

# LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER IDENTIFICATION

HARRY E. LeGRAND JR.

The scarcity of Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) records in North Carolina is primarily due to the difficulty in separating this species from the more common Short-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*). Although Grant and Browne (1970) summarized the status of both species in the state, their paper dealt with the distribution of the two species rather than with the methods used for identifying the two. The purpose of this paper is to discuss several techniques which are useful in separating the Long-billed Dowitcher (hereafter designated LBD) from the Short-billed Dowitcher (hereafter SBD), using both the data collected by Edmund LeGrand and me and material published elsewhere by others who have studied both species in detail.

1. VISUAL FIELD MARKS—In the spring the LBD is considerably darker rusty colored on the underparts than the SBD. At all seasons the LBD is more streaked and barred on the breast and belly, whereas the SBD is often spotted or devoid of markings underneath (Robbins et al., 1966; Easterla, 1970). Since the LBD is apparently rare on the Atlantic coast in the spring and the breast and belly coloration is greatly reduced in the fall, we have found the barred underparts the most useful plumage field mark on fall birds. The bills of many LBD are noticeably longer than those of the SBD (hence the common names). Although some LBD can probably be identified by bill length alone, the fact that bill lengths of shorebirds vary considerably within species makes identification by this character alone tricky and generally not conclusive. Our observations on bill lengths agree with those of Small (1958) and Ogden (1964).

2. CALL NOTES—In the opinion of those ornithologists who have recently studied LBD, the only sure way to identify the LBD is by its call. Much has been presented in the literature (see Small, 1958; Buckley and Buckley, 1967; and Ogden, 1964) about the validity of its call note in separating it from the SBD, and our observations compare favorably with the literature. The LBD call is a single note, "keet" or "peep," or a short series of this note. Since we have on occasions seen this species in tight flocks, the calls of the flock when flushed are very distinctive and reminiscent of young chicks or a chorus of frogs. Ogden (1964) states:

"While *griseus* [SBD] very rarely calls except as they are flushed, *scolopaceus* [LBD] will continue to give their 'peep' notes as they fly around after taking flight. Several times I have identified LBD in the air by hearing their regularly uttered 'peep' notes even before the flock was close enough to identify the bird by sight as Dowitcher."

On the other hand, the SBD call, as is well known, is similar to that of the Lesser Yellowlegs (*Totanus flavipes*) and can be described as "too-too" or "too-too-too," almost always in a series of single notes. The SBD calls are the only ones we have heard given by birds on salt-water mudflats along the North Carolina coast, whereas we have heard both species in the fresh and brackish ponds on the Outer Banks.

3. HABITAT AND HABITS—All of the LBD we have ever seen were found in fresh-water or brackish-water areas, and most of these have been on impoundments. This preference for fresh-water has been noted by many other observers, and Buckley and Buckley (1967) have found that in southeastern Virginia the LBD is found on fresh- or brackish-water pools, especially after 1 October. This habitat preference is a very helpful character in the identification of LBD. The SBD is primarily a bird of the salt-water mudflats and sandflats. It also occurs regularly in fresh-water areas and often outnumbers the LBD in a given impoundment where both are present, especially in the

spring. The points to remember are that any dowitcher seen in a salt-water habitat is almost certainly a SBD, but that both species can occur together in fresh or brackish areas.

I have noticed that the LBD seems to feed in deeper water than does the SBD. At the Bodie Island lighthouse pond the water level has been so high on one or two occasions that only American Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*), Greater Yellowlegs (*T. melanoleucus*), and LBD have been seen feeding there. Both species of dowitchers feed in fairly tight groups. Mixed flocks are apparently not unusual, and in several of the flocks of LBD we have studied there have been a few SBD, based on call notes of flushed birds.

4. PERIODS OF MIGRATION—The SBD is well known as an early fall migrant along the Atlantic coast. The peak of its migration is in July and August, even though many birds remain to winter on the North Carolina coast. In the spring the species is a late migrant, often becoming abundant along the coast from late April into June. For example, we recorded about 4,000 SBD at Bodie-Pea Islands on 16 and 17 May 1970 and about 400 there on 13 through 15 June 1971. On the other hand, several observers have mentioned that the LBD is an early spring and a late fall migrant in the eastern United States. Urner and Storer (1949) recorded only two LBD in the spring in their study area on the northern and central New Jersey coast during a 10-year period, one bird each on 18 April and 2 May 1937. In the fall they found that the principal period of migration for the LBD was between 19 September and 27 October, with high counts on 27 September, 10 October, and 13 October. Conversely, their data showed that the principal movements of SBD occurred between 4 May and 25 May and between 6 July and 24 August. Buckley and Buckley (1968) consider the LBD a regular but rare spring migrant in southeastern Virginia, with records between 20 April and 5 May. In the fall they found it to be an uncommon migrant between the dates of 15 September and 1 November. We have not seen LBD in the spring, and the species appears to be rare along most of the Atlantic coast during this season. However, the LBD is definitely more common along the Atlantic coast in the fall than in the spring. My brother and I have recorded this species on the Outer Banks of North Carolina on seven occasions in fall and winter. Our LBD records are as follows:

15+	26 September 1971	Bodie Island
50+	3 October 1970	Bodie Island
1	11 October 1969	Bodie Island
30	30 October 1971	Pea Island
1	14 November 1970	Pea Island
40	30 December 1971	Bodie Island
12	30 January 1971	Pea Island

These sightings agree with those of other published records in that the LBD is definitely a late fall migrant. Although the latter two observations are winter records, the LBD is apparently not a regular winter resident on the Outer Banks or elsewhere in North Carolina.

#### SUMMARY

There are several techniques which are helpful, if not necessary, for distinguishing between the Long-billed Dowitcher (LBD) and the Short-billed Dowitcher (SBD). The best field mark for the LBD is a single "keet" call note or a series of the same, whereas the SBD has a rapid "too-too" or "too-too-too" call note. Other helpful points in separating the two species are that the LBD has a slightly longer bill than the SBD, somewhat more barred underparts in the fall, a preference for fresh- and brackish-water areas rather than salt-water areas, and a later period of migration in the fall (after mid-September, as compared to a migration peak in July and August for the SBD).

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