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Tinicum's Most Famous Bird, 35 Years Later

(Homage to Johnny Miller, 1939-2009)

by Gregg Gorton

When Johnny Miller left his house the morning of October 19, 1979 to conduct his weekly shorebird census at “Tinicum,” a birdy patch of freshwater tidal marsh just a stone’s throw from his door, which he knew better than anyone had before (and, likely, since), he had no inkling that he was about to discover a feathered traveler from across the world. He drove over to the main entrance of the roughly 700-acre preserve that in 1972 had been designated the Tinicum National Environmental Center (TNEC), the first such entity in the U.S., and, since 1991—as the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge--the most urban among all U.S. wildlife refuges. Per his routine, he made his way out along the gravel surface of the dike surrounding the main water impoundment, ticking off species and numbers of migrating sandpipers and plovers. Then he came to a vantage point from which he could scan northward in a nearly 180-degree arc across mudflats where the tide-driven water from the Darby Creek was rapidly rising. His 9x35 bins (he did not carry a scope) revealed a group of yellowlegs that looked to him to be the Greater species (*Tringa melanoleuca*). But among them was a slightly different shorebird that he figured to be a Hudsonian Godwit (*Limosa haemastica*). He had seen that species in past years at Tinicum in the early-to-mid-Fall, and—though a very “good bird”—it’s presence was not too surprising. But this bird didn’t look quite right: some of the field marks didn’t jibe with his mental image of Hudsonian Godwit. As he watched it forage in the marsh by probing—dowitcher-like—he jotted down key features such as the “rufous-buff color on its neck” and “the bill longer and straighter than a Hudsonian’s would be.” Then, suddenly, the odd bird took flight—as he had no doubt hoped it would, eventually—and as it flapped away he was able to glimpse its “white and gray underwings, with broad white wing stripes,” as he wrote later in the report he prepared for his bird club’s journal, *Cassinia* (the journal of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, or DVOC). That was it! --Suddenly he flashed back to the hundreds of Black-tailed Godwits (*Limosa limosa*), or “blackwits,” he had seen in Australia during a birding trip there five years previously. That *had* to be the answer to the question that had formed minutes before in his mind: what the heck is this thing?

After Johnny returned home to Prospect Park later in the day, he called a few fellow birders, hoping they could help confirm his identification. One of them, Keith Richards, also a member of DVOC, managed the “phone chain,” that erstwhile system once used to alert other birders to rarities. Two others, Frank and Barb Haas, were playing bridge with yet another avid birder, John Ginaven, and his wife, Peggy, when the phone rang. The Haas’s were not members of DVOC because Barb was not eligible, and Frank (Superintendent of Ridley Creek State Park) had therefore refused to join until the club voted to accept female members (which it did, finally, in late 1982). Johnny’s call got their attention fast; in fact, Barb and John suddenly realized that an odd-looking, godwit-like shorebird they had seen only the day before at the Philadelphia sewage ponds might have been the very bird Johnny was now describing! Barb

recalls that on that prior day she had said to Ginaven when they both were stumped by the unknown bird that “it has enough white in the wings to be a Willet, but in all the wrong places!”

After having assured Johnny that they would help, the three birders in the group jumped up from the table and rushed over to the Haas’s extensive library of bird books. Thumbing quickly through a few of them, they finally found an illustration of Black-tailed Godwit to scrutinize. It certainly looked like the mystery bird two of them had seen! (Today, Frank and Barb can’t recall the exact book they used to make the ID, but it may have been “some book on birds of South Asia or Australia that we had.”) Then they called a few other members of DVOC and some birders from New Jersey, and arranged for a return trip the next day to the “scene of the crime,” as Barb calls it, which was the original place she and Ginaven had seen the bird—the sewage ponds.

October 20th was “quite sunny, and not particularly cold or windy” when they arrived at the Water Treatment Plant gate. Surprisingly, they were able to “walk in unobserved,” rather than having to convince the security guard to let them enter yet again. Other birders also showed up, and many had spotting scopes. Once inside, they were able to re-locate the “suspect” bird as it flew overhead, and indeed it displayed crucial features of *Limosa limosa*, the Black-tailed Godwit. This apparition *had* to be that suspected interloper from a far land because its bill was longer and straighter than a Hudsonian’s, its underwings were pale (neither sooty, nor with black axillaries), and it had a broad white wing stripe. And, since its plumage was generally gray and its tail was white with a black tip—but not barred—it was certainly not a Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), either. Thus, this now less-mysterious bird appeared to be a winter (basic) plumage *Limosa limosa*, albeit with a trace of alternate-plumage color still left on its neck. In fact, they figured this had to be the very bird Johnny had seen, and it must have been flying back and forth between the two nearby locations where it had now been spotted thrice and identified twice. But how could they really be so sure that the birds seen at the two places were actually one and the same? Well, it just so happened that this was the very first Pennsylvania record for this species, a fact that by then had been loudly bruited among the assembled gawkers--so the chances were pretty darned good.... --But suddenly the guard spotted the group of birders, some of whom were carrying those long devices that he told them could be “weapons or something,” and that was it!—they were all summarily kicked out.

