

The status of four species of vagrant shorebirds in Venezuela, with an updated national checklist of species

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Este trabajo recopila información histórica de las aves playeras *sensu stricto* (Burhinidae, Recurvirostridae, Haematopodidae, Charadriidae, Jacanidae y Scolopacidae) registradas en Venezuela. Reevaluamos el estatus de ocurrencia y la evidencia disponible de cuatro especies para las que se carecía de evidencia verificable o se presentaba evidencia cuestionable: La Viuda Pico Tuerto *Recurvirostra americana*, el Correlimos *Calidris alpina*, el Rufo *Calidris pugnax* y la Becasina Pico Largo *Limnodromus scolopaceus*. Además, presentamos la primera evidencia de *C. alpina* de origen paleártico (subespecies *arctica/schinzii*) en Suramérica y una lista actualizada con 46 especies que cuentan con evidencia verificable en el país, una especie Hipotética *R. americana* y una considerada Errante *L. scolopaceus*.

The first guide to the birds of Venezuela included 38 shorebird species recorded in the country⁴⁵, the same species list compiled 20 years earlier⁵¹. Over the subsequent 45 years, as many as 10 or 11 additional species have been added to the national list^{5,6,26,46} (Appendix). Since the two current national checklists differ somewhat in the number of reported species and their migratory status (Appendix), and we consider the evidence for acceptance of some of these species to be questionable, in this note we clarify the status of four species for which unequivocal published voucher material is or was lacking. We also present an updated species list that comprises 46 confirmed shorebird species for Venezuela plus one Hypothetical (defined, following Kirwan *et al.*³⁵, as a credible sighting lacking voucher photographic, audio or specimen material, which cannot therefore be independently verified).

American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana*

There is one sight record of American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana* in Venezuela, claimed by ornithologist Tom Ryan and first published without further comment by Restall *et al.*⁵⁶. In initial correspondence, the author had no recollection of the sighting and could find no record in notebooks from the time (T. Ryan *in litt.* 2022/2023). However, a few months later, TR rediscovered written notes documenting the encounter and provided the following information (T. Ryan *in litt.* 2023):

“The observation date was 22 April 2000. It was in a cattle pond along with Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus* and Wattled Jacana *Jacana jacana*. The notes just say, ‘avocet, upturned bill, grey head, large white streak on wing’ [I may have just been trying to distinguish it from Andean with that note]. At that time, I was working with terns in San

Francisco Bay and was VERY familiar with the species. I have the location as ‘en un [sic] laguna cerca de carretera entre Terecay y El Arrecife’. It was after we had crossed the [River] Orinoco at Caicara and were going north on Troncal 12. I am almost certain that we had stopped at a ‘parador’, and checking Google Earth, there is a whole series of ponds in this area and there is a Parador Turístico [La Puerta, Guárico state] at 7°43′31.75″N 66°15′18.53″W. That is the most likely place that we would have stopped. I recall there being a building and a pretty prominent turn off the road.”

In the Caribbean, American Avocet is a rare winter visitor to Cuba, the Cayman Islands and Puerto Rico, and a vagrant farther south³⁵, with the closest occurrence being a sight record of two birds on Bonaire on 7 Mar 1979⁵²; there are also several records from the Caribbean coast of Colombia^{13,27}. All records are coastal, so an inland bird is highly unusual and would require independently verifiable evidence for acceptance. We therefore suggest that the species be considered Hypothetical in Venezuela.

Ruff *Calidris pugnax*

The only record of Ruff *Calidris pugnax* in Venezuela is a sighting of a single bird at Chichiriviche, Falcón, on 18 November 1977, documented with thorough field notes¹ and accepted in the subsequent field guide⁵⁰. Further records have been mooted from Laguna de Unare, Anzoátegui⁵⁰, and from “Llanos (Apure) in March”⁵⁶ but without supporting details.

The Laguna de Unare bird was photographed by JS (Figs. 1A–B) and is indeed a male Ruff in its second calendar-year, sexed on the basis of its long bill and plumage. The bird is in incomplete breeding (alternate) plumage, characterised by the presence

morphological characteristics, is not a reliable field characteristic to separate these two species nor one that can be used to confirm the validity of the record from La Tortuga, as some female Short-billed Dowitcher have longer bills than male Long-billed Dowitcher⁵⁸.

A more useful and robust feature to separate the two species is the loral angle, which can be defined as the angle between an imaginary extension of the bill gape towards the nape and the line connecting the gape of the bill with the centre of the bird's eye³⁶. This feature is, on average more acute in Long-billed Dowitcher, averaging around 15°, while the opposite is true for Short-billed, which shows a more obtuse angle, averaging around 21°, due to the higher placement of the

eye on its head³⁶. We analysed the loral angle on the individual photographed in La Tortuga and compared this with a referential Long-billed Dowitcher photographed by David Turgeon in Quebec, Canada, on 26 August 2016 (see Lee & Birch³⁶ for details): a comparison is shown in Figs. 5A–B. The value for this measurement on the individual photographed in La Tortuga was 20°. In contrast, the referential Long-billed Dowitcher had a value of 14°. The value obtained for the putative individual was 4° above the mean value reported by Lee and Birch³⁶ for Long-billed Dowitcher.

In addition, the photographs shows a bird in juvenile plumage, as indicated by the bright, uniform wing-coverts, the fresh scapulars and tertials (Figs. 5A/C), and the lack of freshly



Figure 5. Loral angle, tertial (green arrows) and scapular (yellow arrows) feather comparisons of: **A/C/E** putative Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus* from Punta de Rancho, Isla La Tortuga, Dependencias Federales, Venezuela, 12 September 2009 (Yalicia Carvajal), adapted from the original publication of Marin *et al.*⁴³; and **B/D/F** known Long-billed Dowitcher from Pointe à Émile, Quebec, Canada, 26 August 2016 (David Turgeon).