

Ruff (adult, possibly not assignable to sex) (*Philomachus pugnax*)
23 October 1988 full, high overcast; cool; calm early afternoon
Parish road 5-19, 4/10 mile west of Highway 699, Vermillion Parish, Louisiana
other observers: J. V. Remsen, Pete Marra, and Mark Swan

After seeing an initial individual that was clearly a Reeve, Van, Mark, Pete, and I, decided to wander around in the nearby vicinity to see what else was around. A few miles away we came across another flooded field that was full of birds. This field was more like a flooded stubble field with extensive vegetation throughout. Unlike the other flooded field, this particular one was mostly occupied by yellowlegs (both Greater (*Tringa melanoleuca*) and Lesser (*T. flavipes*) yellowlegs were present in good numbers), but there were also a number of Long-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*), and a few smaller sandpipers (including both Least (*Calidris minutilla*) and a couple of Pectorals (*C. melanotos*)). After about five minutes of scanning through these birds, I managed to pick out the distinctive facial pattern and the scaly back of a second Ruff. When I tried to show the bird to the others, it mysteriously disappeared. After about twenty minutes or so of carefully looking through the flock, when I suppose the others were beginning to wonder if I had just imagined the bird, I again spotted the bird, but this time was successful in showing it to all who were present (actually Pete was already looking at the bird, but was trying to see the leg color before calling it out). Like the bird that we had seen only about fifteen minutes earlier, this individual was in almost constant motion as it walked around foraging. Its actions were very much like those of the nearby yellowlegs, namely it walked around and occasionally picked at something in the shallow water, or, more unusually, it also seemed to pick small insects or something off the emergent vegetation. Because the vegetation was fairly high, we would regularly lose the bird for several minutes at a time, and eventually it just disappeared and was never seen again. On one or two occasions we had the bird flying around the pond, at which time, we were able to see the distinctive rump pattern.

As is typical for this species, this bird was a strange-shaped shorebird; it was sort of like a yellowlegs with an elongate body and a short, broad based bill which appeared slightly drooped (although this may have been an effect of the tapering of the bill). The bill was a medium length for a shorebird, not being too long or short; it had a fairly broad base, but tapered to a fairly fine point. Even more so than in the other bird, this individual had pale feathering around the base of the bill (this was the first point that I noted when I spotted the bird), which contrasted with the relatively blank, medium gray face. The only additional facial marking was a relatively indistinct, pale eyering. Overall the bird had sort of a beady-eyed appearance. The eye itself, was dark. The top of the crown had some dark mottling which became somewhat more pronounced on the nape, and

especially on the upper back. The general ground color of the upperparts was a medium gray. The scapulars and wing coverts were quite dark centered (slaty-gray) with fairly sharply demarcated pale gray edges. The back pattern was even more accentuated by the enlarged back feathers which almost gave the bird a hunch backed appearance so characteristic of this species. This effect was quite striking, but not as much so as in juveniles (which have black centered feathers with pale, buffy edges). The rear part of the bird was quite noticeably tapered. The throat was pale and relatively unmarked, but the breast was noticeably mottled with darker markings on a pale gray background (rather than the clean buffy breast of a juvenile). The remaining underparts were basically an unmarked white. The legs were fairly long, even for a shorebird, and a fairly bright orange color (though a little duller than those of the other bird seen earlier in the day). All in all, this was a distinctive bird with a distinctive shape, enlarged and very scaly back feathers, and noticeably orange legs. This individual was somewhat larger than the first bird seen this day. Side by side, this bird was just slightly taller than a Lesser Yellowlegs, whereas the other individual seen this day was a little shorter than nearby Long-billed Dowitchers. This size would probably be at the large end for a Reeve, but I could not say for sure that it could not have been a small Ruff. The grayish, mottled breast; dark gray centered, pale gray edged back, scapular, and covert feathers; and the orange legs should serve to identify this bird as a basic plumaged adult; however, by late October it is conceivable that a juvenile could have molted into basic plumage already (but I would think that the leg color would be somewhat paler in a young bird). I never really did get good views of the bird in flight, but the large white ovals on the sides of the rump were clearly apparent, as were the extensively white underwings.

During our best views, we had this bird at a distance of about 50 meters in good, subdued light (due to the full, but not excessively dense, overcast conditions). I initially was able to get about a thirty-second look at the bird, but I then lost it for twenty minutes or so. We refound the bird about a 150 meters away, but it soon flew in much closer and began to forage right in front of us (maybe 50 meters or so away). I was typically using my 22X spotting scope, but, on occasion, I also used my 10 X 40 binoculars and Mark's zoom scope (at a power of about 40X, I believe). We had the bird under observation for a total of about 15 or 20 minutes. The bottom line is that the viewing conditions were quite good. I have previously seen at least eight of these birds in California and a much larger number in eastern Austria (during the summer of 1985).