

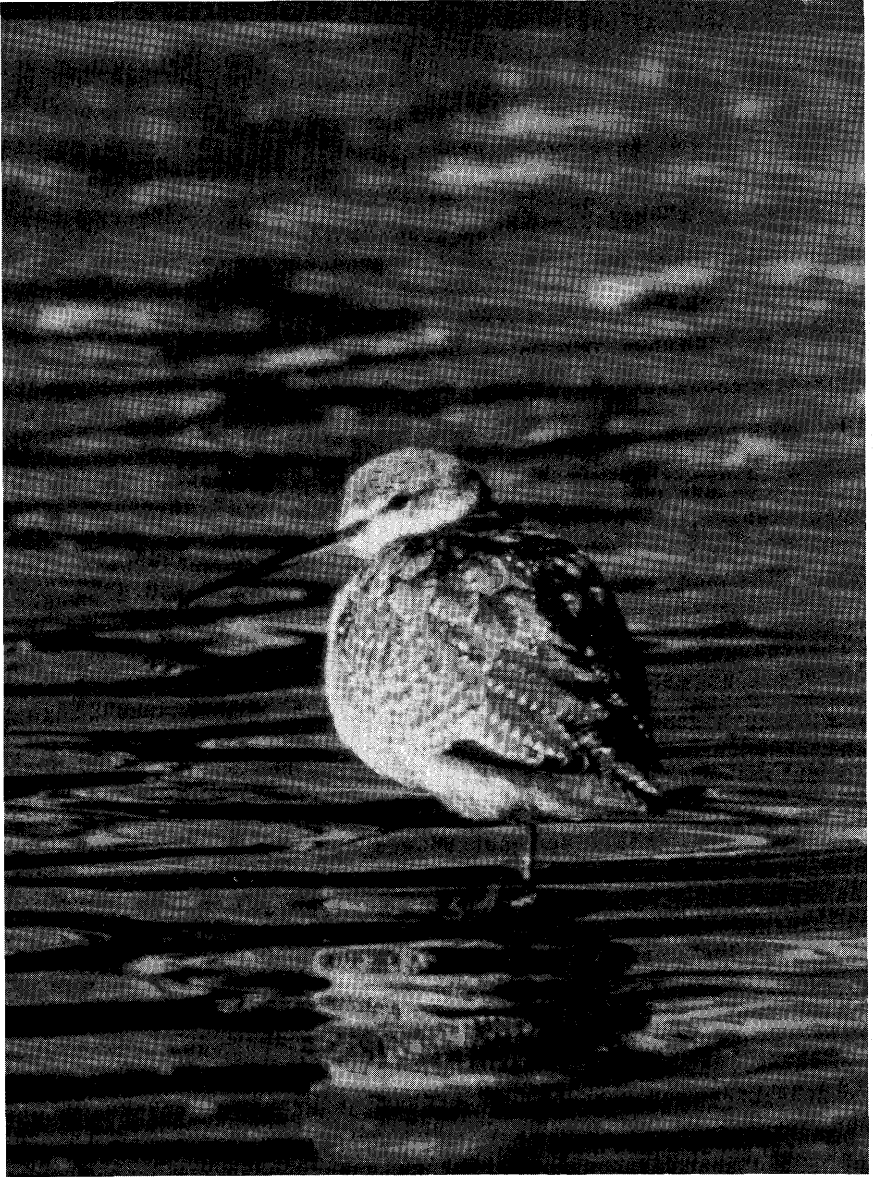


Figure 1. Spotted Redshank at Brooklyn, New York, 30 Jan 1993.
Photograph by Michael P. Gage.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF NEW YORK RARITIES 58: A SPOTTED REDSHANK WINTERS IN BROOKLYN

JOHN C. YRIZARRY

At approximately 3 PM on 6 December 1992, I stopped at an occasionally visited birding spot located at the northwestern corner of a rather grubby tidal estuary named Little Shell Creek near the junction of Avenue X and Knapp Street in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, New York. There, my wife and I discovered a Spotted Redshank (*Tringa erythropus*) with a group of five Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*), all resting on a secured floating raft some twenty-five feet from shore. We were standing on a fifteen foot embankment at street level looking down and viewed the bird through a 30 power telescope for some ten minutes.

