

**A PROBABLE SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER
(*Limnodromus griseus*, SCOLOPACIDAE) AT TONGOY, IV REGIÓN:
FIRST RECORD OF THE GENUS AND SPECIES FOR CHILE?**

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ABSTRACT

A single dowitcher, identified as a Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus* (Scolopacidae), was observed during a period of about four hours on 22 January 1997 at Estero Tongoy, IV Región, Chile. The dowitcher was part of a large mixed-species flock of shorebirds containing about 500 individuals of 14 species, and including eight other species of boreal migrant shorebirds breeding in North America. These birds foraged in a tidal area of soft mud partially covered with halophytic plants. The distribution of the two American species, the Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus* and the Long-billed Dowitcher *L. scolopaceus*, and their occurrence in southern South America are reviewed and discussed. In Argentina, the status of *Limnodromus* spp. remains uncertain. There are very few records, of both *Limnodromus griseus* and *L. scolopaceus*, from Buenos Aires Province, but identification of either species needs verification. There are two records of *L. griseus* from Rio Grande do Sul in southern Brazil. The observation of a probable *Limnodromus griseus* at Estero Tongoy appears to be the first record of this genus and species for Chile, about 1500 km south of the southernmost records of this species along the Pacific coast at Arequipa, southern Perú.

RESUMEN

Un único individuo de agujeta, becasina migratoria o correlimos, identificado como un *Limnodromus griseus* (Scolopacidae), fue observado durante aproximadamente cuatro horas el 22 de enero 1997 en el Estero Tongoy, IV Región, Chile. El correlimos formaba parte de un grupo mixto de playeros de aproximadamente 500 individuos de 14 especies distintas. Estos playeros fueron observados en una zona intermareal de barro fino y suave parcialmente cubierto de plantas halofíticas. Se presenta la distribución de las dos especies americanas *Limnodromus griseus* (Short-billed Dowitcher en inglés) y *L. scolopaceus* (Long-billed Dowitcher) y se discute su ocurrencia en el sur de América del Sur. Existen hallazgos de *Limnodromus griseus* (sin nombre vernacular en Chile o Argentina; Becasina migratoria en el Perú) y *L. scolopaceus* (sin nombre vernacular en Chile, llamado Becasina de patas verdes o Becasina boreal en Argentina) para la Provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina, pero la identificación de ambas especies necesitaría verificación. Hay dos hallazgos de *Limnodromus griseus* en Rio Grande do Sul en el sur de Brazil. La observación de un probable *Limnodromus griseus* en el Estero Tongoy parece ser el primer hallazgo de este género y especie para Chile, aproximadamente 1500 km al sur de los hallazgos más australes de esta especie a lo largo de la costa del Océano Pacífico en Arequipa, sur del Perú.

KEY WORDS

Dowitcher, *Limnodromus*, shorebirds, Chile, South America, distribution.

INTRODUCTION

On 22 January 1997 I observed a single dowitcher (*Limnodromus*, Scolopacidae) at the mouth of Estero Tongoy, near the town of Tongoy and Playa Socos, IV Región, Chile (30°15'13S, 71°29'42W; coordinates obtained with a Magellan GPS 2000). The dowitcher was part of an important mixed-species flock of shorebirds.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first record of any individual of the dowitcher genus *Limnodromus* anywhere in Chile. The genus *Limnodromus* is not mentioned in the classic works on Chilean ornithology (e.g., Hellmayr 1932, Goodall *et al.* 1951, Philippi 1964, Johnson 1965) or in the more recent literature on the avifauna of Chile (e.g., Araya *et al.* 1992, Araya *et al.* 1995, Howell 1996). The nearest records from the Pacific coast of South America, north of Chile, appear to be of *Limnodromus griseus* (Short-billed Dowitcher) from Arequipa, southern Peru (Blake 1977: 582), about 1500 km north of Tongoy.

I first describe my observation at Estero Tongoy below, then, to place this observation into a broader context, review the literature about the occurrence of *Limnodromus spp.* in southern South America, before concluding about the occurrence of this genus in Chile.

STUDY AREA AND ITS AVIFAUNA

The area where I observed the dowitcher and the other shorebirds was near the mouth of the narrow estuary of Estero Tongoy, close to the town of Tongoy, in a tidal area of soft, shallow dark mud, partially covered with low (about 40 cm tall), rather dense, succulent halophytic vegetation. The Tongoy area is a well-known shorebird resting and feeding area. My observations were made with Zeiss 10x40 binoculars in bright sunshine and under excellent light conditions, for about 4 hours from 10:00 to 14:00 h.