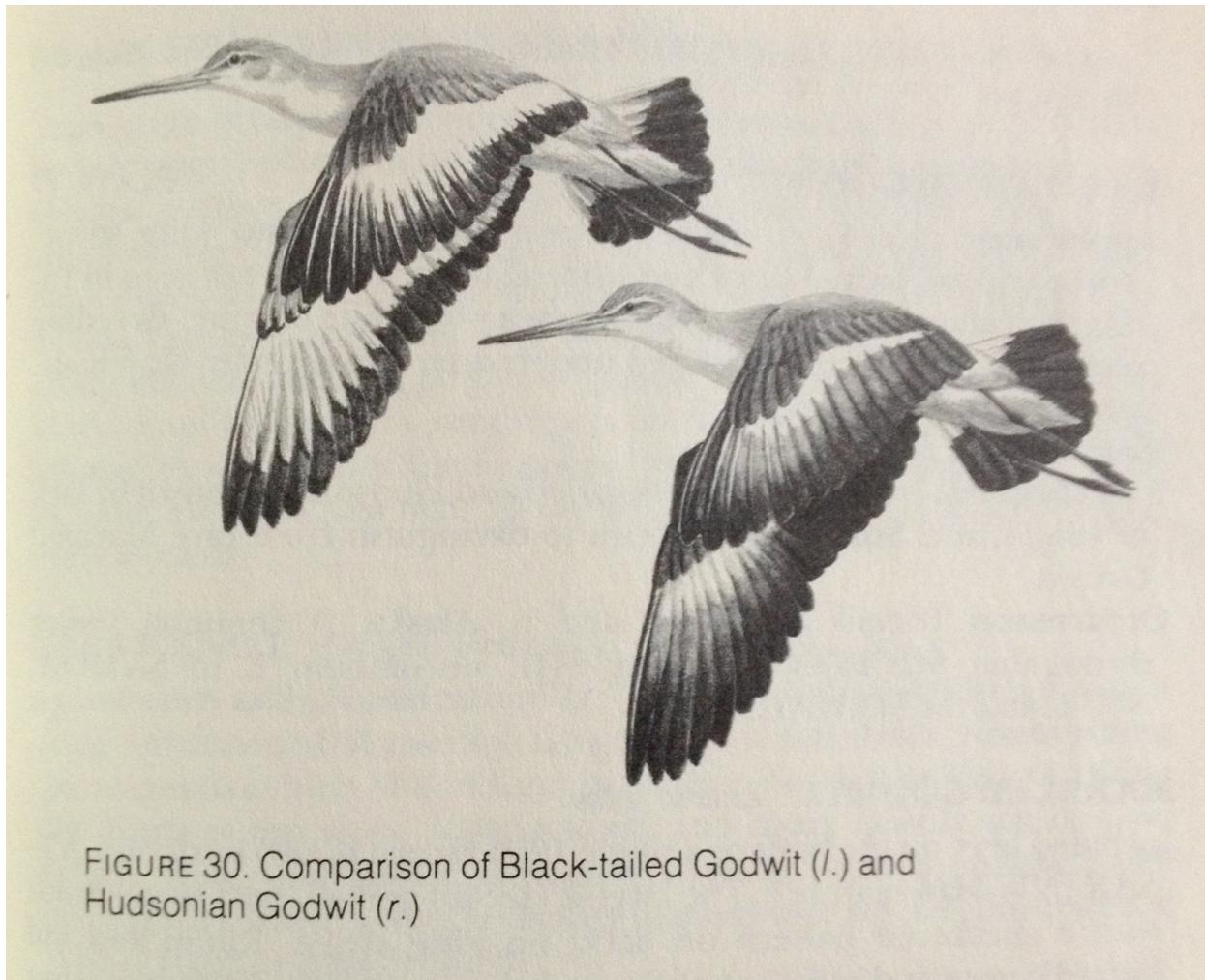


FIGURE 30. Comparison of Black-tailed Godwit (*l.*) and Hudsonian Godwit (*r.*)

Figure 30 from Pratt, et al. (1987): Black-tailed Godwit (above) and Hudsonian Godwit (below), by H. Douglas Pratt (used with permission)

