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THE ESKIMO CURLEW IN NEW MEXICO: A PROBABLE 1854 SPECIMEN RECORD  
FROM DONA ANA COUNTY

JOHN P. HUBBARD, CARLA DOVE, AND CHRISTOPHER MILENSKY

10 Urraca Lane, Santa Fe, NM 87506 (JPH) and Division of Birds, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560

Thomas Charlton Henry (1825-1877) was a U. S. Army surgeon stationed in New Mexico in 1852-1858, during which time he practiced medicine in what are now Dona Ana, Grant, and Lincoln counties (Bailey 1928, Hume 1942). In addition, Henry (1855, 1859) also studied and collected birds there, with the specimens later deposited in the Smithsonian Institution (USNM) and Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences (ANSP). In April 1854, Henry collected a curlew along Rio Grande near Fort Thorn, just northwest of the present town of Hatch in Dona Ana County (Julyan 1998). He identified that bird as *Numenius* or *Phaeopus hudsonicus*, now known as *Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus* or the American race of the Whimbrel. Henry (1856) prepared the bird as a museum skin, as it was listed among a shipment of specimens sent from New Mexico to Spencer F. Baird at the Smithsonian in March 1856. That was his second such shipment to Baird, the first having been in 1854 (Henry 1854a, 1854b). Both of these were transported to the Smithsonian by Captain John Pope and his U.S. Army party, in the course of their railroad survey along the 32<sup>nd</sup> parallel in New Mexico and Texas (Baird in Pope 1854, Goetzmann 1965). However, Henry's Whimbrel is not listed in Baird et al.'s (1858) comprehensive treatment of birds collected during midnineteen century explorations of the western U.S. Nor is it to be found in the USNM or ANSP catalogues or collections, where the vast majority of Henry's specimens were accessioned and most of the remainder are today. Nonetheless, Henry's report has long been accepted as the first record and only specimen of Whimbrel from New Mexico, including by Ridgway (1919), Bailey (1928), and the A.O.U. (1957). Hubbard (1978) also considered the report as valid, although long puzzled by the apparent absence of the specimen (or any record of it) in the above or other collections. Recently, a USNM printout of Henry's specimens yielded a clue about the possible whereabouts of this curlew specimen. This listing shows not a Whimbrel collected by Henry, but an Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*)-which still remains in the Smithsonian collection (USNM 6573)! Spurred by this discovery, we have investigated the matter and now conclude that this specimen is almost certainly the bird that Henry (1855, 1859) identified as a Whimbrel! If this assessment is correct, this constitutes the first record of this species for New Mexico and apparently the fourth from the Chihuahuan Desert and vicinity.

#### BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION

Although Henry was an avid and accomplished student of birds, we can understand how he might have confused these two species of curlews-even in the hand. Although the Whimbrel is larger than the Eskimo Curlew, the two are similar in many aspects of morphology and plumage. Furthermore, being on the frontier of New Mexico, Henry would have had only limited access to technical references or other help in distinguishing the taxa. In addition, even though he was from Philadelphia (Hume 1942), we are uncertain how familiar he might have been with either species. Certainly, he did not add to that familiarity in New Mexico, as he only encountered this type of curlew there once-as noted in Henry (1855, 1859). Of course, his field misidentification would have been easily corrected once the specimen reached Baird and his staff at the Smithsonian. However, there is nothing to suggest Henry was ever informed about such mistakes (of which there were several), for whatever reason(s). In fact, it appears that very little exchange of information ever occurred between Henry and Baird, even though it would have been to their mutual benefit to have done so. For example, most if not all Henry's birds apparently lacked labels, so "debriefing" him for collection data would have obviously helped fill this void. Not only was this not done, but Baird also seems to have bypassed Henry's (e.g., 1855) publications in his attempts to recreate specimen data. As a consequence, the resultant label and catalog information is at best guesswork, with much of it vague and some questionable if not downright erroneous (Hubbard et al. in prep.). In addition, Baird's manner of handling Pope's involvement with Henry specimens added to the data problem, with the good captain listed as their collector and the doctor relegated to the status of preparator! While apparently standard practice at the time, this treatment would later further cloud the origin of this Eskimo Curlew and other Henry specimens.

