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AN UNUSUAL EURASIAN CURLEW *NUMENIUS ARQUATA ORIENTALIS* IN BANYUASIN PENINSULA, SOUTH SUMATRA, INDONESIA

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An unusual looking small Curlew *Numenius* was observed and photographed on 22 November 2018 in a flock of Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* at Barong river, Banyuasin Peninsular, Banyuasin district, South Sumatra province, Indonesia. This small curlew appeared to be very similar to the Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* (*N. p. phaeopus*, *N. p. variegatus* and *N. p. alboaxillaris*) and the Slender-bill Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*. However, further careful identification indicates this small *Numenius* is a Eurasian Curlew. This case at first appears to be an aberrant curlew, but on careful examination of the photo, it is actually an interesting example of how photos can give the wrong impression. We provide a word of caution to local birdwatchers to pay careful attention to the use of photographs for species identification in Indonesia, as well as more broadly in south-east Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* is a common large curlew of Eurasia, Africa and the Oriental region, farther east in Siberia, and in Australia (Hayman *et al.* 1986). It is a large to very large, bulky wader with a remarkably long and decurved bill, long legs and rather uniform plumage (Cramp & Simmons 1983). In South- east Asia, Eurasian Curlew is an uncommon to fairly common coastal winter visitor and passage migrant (Robson 2011). The bird is a locally common migrant in western parts of the Indonesian archipelagos (Greater Sunda) and is less common in eastern regions (Sulawesi) (MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993, Eaton *et al.* 2016).

In this paper, we provide a brief report on what appeared to be an unusual small *Numenius* curlew, sighted in and Banyuasin district, South Sumatra province (Indonesia). We discuss this sighting and review the literature about *Numenius* species in Indonesia.

METHODS

On 22 November 2018, an unusually small *Numenius* curlew was observed and photographed at Barong river, Banyuasin Peninsular, Banyuasin district, South Sumatra province, Indonesia (02°10' 46" S, 104°54' 21" E). The bird was in flight in a flock of Eurasian Curlew. Further identification has been critically reviewed based on the photograph taken (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Compared to Eurasian Curlew, this bird looked significantly smaller, and somewhat similar to Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* in terms of size and its apparently smaller decurved bill. The was eliminated as one of potentially two subspecies of Whimbrel (*N. p. phaeopus* and *N. p. variegatus*) that occur in South- east Asia based on the more uniform head pattern and absent barring patterns in underwing. The other potential smaller *Numenius* subspecies without barring patterns on the underwing are the Slender-bill Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* and the Steppe Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus alboaxillaris*, but neither species has ever been recorded in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. The smaller *Numenius* found in Banyuasin Peninsular was therefore not considered one of these species. The Slender-bill Curlew is a critically endangered (or possibly extinct) shorebird that breeds in Siberia (Taiga zone) and spends the non-breeding season in the Mediteranean basin (mainly Tunisia and Atlantic Morocco). A second migration route may lead from breeding grounds to the Middle East, where it may spend the non-breeding season in Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Oman (Hayman et al. 1986, Gils & Wiersma 1996, Birdlife International 2020). The bird sighted in our study shares characteristics with the Slender-bill Curlew by its smaller size and smaller bill shape, but differs chiefly in the face pattern and breast pattern. That is, the supercilium of Slender-billed Curlew is bolder than on Eurasian Curlew, tending to isolate the dark cap, and there is a fairly narrow dark bar crossing the lores in place of Eurasian Curlew's diffuse rounded dark area. The breast pattern of Slender- billed Curlew also differs by having a sharply defined dark brown breast streaking against an almost white background, sometimes lightly suffused with brown, contra brownish or buffish brown suffusion across the breast and having poorly defined streaking for Eurasian Curlew (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Gils Wiersma 1996, Robson 2011, Corso *et al.* 2014, Chandler 2019).

The Steppe Whimbrel is a little known shorebird distributed in the mid-latitude (50–54°N) steppes of Russia and probably Kazakhstan (Cramp & Simmons

Figure 1. The unusual *Numenius* (yellow arrow) found on 22 November 2018 in Banyuasin peninsular, South Sumatra province, Indonesia (by ©Muhammad Iqbal).

Figure 2. The unusual *Numenius* has smaller decurved bill and plain white underwing without barred pattern (by ©Muhammad Iqbal).

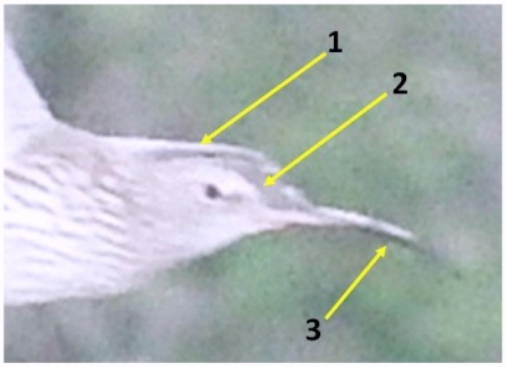

Figure 3. Close up head pattern and some remarks: 1. Left wing; 2. Underwing (in shade). This area is not a dusky crown; 3. Bill slope. A little foreshortened because it is slightly turned to the photographer, but also note that the dusky bill tip is pixellated and the camera sensors barely distinguish it from the background (by ©Muhammad Iqbal).

1983), and migrates to coastal south-east Africa for the non-breeding season (Allport 2017). The smaller *Numenius* sighted in Banyuasin peninsular was similar to Steppe Whimbrel by its smaller size and white underwing and axillaries, but as with other subspecies of whimbrel, the Steppe Whimbrel has strongly marked crown stripe and face pattern; contra lacking contrasting head pattern. These features were not evident on our curlew.

Corso *et al.* (2014) considered some small curlews that resemble Slender-billed Curlew based on field observations in Italy (from Scily and Puglia), and specimens in the Museo Civica di Zoologica di Roma (MCZR), and identified that the birds are Eurasian Curlew *N. a. orientalis*. Based on the literature, the small *Numenius* curlew sighted in Banyuasin peninsula is identified as Eurasian Curlew *N. a. orientalis* based on unbarred white underwing, the small decurved bill and slightly uniform head pattern (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Gils & Wiersma 1996, Robson 2011, Corso *et al.* 2014, Chandler 2019). This small shorebird is presumed a male (Garry Alport *pers.comm.*) as males have shorter bills than females (Hayman *et al.* 1986).

This record of an apparently unusual or atypical Eurasian Curlew in Banyuasin Peninsular, based on a single photograph, is important to note for future identification of *Numenius* in south-east Asia. Close inspection of the photo shows the bill to be a bit foreshortened and the rear-wing is just behind the head (Fig. 3). This makes the head look bigger and the bill look correspondingly smaller. The similarity in colour of bill tip to the background adds to the illusion that this is an atypical sized Eurasian Curlew. Thus, we conclude that this case is not so much an aberrant curlew, but an interesting example of how photos can give the wrong impression when used as the sole means of identifying a bird. This is something that should be addressed by local birdwatchers. We caution them to pay careful attention to shorebirds species identification from photographs, particularly in relation to population estimation and species assessment. In Indonesia, there has been an increase in recent years of birdwatchers with good photographic equipment, and the likelihood of photographic-based identifications is expected to increase. Incorrect identifications may result in false additions to country checklists (Iqbal *et al.* 2010, Imansyah & Iqbal 2015, Iqbal & Albayquni 2016, Putra *et al.* 2018), but this problem is never reported or rarely discussed. This interesting example is a good lesson for birdwatchers to use photos with caution and always getting these photographs verified by experts.

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