It was the leg coloring, a very intense orange-red that contrasted vividly with its yellow-legged cousins, that first caught my attention. The legs, which were in full view, appeared longer in proportion to its body than those of its neighbors, although this may have been an illusion due to what appeared to be a more compact body. Its head was tucked in when first viewed, its bill buried beneath back feathers. The part of the head that was not hidden showed the characteristic whitish extension of the eye-line past the eye, made more obvious by the deep, non-streaked gray crown, similar to a winter plumaged dowitcher. Looking at the yellowlegs for comparison, I noted that the white eye line on the latter ended in a white eye-ring, unlike the extended white line on this bird. These marks, together with the whitish underparts featuring varying amounts of dusky feather edging, made me speculate that we might be viewing a bird of some significance. Adding to my suspicion was its smaller size compared the yellowlegs, positioned as it was between a large female and smaller accompanying males. But it wasn't until some five minutes of studying the bird that it finally roused itself, opened its eyes fully and, suddenly alert, raised its head to give us our first full view of its diagnostic bill shape and color. The orange color at the base of the thin, dark bill with a sudden droop at the end confirmed its identity (Figs. 1, 2). A Spotted Redshank indeed!

We continued observing the bird for another 5 minutes, confirming the various characteristics that were apparent. Once it decided to return to its slumbering position, we raced for home — it was just about 3:15 p.m. We did not observe its final field mark, the all white back, because