This godwit even turned out to be only the fourth record of its species for all of the mainland U.S. The very first record of Black-tailed Godwit in that region of 48 states had been a bird discovered feeding in a flooded field about a mile north of Buzzard's Bay in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts on April 23, 1967. First thought to be a Hudsonian, it lingered for a week and was eventually seen and photographed with wings upraised and correctly identified by James Baird of Massachusetts Audubon, who listed some of the key features differentiating the two species in the brief report about it he wrote for *The Auk* a year later. However, he erroneously stated that it was the first record for the (entire) U.S. and the second for North America, not realizing that there were some obscure records of the Asian subspecies (*L. l. melanuroides*) from as far back as 1907 in Alaska--on Little Diomed Island in the Bering Sea and from 1961 on Amchitka Island in the Aleutian chain. (The *melanuroides* subspecies is now sometimes treated as a full species, the Eastern Black-tailed Godwit, half the total population of which winters in Australia after breeding as far north as Siberia.)

The very *first* Black-tailed record for mainland North America had been of the Icelandic-breeding subspecies, *L. l. islandica*, which was collected at Dunn's Pond, Placentia Bay, in Newfoundland, on May 20, 1954, and which now lies in taxidermic perpetuity at the Canadian National Museum. In fact, the very few Black-tailed Godwits that have been found in Eastern North America over the ensuing years, whether in Spring or Fall, have been thought to be members of that Iceland-breeding subspecies, which differs from *melanuroides* by being larger and longer-billed, and by lacking a blackish-brown forewing. (But an overshoot or storm-blown visit by a member of the nominate European subspecies, *L. l. limosa*, is also a hypothetical possibility.)

The second Black-tailed in the mainland 48 states was found on February 27, 1971, on Pea Island, North Carolina, when a fellow named David Hughes noticed what he thought was a Hudsonian Godwit, and, fortunately, dutifully recorded its features. Not all of them fit with the illustration of that species in his field guide, however, and that is where the issue stood for a few years. Later, his sighting was more properly identified as a Black-tailed Godwit—but let us be gentle in our judgment of Mr. Hughes since he, too, struggled, having no rendering of that species in any U.S. field guide, and having no trigger-memory of the species from a prior encounter to help him.

Then—lo and behold—yet another Black-tailed Godwit (the third in the mainland U.S.) was spotted by a Brooklynite named John Yrizzary barely three months later, on May 22nd, in the West Pool at Brigantine (now Forsythe) National Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey. And how could this *not* have been that same Pea Island bird moving expectantly northward, hoping in its earnestly birdish way to find its breeding grounds, even if from the wrong side of the Atlantic Ocean? Frantic alerts about this astonishing discovery went out quickly, mostly by phone, but sometimes even by means of that old-fashioned form of communication, a postcard.

One of the birders who received such a card in his mail was the young Ted Parker, who lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and was nearly done with his senior year in High School: “Black-tailed Godwit seen at Brigantine May 22nd. Good authority,” the card read, though the signature is unfortunately illegible. This incredible find was the first of what turned out to be a remarkable run of godwit discoveries encompassing *all four* of the world's species between May and mid-Fall on the New Jersey coast that year. In fact, that is still believed to be the only known occasion when all four godwit species were present together in a single location, allowing some incredibly lucky birders to check off a godwit “grand slam” in a single day! This rarest of phenomena was a special boon for young Ted, since 1971 was also the year he had chosen for what turned out to be his record-breaking Big Year in the lower 48 states (626 species, smashing both Stuart Keith's North American record of 598 and also the 600 “barrier”).

However, when that unlikely postcard arrived at his house, Ted—having gotten permission to work on a “special senior project” instead of having to attend classes!--was in the Lower Rio Grande Valley chasing birds with his friend Harold Morrin. We can presume that he would have read the card upon his return at the end of May, along with a second card telling him about two Curlew Sandpipers and a Bar-tailed Godwit--also at “the Brig.” But he and Harold took off straightaway for their long-planned visit to the northwestern U.S. to tally as many species as possible there. The first actual record we have of Ted's

seeing the Black-tailed Godwit at the “Brig” was on July 9th, one week after the dynamic duo of Parker and Morrin had hopped on board a “pelagic” trip on the old Bluenose Ferry from Bar Harbor to Nova Scotia. While waiting to board, Ted had met Jon Dunn and Lee Jones—young birders, both of whom would later become well-known experts and field guide writers—and they struck up an immediate friendship. After the ferry trip, they all stayed at Ted’s house in Lancaster and then he took them for a visit to the “Brig” on July 9th, where the trio saw the rare blackwit, along with a Ruff and a Reeve. Later in the summer, Ted was able to rack up the other three godwit species, and that special quartet of birds thus became part of the remarkable listing achievement that rocketed him to fame as a birding prodigy.

