



ORNITHOLOGY

A mysterious wader... hybrid or aberrant plumage ?

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By Pierre Crouzier



Black-headed Gull and an unidentified wader (right), Marlieux, Ain, November 2024 (© Pierre Crouzier)

On 9 November 2024, I was birdwatching in the Dombes (Ain), a plateau situated about thirty kilometres north of Lyon (Rhône) and home to nearly a thousand ponds, a large proportion of which are still used for fish farming. As the Vavres-Nord pond, in the commune of Marlieux (Ain), had just been drained for its annual fishing, I setted up near the outlet to look for gulls and waders on the vast mudflat bordering the little water remaining in the centre of the pond. Unsurprisingly, given this relatively late date in waders migration, I quickly spotted the few species I'd expected : a good number of Northern Lapwings, a flock of 74 Dunlins, 12 Ruffs, 29 Eurasian Curlews, 1 Common Snipe, 1 Golden Plover and 4 Green Sandpipers. The latter in particular frequented the puddles that had formed in the ruts left by a tractor, where they were able to hide very easily. While counted them, I discovered that a strange wader was accompanying them... Very dark in colour, this one generally resembled a Green Sandpiper in size and appearance, but its plumage was quite different from that of this specie. I was able to observe it for nearly two hours, whenever it appeared, though always backlit, on a glistening mudflat. I managed to take a few digis, rather poor quality, but nevertheless usable. The next day and the day after, I found the mysterious wader in the same spot, in light that was still just as unfavourable. I then managed to watch, though without being able to photograph it, the markings on its rump and tail.



Unidentified wader with Black-headed Gull, Marlieux, Ain, November 2024 (© Pierre Crouzier)



Unidentified wader (left) with Green Sandpiper, Marlieux, Ain, November 2024 (© Pierre Crouzier)

I - Description of the bird

These three observation sessions enabled me to compile the following description.

- **General appearance.** A small *Tringa* sandpiper that at first glance resembles a Green Sandpiper, due to its general appearance, the profile of its head and beak, and the very dark colour of its head, back and wings.
- **Size.** On several occasions, it appeared to me to be slightly larger than the Green Sandpipers with which it was associated. Its legs also seemed slightly longer than those of these latter, when compared directly with them. Its wings appeared slightly longer than those of Green Sandpiper, with the tips of the flight feathers extending slightly beyond the tip of the tail.
- **Head.** Green Sandpiper-like profile, with a vertical forehead. The blackish bill appeared slightly thinner and longer than that of Green Sandpiper (the length of this bird's bill slightly exceeded that of its head). The black eye showed no visible eye ring nor orbital ring, the head being entirely brown-black, like the rest of the upperparts. The plumage of the head was of a uniform colour, with no paler area on chin, ear-coverts or neck. Similarly, there was no trace of a lighter supercilium or darker lores.
- **Upperparts.** Back and mantle were the same solid black-brown as head.
- **Wings.** When closed, they were the same black-brown as back, mantle and head. When spread, they were uniformly dark, both above and below. Their structure appeared similar to that of Green Sandpiper, except for their length, which seemed slightly greater.
- **Underparts.** The neck was the same black-brown as the head and the rest of the upperparts. From the upper breast down to the legs, the colour was slightly lighter, a less dark grey-brown. But above all, the flanks were streaked with black on a white background ; these faint black streaks began at the level of the legs and continued down the sides of the undertail coverts. A white ventral patch was visible between the legs and the underside of the undertail coverts.



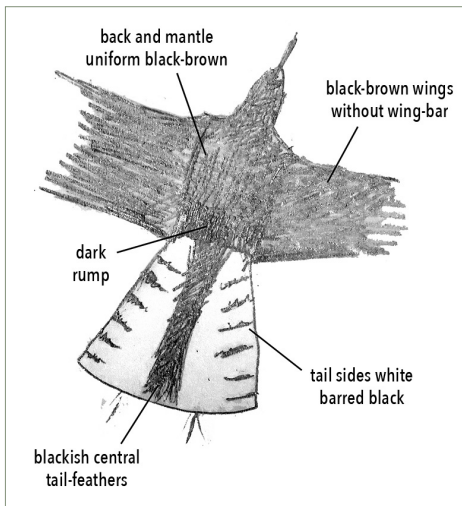
Unidentified wader (photo heavily brightened on the right), Marlieux, Ain, November 2024 (© Pierre Cruzier)



Unidentified wader, Marlieux, Ain, November 2024 (© Pierre Cruzier)



Unidentified wader, Marlieux, Ain, November 2024 (© Pierre Cruzier)



Unidentified wader, Marlieux, Ain, November 2024
(field sketch by Pierre Crouzier)



Unidentified wader (left) with Black-headed Gull,
Marlieux, Ain, November 2024 (© Pierre Crouzier)

- **Tail and rump.** The rump was entirely dark, with no trace of white, and two-thirds of the tail was white. The (2?) central tail feathers were blackish along their entire length, and the sides of the tail were white but marked along the entire length of the tail feathers by a series of (5 or 6?) blackish bars with an irregular pattern, starting from the outer edge of the tail without appearing to reach the black central tail feathers. The general appearance of the rump and tail therefore strongly resembled that of a Solitary Sandpiper.
- **Legs.** Blackish-brown, they appeared slightly longer than those of a Green Sandpiper.
- **Voice.** Not recorded. A 'kip' call was heard during a short flight.

II - Discussion

Although this bird briefly reminded me of a Purple Sandpiper, due to its very dark plumage, I quickly ruled out this species, based on the colour of the bill, the legs, the size and the head markings. Similarly, particularly given the colour of the legs (dark rather than yellow), I ruled out the possibility of a Wandering Tattler or a Grey-tailed Tattler. The possibility of a Wood Sandpiper with excessively dark plumage seemed to me to be ruled out by the bird's silhouette. Similarly, the possibility of a melanistic Green Sandpiper (or the more unlikely possibility of a Solitary Sandpiper) can be ruled out by the streaked flanks and the tail pattern. The possibility that it might be a hybrid – which are known to sometimes have plumage that does not necessarily resemble that of their parents – seems as difficult to rule out as it is to confirm...

When asked at the time of this discovery, Killian Mullarney simply replied that he '*had never seen such a bird*'. Philippe J. Dubois suggested, without any certainty, that it might be a hybrid, perhaps between Green Sandpiper and Redshank, given the bird's profile and the markings on its underparts. Marc Duquet, for his part, sent me a summary table of known cases of hybridisation among waders, taken from Bird Hybrids (bird-hybrids.com), a website that lists known cases of hybridisation in birds. It includes references to hybrids between Green and Common Sandpiper (but none concerning Wood Sandpiper). The identity of this bird therefore remains unknown, and I would welcome any comments on its identity (Pierre_crouzierfr@yahoo.fr).

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