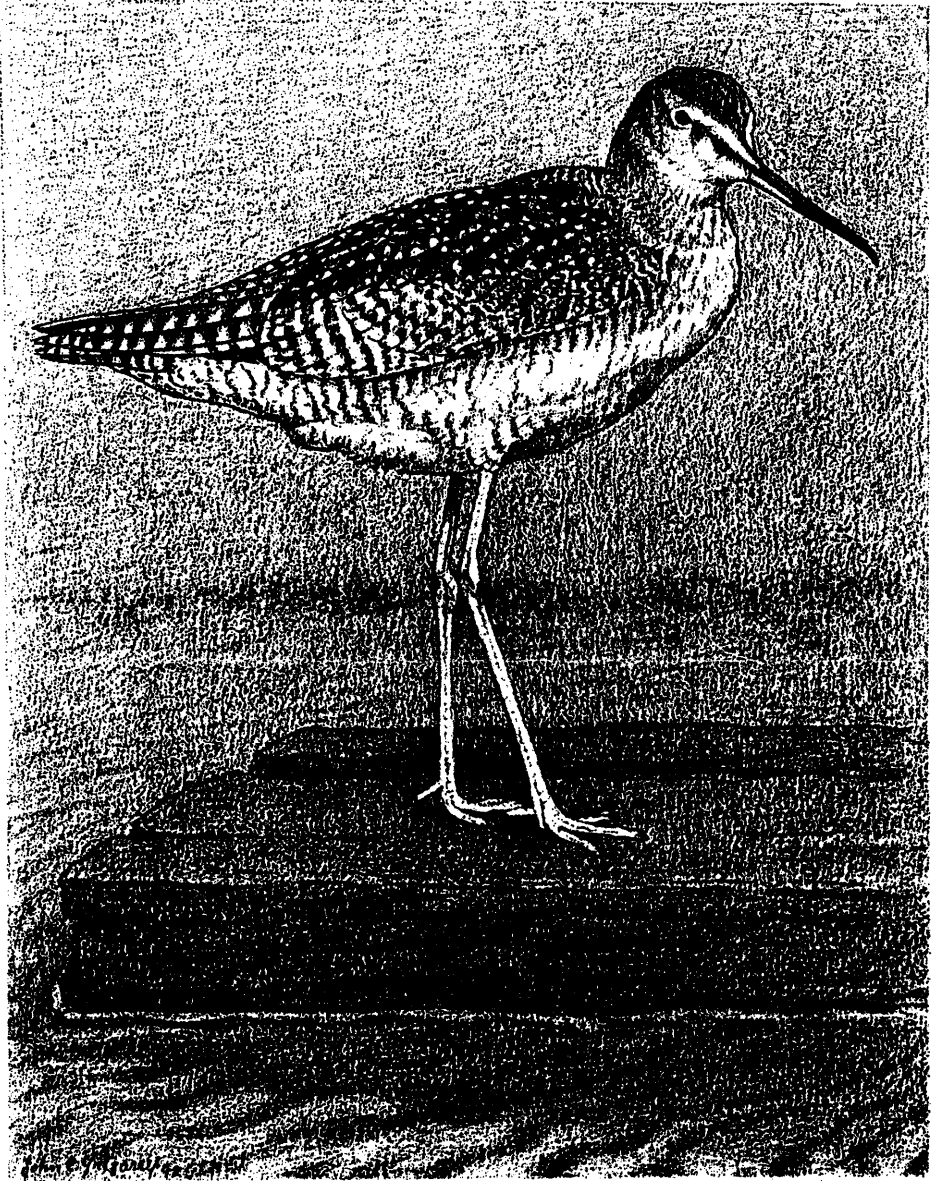


Figure 2. Spotted Redshank at Brooklyn, New York. Sketch by the author.

we felt that to disturb it and perhaps cause it to fly away before anyone else got to see it would be irresponsible, and what we had seen was diagnostic enough. Our telephone line buzzed as soon as we got home and by 3:45 PM or so, other birders were able to reach the scene before the winter light failed. Rick Cech raced out of the house with his camera but not his binoculars (his photos were good for the record but not too clear). Fortunately, when he got to the site, Howard Plimack was already there with his telescope and together they pin-pointed the bird. Louise Vaccoli and Paul Cohen were also able to get there before dark and saw it as well. Phone calls to others and the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge failed to reach anyone else that day.

The Spotted Redshank was seen briefly the following Tuesday, but further searching that week failed to turn up the bird. The following weekend was the great storm of 10 and 11 December and, at that point, it was assumed the bird had gone. Then, on a scouting expedition on the day before the Brooklyn Christmas Bird Count (which took place on 18 December 1992), Starr Saphir, ever hopeful, got the shock of her life when she spotted the Spotted Redshank at its original stomping grounds at Avenue X and Knapp Street. It was found again on the Count Day feeding on a mud flat at Plum Beach in Jamaica Bay. Brooklyn truly had a memorable rarity to report for the count! The bird has been accommodating, showing up at various feeding sites throughout Jamaica Bay and often roosting where it was first found, providing birders from all over the U.S. with a real goodie for their life and year lists. It was last reported on 18 March 1993.

This appears to be the first record of the Spotted Redshank from New York State. It is a shorebird of the Eastern Hemisphere, where it is found chiefly in marshy habitats. It breeds across northern Europe and Asia and winters in the Mediterranean countries and in southern Asia, rarely going south of the equator. It is a casual or very rare migrant in the Western Hemisphere, with observations clustered mainly in the northeastern United States and eastern Canada and on the Pacific coast, but scattered reports come from much of the interior of the United States and Canada. It has been many years since our last encounter with the Spotted Redshank. That occurred in the fall of 1974 while studying and photographing shorebirds in the Minsmere Reserve in England. No doubt as time goes on and the number of birders increases, this shorebird will be found more frequently. But that wonderful feeling of having discovered the unusual will always be with us and be long remembered.

22 Chester Court, Brooklyn, New York 11225