

**BAR-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa lapponica*)
AT MECOX BAY, LONG ISLAND, 28-29 MAY, 2004:
NEW YORK STATE'S SIXTH RECORD**

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A Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*) was discovered on sand flats at Mecox Bay in eastern Suffolk Co., NY on Friday, 28 May 2004 as it fed with Willets (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*), Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*) and Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*). It remained at this location about another thirty-six hours and was studied by numerous observers. Several observers were able to obtain recognizable digital photographs, both on Friday, when viewing conditions were impaired by rain and fog, and on Saturday, under bright sunny conditions, documenting its identification as the nominate, European race.

Setting

Mecox Bay is one of several South Fork salt ponds, including Sagaponack and Georgica Ponds, which are periodically opened to the Atlantic Ocean by Southampton Town Trustees in response to rising water levels to prevent the malfunctioning of on-site septic systems and flooding of basements in nearby homes. Pond opening is eagerly awaited by LI birders due to the lowering of impounded waters and exposure of sand flats attractive to migrating shorebirds. This procedure also allows for flushing of excessive nutrients and contaminants typically associated with stormwater runoff, thereby maintaining the salt ponds' ecological health.

In addition to the planned openings of these waterbodies, high tides and severe storms also breach the closed inlets, forcing temporary openings. Based on anecdotal discussions with area birders who closely monitor these salt ponds during migration, it is believed that a storm or high tide breached Mecox Bay a few days before discovery of the godwit.

The initial opening of the Mecox Bay inlet, both by natural processes and human intervention, creates a strong current as the waters rush through the narrow cut to the Atlantic Ocean. The current is too strong for the deposition of fine sediments high in organic content. Hence, the exposed flats are mainly made up of medium to fine grained sands and can more properly be termed "sand flats" than "mud flats"—a popular term among local birders.

One of the unique features of birding at Mecox Bay during migration is the frequent change in the number and variety of shorebirds. This phenomenon may be related to the proximity of the sand flats to the ocean, drawing in shorebirds, gulls, and terns that are migrating along Long Island's South Shore. The propensity for birds at Mecox Bay to stay for relatively short periods of time has been a source of frustration to birders when a rare bird appears. As an

example, as recently as 1 Sep 2003 a Pacific Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*) appeared at Mecox Bay (McGuinness 2003) and remained for approximately three hours!

Observation

Early Friday morning the authors were traveling east to the South Fork of Long Island for the Memorial Day weekend to census breeding blocks in the Montauk area for the New York State Breeding Bird Atlas. There were a number of breeding blocks along the way that were also our responsibility, one of which included the eastern portion of Mecox Bay.

We arrived at the east side of Mecox Bay at 7:15 am EDT and parked in the W. Scott Cameron Town Beach parking lot. The day was overcast with a fog of varying intensity. Climbing a nearby dune and observing the flats with our binoculars, it was quickly apparent that the inlet to the ocean was open, and that there were over two hundred shorebirds of various species feeding in the shallow water and on the exposed sand flats. Since our primary objective was to identify potential breeding birds, migrant shorebirds were initially ignored. One large shorebird was noted sleeping on the edge of one of the mud flats about 150 yards away, but was not scrutinized carefully.

Upon completing a sweep of the flats with our spotting scope, we turned our attention to the shorebirds present. By this time, the sleeping shorebird observed earlier was actively feeding. The long bi-colored bill, slightly upturned towards the tip, quickly identified the bird as a godwit. Knowing that a godwit of any species is exceedingly unusual on Long Island in spring, this bird piqued our curiosity. The overall pale brown plumage and the dark brown primaries with pale edges made us realize that this was either a species of godwit we had never seen before, or an unknown plumage of one we had previously encountered.

We both felt that Bar-tailed Godwit was a definite possibility, but neither of us had prior experience with this species. We took down some field notes and headed back to the car to consult the National Geographic Society Field Guide. The foggy conditions provided poor long-distance viewing, so we walked out on the flats to obtain a better look and to take some digital photographs through our spotting scope. While walking out on the flats brought us closer to the bird, the godwit never stopped feeding to preen or raise its wings. As a result, the barring on the tail was not observed and Hudsonian Godwit (*Limosa haemastica*) and Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) could not be ruled out. We were reasonably certain that this bird was not a Marbled Godwit (*Limosa fedoa*), since it seemed to lack any cinnamon or rufous tones anywhere in the observable portion of its plumage. However, we still needed to see its tail, rump, and underwing for confirmation.