Of course, Baird and his staff were quite preoccupied in the 1850's, including in preparing reports on the biota encountered by survey parties exploring western North America (e.g., Rivinus and Youssef 1992). As a consequence, there was probably little time to resolve problems such as those posed by Henry's apparently data-less specimens. In addition, it is possible that Henry

might not have been all that forthcoming with Baird, given that the latter has instituted a policy whereby government collections were required to go first to the Smithsonian for inspection, etc. Being from Philadelphia and an associate of John Cassin's (e.g., Hume 1942), Henry wanted most of his specimens to go the Academy of Natural Sciences. In addition, Henry's (1856) letter to Baird shows the good doctor wanted to write up his material himself, as well as to decide on the distribution of the specimens among various collections. In fact, soon after Henry returned to Philadelphia in 1858, he went to the Smithsonian and retrieved most of his

specimens-many of which were later deposited as ANSP (fide catalogues). Whatever the reasons, Henry's Eskimo Curlew was destined to acquire few data once it arrived at the Smithsonian Institution--including a collection locality of "Pacific R. R. [= Railroad] Survey 32° latitude]" on the USNM label and "Pacif[ic] R.R. Survey" in the original catalog. In neither case is a state of origin indicated, although as already noted that survey route extended through both New Mexico and Texas (e.g., Pope 1854). More specifically, it ran from the Dona Ana County area eastward along the 32nd parallel to the vicinity of Big Spring, Texas, thence northeastward to the Red River at the Oklahoma border. Also lacking on the label and in the catalog is a date of collection, although the specimen was catalogued into the Smithsonian collection on 15 December 1857. Finally, both the label and catalog list the USNM number 6573, plus entries showing Pope as the collector and Henry as preparator of this curlew specimen.

Later, Baird et al. (1858) would attribute this Eskimo Curlew specimen to Texas, with no mention of either the railroad route or latitude 32°--nor of course any date of collection. In addition, they cited Captain Pope in the "whence obtained" column, whereas that for "collected by" (Le., Henry's "slot) was left blank! As a result of this treatment, we believe that an unwarranted (if inadvertent) shift may have occurred in the perceived origin of this specimen--Le., from its having been obtained (=certainly prepared and doubtlessly collected) by Henry somewhere along the 32<sup>nd</sup> parallel to its being taken by Pope in Texas! Why this shift might have occurred is a mystery, and indeed it should have been forestalled by what Baird or his staff already knew about the specimen--namely that it had been prepared by Henry, which meant that he very likely took it in New Mexico between 1852 and 1857. In fact, we have little doubt the curlew had been received by the Smithsonian in Henry's (1856) 1856 shipment, where it was listed as "*Numenius hudsonicus*" on his invoice. In addition, it should have been evident that the specimen agrees in "make" with Henry's other skins, e.g., having been initially stuffed and sewed up in the round. By contrast, Pope's birds were typically prepared as unsewn, flat skins, probably because they were initially pickled (Baird 1854) and remade after the fact. Finally, Baird was certainly aware that Pope's involvement with Henry's specimens was only peripheral, namely in transporting them to the Smithsonian Institution from New Mexico. Thus, the association of Pope's name with those specimens should not have been a source of confusion, or did Baird believe there was more to the two men's relationship than the above? More specifically, might he have surmised that Henry actually participated in Pope's railroad survey, to the extent both could have been involved in obtaining this and other specimens along the survey route in Texas?

We are aware of only one person who has suggested Henry participated in Pope's railroad survey, and that is Cooke (*in* Bailey 1928:20-21 )--who indicated the former had accompanied that party "at least part of the way" along its route beginning in February 1854. However, no basis is given for this claim, although we suspect it is related to Pope's transport of Henry's specimens--perhaps leading Cooke to believe these were collected along the survey route. However, based on what we know about that material, much of it was collected prior to 1854 and/or consists of species not present along the route. Furthermore, there is no mention of Henry's involvement in the expedition, despite Pope's (1854) having provided a detailed itinerary, roster of personnel, and descriptions of activities for the 1854 survey. Indeed, in a letter dated 31 January 1854, Henry (1854a) apologized because he could "not be spared to accompany ... and assist Pope and his men on the survey in question. Finally, we know that Henry (1855, 1859) was in New Mexico in at least April 1854, in part because that is when he collected the supposed Whimbrel near Fort Thorn! In fact, our only indication that he visited present Texas is his mention (Henry 1855) of the Rio Grande near El Paso del Norte (now Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua) in August 1854. However, he could well have ventured into that area at other times in 1852-1858, as it was proximal to Dona Ana County and in fact still part of New Mexico! Otherwise, we know of no evidence that Henry ever traveled farther eastward in Texas, and certainly not away from the uppermost Rio Grande Valley in what is now that state. Finally, it should be pointed out that Henry's specimens were not the only ones treated in Baird et al. (1858) but not collected in conjunction with given railroad surveys. In fact, his and other such specimens are frequently listed in that work, with the aim being to give it greater completeness.

