. cookii* from a seamouth about 100 miles (160 km) off central-southern California. Immediately chartered pelagic trips confirmed their occurrence there in small numbers in late fall and early winter, and on at least one trip another species was recorded: Stejneger's Petrel *P. longirostris*. In the spring of 1981, several birds identified as Solander's Petrel *P. solandri* were reported well offshore of northern California and several hundred more were seen off Washington last summer. Icing the cake, a dead Murphy's Petrel *P. ultima* was washed ashore in northern California recently. These are in addition to what was previously the only *Pterodroma* off the Pacific Coast, Scaled or Mottled

P. inexpectata, which, unexpectedly, has also occurred recently in the Gulf Stream off the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

While on the topic of pelagics, we offer the opinion that the sessile habits of British and Irish seabird enthusiasts may be drastically reducing their data input. It is so well known as to be axiomatic in North America that (with a very, very few cases on the Pacific coast where submarine canyons run virtually up to shore) one normally does not see other than the occasional pelagic seabird unless one goes well offshore (100 or more miles (160 km) is not uncommon). It is tempting to imagine what lies at sea off, say, Cape Clear, and how bathymetry and submarine peaks, plateaux and troughs affect pelagic bird concentrations. Here is one major area where, we believe, Europeans lag far behind their American colleagues.

Vagrants One of the few adult Sharp-tailed Sandpipers recorded anywhere in North America outside Alaska, and one of only a handful of that species ever from the Atlantic Coast, was seen at Jamaica Bay, Long Island, for almost a week in late July 1981, followed closely by a going-out-of-breeding-plumage Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* at Plum Island, Massachusetts, and a one-shot Polynesian Tattler in inland California (the first ever away from Alaska). A banner year for Asiatic shorebirds seemed in the offing, but, except for one or two west coast Red-necked Stints and Bermuda's first Wood Sandpiper *T. glareola*, that was the whole show. Plum Island came through again in late September when a visiting Dane found New England's first Redwing *Turdus iliacus*, seen and heard only briefly for one day. This was reminiscent of eastern North America's first Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*, captured emaciated in April 1981 on Martha's Vineyard, off Cape Cod, and seen on only two days.

Taxonomy A recent review in *Continental Birdlife* of the Pied Wagtail complex summarised from available published sources, some of them in the always-obscure Russian literature, interactions between *Motacilla (alba) lugens*, the black-backed form of the Kamchatka Peninsula and a bit farther south, and the northeastern Siberian *M. alba ocellaris*. The notable contributions of the paper are three-fold: it calls attention to distinguishing features between *lugens* and *ocellaris* (aside from the black v. grey backs, respectively); it summarises North American records (both have occurred, supported by specimens or photos, south to California); and it reveals that the Russians find them behaving as full species in a zone of sympatry on the northeast coast of Kamchatka. Indeed, the forthcoming 6th edition of the *AOU Check-list of North American Birds*, to be published in 1983, treats *lugens* as a full species: Black-backed Wagtail.

Information continues to accumulate, slowly and sometimes contradictorily, on the two forms of the Western Grebe (illustrated, to his credit, by Peterson in his new *Eastern Field Guide*). Apparently overlapping broadly in the US, and behaving as full species where sympatric, they are nonetheless reported to be 'hybridising' at one location in Mexico. If true, this would be another, rare example of a 'broken ring', requiring a difficult decision as to the proper taxonomic treatment. Evidence at present favours splitting them off as Western Grebe *Aechmophorus occidentalis* and Clark's Grebe *A. clarkii*, assuming the Mexican situation to represent a recent secondary contact where the isolating mechanisms have not yet sorted themselves out. No new taxa names are required, as *clarkii* was described over 100 years ago; after it was summarily lumped with *occidentalis* it seems almost everyone forgot why it was recognised in the first place. A paper in the latest issue of *Western Birds* (12: 41-46) discusses field separation of the two forms, and offers two splendid black-and-white photos clearly contrasting them. *Plus ça change . . .*

Endangered species It has been known for a while that Europe's Roseate Terns *Sterna dougallii* (most of which are in the British Isles) are in trouble. The other half of the North Atlantic population, centred in the Cape Cod-Long Island area, had been thought to be quite healthy. A paper just published in *Colonial Waterbirds*, the new journal of the Colonial Waterbird Group (established, of course, in the Colonies), points out, however, that not only is the North American Roseate population in very bad shape, but also, like Europe's, it seems to be suffering on its wintering grounds (in this case, northeastern South America). But, *contra* Europe's, our decline, previously unrecognised, goes back at least to the early 1930s, has been continuing at a relatively constant rate up to the late 1970s, and regression analysis predicts the species' complete extirpation—if the present trend is not abated—shortly after the year 2000. How many more species will turn out to be adequately protected on their north

temperate zone breeding grounds while they are quietly being eliminated from the face of the earth in the tropical winter?

Extirpated by pesticides as a breeding species from east of the Rocky Mountains in the US non-Arctic Canada, the Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* is now making a slow comeback—both naturally and assisted by the restocking efforts of Tom Cade at Cornell, and others. Most exciting was the appearance in 1980 of a pair at a former eyrie in an unnamed location in Maine, where they raised several young. It is not altogether certain, but it seems that at least one and perhaps both members of the pair were not ringed. If true, this would be a natural recolonisation, although one or both birds could have lost rings, or could have been raised by released pairs that have nested successfully in the last few years along the mid to north Atlantic coastal area. Alas, they did not return in 1981.

Previews The 6th edition of the AOU *Check-list of American Birds*, now covering down to and throughout the West Indies and Central America, but omitting all subspecies, is expected out in time for the AOU Centennial Meeting in New York City in September 1983.

What is expected to be state-of-the-art in stint identification is the paper by Richard Viet now approaching final draft stage. To be published in *American Birds*, it will feature commissioned colour plates by Lars Jonsson, as well as top-calibre colour and black-and-white photographs of all species. Complete age, sexual and plumage features will also be provided for all species.

Identification Recently published in *American Birds* (35: 778-788) is a paper by Ben King on North American pipits, illustrated with full-page colour plates each by Peter Hayman and Peiter Prall. This important contribution even illustrates worn plumages, and provides an excellent summary table of diagnostic features. It seems a pity that it did not include Richard's *Anthus novaeseelandiae*, Upland *A. sylvanus*, Blyth's *A. godlewskii*, Tawny *A. campestris*, Berthelot's *A. berthelotii*, Long-billed *A. similis* and Rosy *A. roseatus*, as then it would have covered the entire Northern Hemisphere.

*Dr P. A. Buckley and William C. Russell, c/o Box 974, Northeast Harbor, Maine
04662, USA*

North American Competitive League (NACL). Originally announced by the "New Beginnings" team, NACL completes one of the two tenets of their platform: to create a league as a distillation of community desires, along the same vein as ETF2L and ozfortress, and to form a global organization to unite and sustain the global TF2 scene. With ESEA now gone, TFCL hopes to finally breakthrough and become a major league in the North American scene by more closely replicating the ESEA experience, in contrast to RGL's then-progressive ruleset, and offering the promise of automation. However, TFCL's approach has somewhat subdued, with the league choosing to forgo its Rank S tier, which they had advertised in previous seasons.