After an hour of observation the godwit showed no sign of ceasing its active feeding. We looked to the north and saw a severe thunderstorm rolling south across Mecox Bay and quickly headed for the car. For the next hour and a half there were torrential downpours and lightning followed by brief periods of light rain. While sitting in the car we discussed what we should do. Should we start making phone calls to alert birders to the presence of a species whose

identification had not been confirmed? Given the transitory nature of the shorebirds at Mecox Bay, we knew that this bird might abruptly leave. On the other hand, the weather was not conducive to shorebird migration and there was good chance it would at least stay the rest of the day. We had taken perhaps twenty-five digital photographs, and knew that while the photos were of poor quality, they would probably be identifiable to birders familiar with Bar-tailed Godwit. The decision was made to make the phone calls.

We were immediately faced with a host of problems. We were in Sue's car, while the cellular phone with birders' phone numbers was in my car at home in Babylon. Additionally, Sue's cellular phone minutes had expired and had to be renewed. Fortunately, we remembered a friend who had the home phone number of John and Gerta Fritz. After renewing our cell phone minutes, we called our friend's cell phone, interrupting her in the middle of teaching a class. Being familiar with birders' eccentricities, our friend patiently gave us the Fritzes' phone number.

We reached John Fritz at home, a minor miracle in and of itself, and related to him the details of a *possible* Bar-tailed Godwit. John then alerted other birders. Perhaps ten minutes after calling John, our cell phone rang—it was Paul Buckley calling from Rhode Island with questions about our bird. I warned him that we had not confirmed the identification of the bird as a Bar-tailed Godwit and he should wait to get a second opinion before hopping a ferry to Long Island. He advised that what we had seen and described so far actually favored Bar-tailed Godwit.

Shortly after 10:00 am other birders started to arrive. The first birder to arrive on the east side of the Mecox Bay inlet was Hugh McGuinness. Shortly after Hugh set up his scope, the godwit raised its wings, showing its barred tail and whitish rump. Other birders had arrived on the west side of the temporary inlet, including Shai Mitra, Tony Lauro, John & Gerta Fritz, and Joan Quinlan. Just minutes after Shai set up his spotting scope to study the bird, his cell phone rang, and it was Paul Buckley wanting to know if he should get on the ferry. Paul received the thumbs up and was on his way. Shai kept notes on the arrival of other birders, and from his notes we estimate that a total of forty birders saw the godwit on Friday and Saturday. We remained at Mecox until approximately 11:45 am, when, satisfied as to its identity, we headed east to continue atlas-ing. We stopped at Mecox on our way home on Monday, 31 May. The Bar-tailed Godwit was no longer there and the inlet was in the process of closing, as evidenced by the higher water levels and considerably reduced flats. We subsequently learned it had last been seen shortly before dark on Saturday, 29 May (Arie Gilbert, personal communication).

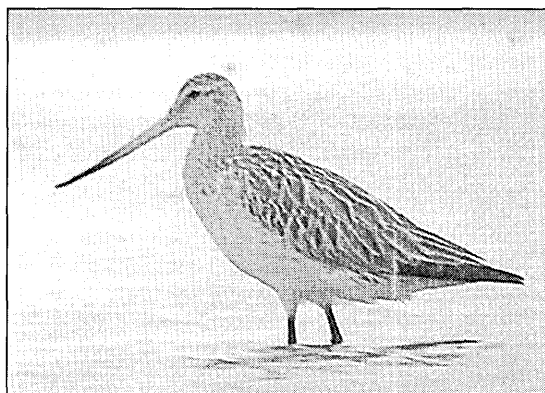
Description

The Bar-tailed Godwit conveyed the appearance of a large, chunky shorebird as it actively fed in thigh-deep water, where it loosely associated with Willets and Greater Yellowlegs (See Figure 1). The godwit dwarfed the Greater Yellowlegs and was significantly larger than the Willets.

Figure 1.
Bar-tailed Godwit
Mecox Bay
28 May 2004

Note long re-curved bill,
large size, and striped
appearance of the upperparts.
Size, very long bill, and
long legs indicate a female.

© Angus Wilson



Upon first viewing it, we were struck by the color and pattern of the upper parts, paler than on any godwit we remembered. The darkest parts of the plumage were the long, brown primaries, bordered by pale edges at their tips, and the blackish centers of the otherwise pale brown tertials, wing coverts, scapulars, and back feathers, which together gave the upperparts a striped look. We also felt that the bird looked short-necked when compared to other godwits we had seen, but lacking any direct comparison, we were unsure whether this was actually the case.