Fast forward to 1979 again, when word of the Black-tailed Godwit found by Johnny Miller, Barb Haas, and John Ginaven was quickly spread via rotary-dial telephones (and maybe a postcard or two), and more than 300 birders “from all over the country” began to stream into Tinicum (birders having not been allowed back into the sewage ponds after that summary ejection). Of course, they were each hoping the bird would linger long enough for them to find it, inspect its field marks, marvel at it, pat one another on the back (high-fives then being barely known), and then add it to their life-lists. How this crush of bird-fans was handled by Dick Nugent, the TNEC Manager, and his staff (which included the venerable Jim Carroll, the original and sole guard tasked with watching over the fledgling Tinicum Preserve from 1965 to 1976, and Nelson Hoy, who had been an early birding mentor to Johnny Miller), is not clearly recalled, but it must have been something to behold, and those keepers of the marsh must have been pretty fired up and pretty proud of the frenzied birding going on right there on their own precious piece of soggy real estate. Perhaps it even seemed to them as if the arrival of this hallowed creature was salutary validation of all the decades-long efforts made by so many in the Delaware Valley birding and environmental community to save their beloved, remnant “waste place.”

One particularly desperate birder who received a call about the winged rarity was a fellow named Jim Vardaman, who just happened to be engaged in his own birding Big Year (in the entire ABA Area), hoping not only to break the record set by a young Pittsburgh birder, Scott Robinson (657 species, in 1976), but to hit or break the 700 species barrier—a very tall order, indeed. But Vardaman more than made up for his chutzpah by engaging a cadre of consultants comprised of the leading birders of the day—especially those most expert on their own “patches,” like Guy McCaskie in Southern California, Rich Stallcup in Northern California, John Edscorn in Florida, John Arvin and Victor Emanuel in South Texas, and Kenn Kaufman in Tucson, Arizona. In order to have the best shot at a new record, Vardaman had also arranged for a special phone number that would ring at both his home and office in Jackson, Mississippi so he could quickly gather reports of rare bird sightings from anyone and everyone who might be willing to share their “gen” with him. Willing informants merely had to “Call Collect, Ask for Birdman,” as the title of his (later) Big Year memoir exhorted them to do.

Early on October 21st, when Vardaman arrived at the office of his forest management company, he found a message from Frank Haas on the answering device connected to his special 690 (area code) number. He could hear Frank’s voice giving him both bad news and good news: the Barnacle Goose he had hoped to bag near Philadelphia had gone missing and likely had been misidentified anyway, but in its place a rare godwit had shown up at Tinicum. The disembodied voice urged him to come north soon to see it. Vardaman wrote “My hopes soared,” and—very shortly-- he did, too, hopping on a 2:30AM

plane and landing by 8AM in Philadelphia. When he arrived at the Tinicum marsh—just a few minutes north of the airport—“there was a large and distinguished crowd already there,” which included Johnny Miller and Stuart Keith (the top lister in the world and former president of the ABA). But the darned bird was nowhere to be found. After searching and waiting fruitlessly all day, and figuring that it had flown for good, Vardaman himself took wing toward home that evening, but at least he had gotten to chat with some of the other big listers, among them Allan Keith (Massachusetts), Larry Peavler (Indiana), Bob Farris (Oklahoma), and Thompson Marsh (Colorado). Vardaman had a last drink with some of them at the airport, and wrote that “it was my saddest cocktail party in a long time.”

But then the winds of birding luck swirled a bit more, and another call rang at Vardaman’s place on October 26th. This time it was the well-known top lister and Attu tour leader, Larry Balch, calling--but darned if Vardaman didn’t happen just then to be in Boston on his way to Nova Scotia where he was due to board a ferry ship to Newfoundland in search of Great Skua. Jim’s wife, Virginia, fielded the call and was able promptly to reach her husband with the good news that the *rara avis* of his (most proximate) desire had been relocated at Tinicum. Again, he dropped everything and flew southward to Philadelphia. This time, the bird had hung around, and in less than an hour he had seen it along the Darby Creek feeding and then in flight and so was able finally to add this dratted and exalted creature to his Big Year list as species No. 692, with Johnny adding his co-signature to confirm the ID officially. Later, when this fickle bird became an orni-character in Vardaman’s memoir of that Big Year, it entered ornithological history in a rather more salient way than it had in Johnny’s small academic note in a bird club journal.