While Henry's Eskimo Curlew is an exception, most of his Smithsonian specimens were in fact attributed to New Mexico--either as accessioned into that collection or enumerated in Baird et al. (1858). In fact, some such attributions had been made so uncritically as to likely be in error. For example, several eastern birds in his collection were more likely taken while Henry was en route to (rather than in) New Mexico, most probably in Kansas in spring 1852 (Hubbard et al. ms.). In each case, these were of species that Henry (1855, 1859) never mentioned from New Mexico, which is sufficient basis for doubting that they originated there. As for his Eskimo Curlew, that could have also been taken in Kansas--perhaps along with the eastern birds noted above. However, Henry (1854b) shipped the latter material to the Smithsonian in early 1854, as he likely would have done with a curlew collected in 1852 as well. Instead, the latter was dispatched two years later (Henry 1856), suggesting it was taken in New Mexico after Henry's first shipment was made to the Smithsonian. In any case, we are uncertain why the Eskimo Curlew was not attributed by Baird to New Mexico, whether by oversight, design, or otherwise. One possibility is that he did not do so on biological grounds, namely in the belief that this was a more eastern species and thus unlikely to occur in New Mexico. Indeed, this view could have led Baird et al. (1858) to assign the specimen to Texas, as well as inferring that Pope was involved in its collection. In this regard, the only other Eskimo

Culews cited in that work were from New York and the upper Missouri Valley, along with the statement that "we have never seen [this species] from the western countries [=states] of the United States." Despite their attribution of Henry's specimen to Texas, Oberholser (1974:335) did not include it among those he listed for that state-the earliest being dated 1860.

## SUMMARY AND COMMENTS ON SOUTHWESTERN ESKIMO CURLEW RECORDS

As detailed above, an apparently dataless Eskimo Curlew skin (USNM 6573) was accessioned into the Smithsonian Institution in 1857 and variously attributed to Dr. Thomas' Charlton Henry, Capt. John Pope, the Pacific Railroad Surveys, and Texas. However, our evidence suggests that Henry collected and prepared the specimen, Pope transported it from New Mexico to the Smithsonian, and the bird was taken in the Southwest in the period 1852-1856. Although the curlew might have been collected in Kansas or Texas, it more likely represents the Whimbrel Henry (1855,1859) reportedly took in April 1854 near Fort Thorn, present Dona Ana County, New Mexico. While that locality is west of the Eskimo Curlew's generally accepted spring range (e.g., Swenk 1915), the species was recorded in the 19th century in such then-poorly-known regions as northeastern Colorado, Trans-Pecos Texas, and the northern Mexican Plateau. In fact, we are aware of three verified occurrences from that inclusive region, including (1) two specimens taken at Denver, Adams and/or Arapahoe counties, Colorado on 29 April 1882 (Bailey and Niedrach 1967); (2) three from Fort Stockton, Pecos Co., Texas on 4 May 1860 (Oberholser 1974, Casto 1995); and (3) one at Lake Palomas, northernmost Chihuahua on 8 April 1892 (Cooke *in* Bailey 1928:262). In addition, McCall (1851) reported seeing "a few [of these curlews] on the plains east of the Rio Grande" in March and/or April 1850, presumably between the Davis Mountains of Texas and El Paso del Norte, Chihuahua. The Chihuahuan specimen represents both the westernmost and only confirmed record from Mexico (A.O.U. 1998), taken at a time by which the species' numbers had already begun a noticeable decline (e.g., Oberholser 1974). Notably, that locality lies only about 115 km SW of Fort Thorn, which is in turn some 500 km NW of Fort Stockton, Texas. Thus, in this 500 X 115 km polygon (ca 57,500 square km) of the Chihuahuan Desert, the Eskimo Curlew was likely recorded on four occasions between 1850 and 1892-with five specimens taken at three different localities, including the presumed bird in New Mexico in 1854.

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