A conspicuous white supercilium and dark eye stripe off-set a brownish crown. The nape was brown, but considerably lighter than the mantle. The streaked pattern of the upper breast could clearly be seen in some of our better digital photos and had a fairly clear demarcation. The underparts were mostly white, but did show some dark streaking on the lower flanks near the undertail coverts.

Our initial confusion when we first found it was related to its relatively long bill and legs, which didn't seem suggestive of Bar-tailed Godwit. After looking at the National Geographic Society Field Guide we realized that the female depicted in the guide seemed more consistent with the bird we were seeing. The size of the bird and curvature of the bill reinforced that this bird was a female. Paulson (1993), presumably speaking about both Bar-tailed Godwit races, indicated that sexual dimorphism in bill length is greater than in other godwits, measurements of adult males and females not overlapping.

The bird's winter-plumaged appearance was also a topic of conversation. If it were a breeding adult, one would expect that by the end of May the bird would show some evidence of acquiring breeding plumage. However, Chandler (1989) indicates that adult female Bar-tailed Godwits in summer look much like winter adults. Rosair & Cottridge (1995) stated that female Bar-tailed Godwits frequently remain in non-breeding plumage during the breeding season. Angus Wilson (2004) indicated that he did not observe any retained juvenile coverts on the bird, but included a qualification that these feathers could be very worn by this time and difficult to see. An alternative possibility is that the godwit was a one

year old bird. Paul Buckley (personal communication) points out that out-of-range shorebirds in spring in eastern North America often prove to be one year olds, presumably having arrived in North America the previous fall as juveniles.

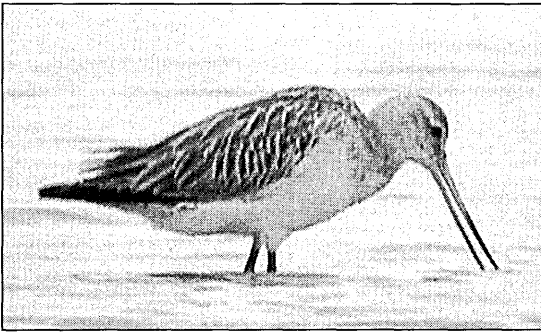


Figure 2.
Bar-tailed Godwit
Mecox Bay
28 May 2004

Note bicolored bill, streaking on the throat and upper breast, prominent white supercilium and dark eye stripe, and streaking on the lower flank.

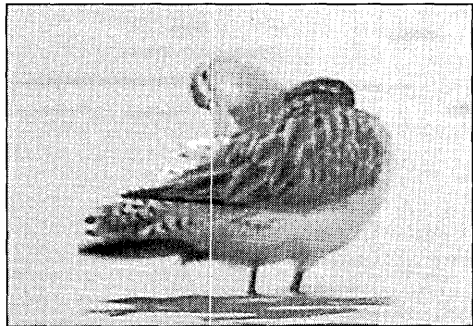
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When the godwit finally raised its wings it revealed a black and white barred tail, a whitish rump, and whitish axillaries and underwing coverts, conclusively eliminating Marbled, Hudsonian and Black-tailed Godwits, and also the Siberian race of Bar-tailed Godwit, *L. l. baueri* (see Figure 3). Although the white axillaries showed a scattering of small brown flecks, the generally whitish appearance of the underwings and rump clearly indicated the nominate subspecies *L.l. lapponica*, which breeds in northern Scandinavia and western Russia. *L.l. baueri* breeds in Alaska and eastern Russia and has a heavily mottled rump, and brown axillaries with white barring.

Figure 3.
Bar-tailed Godwit
Mecox Bay
28 May 2004

Note the barred tail feathers.
Black-tailed and Hudsonian
godwits would have a black tail,
Marbled a plain rump.

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Other Photos & Illustration Analysis

A Bar-tailed Godwit observed and photographed by Blair Nikula at South Beach in Chatham, MA on 5 Jun 2004 resembled the Mecox Bay bird in general appearance (Figure 4). Furthermore, the dates and locations of these two records raise the possibility that they might pertain to the same individual. In our

opinion, the overall plumage color of the South Beach bird seems more grayish than that of the bird at Mecox Bay, and the dark brown, streaked upperparts, prominent on the latter, don't stand out on the South Beach bird. However, these differences could be a function of lighting on the particular days the digital photographs of the Massachusetts and New York birds were taken. Birders who saw the Mecox Bay bird on both Friday and Saturday have commented on its different appearance in the overcast, foggy weather on Friday, when the bird appeared a warmer brown, with peachy tones in the breast, and the bright sun on Saturday, when the bird exhibited generally cold and grayer plumage tones (S. S. Mitra, personal communication).