Vardaman was so grateful for Johnny’s birding acumen, and so exultant over bird No. 692 (being a Code 5 species—using the coding system his consultants had invented), that he penned this tribute in his book: “An unexpected plus of the trip was the chance to go birding with John C. Miller. He is the size of a football lineman, a ramp boss for Northwest Orient Airlines..., and the only person I know who spent his first five years of birding *without binoculars of any kind*. To overcome such a disadvantage, he had to learn birds by habitat, habits, flight characteristics, shapes, and calls, and he has no equal on his home grounds.”

Now, what Johnny and other North American birders did not know back then is that certain tell-tale field marks allow an observer definitively to differentiate a Black-tailed Godwit from its Hudsonian relative, even when a bird’s wings are folded in resting position. In the July/August issue of *Birding*, the magazine of the American Birding Association, Kurt Schwartz’s article entitled “Primary Extension in Godwits” describes (with photographs) “a new way to identify [these two] godwits in basic plumage.” The keys are how far the primary wing feathers project beyond the tertials, and how far the wingtips extend beyond the tips of the tail feathers. Little or no extension beyond the tail means the godwit is almost certainly a Black-tailed, and, no more than two (and maybe a hint of a third) primary feather-tip(s) projecting beyond the tertials cinches the matter. And, indeed, if one looks closely at the rather fuzzy picture that DVOC member Alan Brady took of the Tinicum visitant on October 25th (published with Johnny’s note), the wing feathers do not extend beyond the tail, though the primary projection cannot be assessed due to the poor quality of the reproduction of the photo (or perhaps the original photo itself—no digiscoping back then!). But by relying on the old method—noting the pale color of the underwings—Johnny and

his friends were able to confirm the ID. Because Johnny had been fortunate enough to watch the bird take flight, thereby affording him a few wing-flaps to eyeball that critical feature, the whole chain of events described here began to unfold, resulting in this adventitious bit of local ornithological history. And even though later the Pennsylvania Bird Records Committee would only designate the sighting as “provisional”—because none of the photographs captured the bird’s underwings—there can be no reasonable doubt as to the veracity of the record because of the skill and integrity of the birders involved.

The Tinicum blackwit was last seen in Pennsylvania on October 26th, but when yet *another* blackwit was discovered two months later during the December 26th Christmas Count at the Bodie Island Lighthouse pond in North Carolina—again, by the same David Hughes (who got the ID right this time)—it had to have been that Tinicum bird making its way southward toward a (latitudinally) more proper wintering spot, where it lingered for nearly a month until a storm swept through.

Finally, we can speculate about how this most famous of Tinicum’s three hundred fifteen (or so) bird species had found Pennsylvania in the first place, thus catalyzing the events in this tale. The closest population of *Limosa limosa* to North America is made up of those aforementioned Icelandic godwits of the *islandica* subspecies. Normally, they are programmed to begin their migration southward toward more easterly European countries from late June into October, to winter as far away as Ireland, Britain, France, Spain, or even Morocco. These birds represent about one tenth of the roughly 600,000-800,000 total members of this Near Threatened species. So, perhaps one of those Icelandic migrants had mistakenly flown (or been blown) southwestward to landfall in North America, and then made its way down the Eastern Seaboard, undetected (or maybe misidentified) until it reached Tinicum. There is a tantalizing clue: on September 6, 1979, Tropical Storm David had tracked up along and drenched the East Coast (including Tinicum, where a dike was partially breached) and had then moved northeastward to clip Iceland, but we can only muse about whether its powerful winds might have played a role in the bird’s appearance.

Even today that magical 1979 bird remains the pride of the birding community in Philadelphia, with old timers still telling stories of those days at the marsh, and recalling the excitement of Tinicum’s becoming a rare bird hotspot and birder magnet at a time when obligate birding pilgrimages (or, “twitches,” as Brits call them) were just becoming *de rigueur* among the top listers and birding cognoscenti. Now, when birders gather, we find ourselves not uncommonly saying something like the following as we recall how we first encountered a particular fellow birder: “I think it was when that [fill in the name of a rare bird visitant] showed up at [fill in a place-name where a crowd of eager birders had gathered in a desperately festive frenzy-- mobbing some unwitting creature that would wish only to be left to its own devices].”

I have wondered whether Johnny Miller went after that 1971 Black-tailed Godwit at the Brig, along with Ted Parker and his new friends, and so many other birders, but he makes no mention of such an attempt or sighting in his *Cassinia* article. The more recent and much more dramatic memory of hundreds of blackwits in Australia was what leapt into his mind, like an epiphany, when on that memorable autumn day he was confronted by an improbable guest among the avian *hoi polloi* in the marsh he so loved.

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