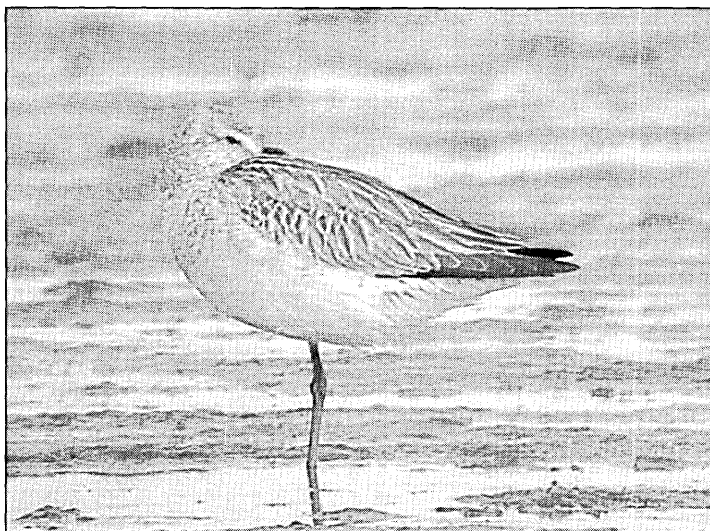


Figure 4
Bar-tailed Godwit South Beach, Chatham, MA 5 June 2004
In color photos, this bird appears grayer than the Mecox Bay bird.
See text.

©Blair Nikula.

Of the Bar-tailed Godwit illustrations we have reviewed, the drawing coming closest to the Mecox Bay bird is, in our opinion, Lars Jonsson's (1993) depiction of a winter female Bar-tailed. This illustration looks particularly like the South Beach, MA Bar-tailed Godwit in Figure 4.

Discussion

Away from *baueri*'s Alaskan breeding range, the Bar-tailed Godwit is a rare but regular, annual visitor along both coasts, south to Florida and California (Sibley 2000, P.A. Buckley, personal communication). The species has been observed frequently in Massachusetts, with approximately 23 records accepted

through 2002, and recently it has proven almost annual as close to LI as Cape Cod. Records from Massachusetts include individuals of the Asian/Alaskan subspecies *baueri* in 1988 and 2002 (most east coast records that have been identified sub-specifically are attributed to the nominate European race *lapponica*), and New England's only winter record, 29 Dec 1997-12 Feb 1998 (Massachusetts Avian Records Committee, 2004).

In contrast, New York has had only five previous Bar-tailed Godwit records (Levine, 1998). Three records are from Moriches Inlet, Suffolk Co., the first being recorded on 15 Nov 1946 (specimen), also on 10 May 1971 and 17 Aug 1974. Another was at the Oak Beach Marsh, Suffolk Co., on 23 Aug 1977, and again at Bay Park, East Rockaway, Nassau Co. on 5 Jun 1985. Thus, this paper documents just the sixth record for New York State and the first since 1985.

This spring has been a banner season for Bar-tailed Godwits in the Northeast. One observer in Massachusetts, Blair Nikula, found and identified no fewer than three this spring: MA's third *bauri* on North Monomoy Island on 9 May, a nominate bird at the same location on 12 May, and the previously discussed individual on South Beach, Chatham on 5 Jun.

The nominate race of Bar-tailed Godwit, *lapponica*, winters primarily on the Atlantic and North Sea coast of western and northwestern Europe, while some migrate south along the North African Coast to Mauritania (Hayman et al. 1986). Wilson (2004) hypothesizes that during fall migration, *lapponica* Bar-tailed Godwits heading south may overshoot the African coast, crossing the narrowest part of the Atlantic to winter in South America and the Caribbean. Thus, their occurrence on the Atlantic coast of the United States in spring might represent a northward movement of birds from these locations. The Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) follows a similar fall migration route to its wintering grounds in West Africa. Wilson notes that this has also been a good spring for Ruffs on eastern Long Island, and that we may be witnessing the belated consequences of a significant shorebird displacement in the fall of 2003.

Acknowledgments

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