The study site is about 500-700 meters from the town of Tongoy and from Socos beach. Although the dowitcher and other shorebirds and waterbirds were within a few hundred meters of a busy town and a crowded beach, they were not molested by human activities because the muddy area on which they rested

was relatively deep and slimy, and thus avoided by both people and dogs.

I was able to approach the dowitcher and the other shorebirds to about 20-35 m, but they flew away if I came any closer. However, after a short flight over the wetland they would settle down near the spot they had left and would let me approach them again.

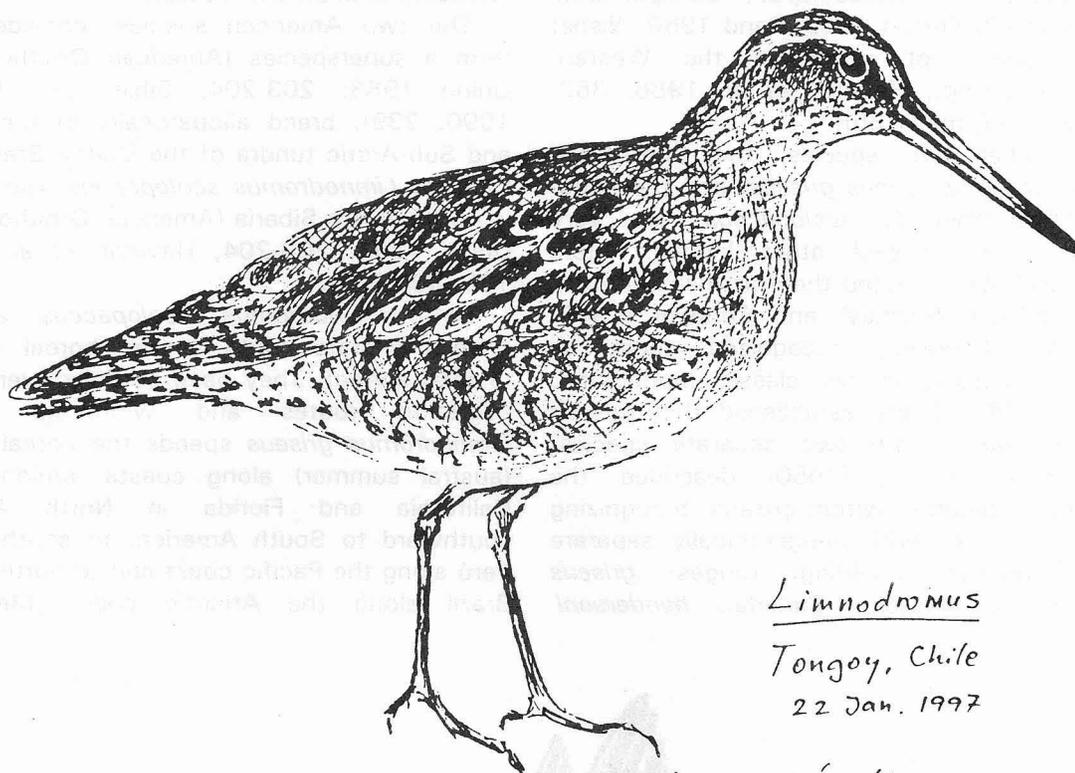
The dowitcher was part of a large mixed-species flock of shore- and waterbirds totalling about 500 individuals of 14 species. This flock contained, in addition to the one *Limnodromus*, about 80 *Pluvialis squatarola*, 30-40 *Himantopus mexicanus*, 20 *Tringa flavipes*, 4-5 *Tringa melanoleuca*, 50 *Arenaria interpres*, 7-10 *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*, 10 *Calidris canutus*, 50 *Numenius phaeopus*, 2 *Limosa haemastica*, 8-10 *Larus dominicanus*, 25-30 *Larus pipixcan*, 75-80 *Sterna elegans*, and 130-150 *Rynchops niger*.

THE DOWITCHER *Limnodromus* AT TONGOY

The bird I sighted at Estero Tongoy was mixed with the other thirteen species of shorebirds and waterbirds listed above, but was seen to associate mostly with four species, *Pluvialis squatarola*, *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*, *Tringa flavipes* and *T. melanoleuca*. During the entire observation time the dowitcher remained relatively inactive among the other shorebirds, occasionally moving here and there, as the other birds also did. I did not see the dowitcher forage for food.

I identified the bird as a dowitcher *Limnodromus* by its medium size, snipe-like bill, longish yellowish-olive legs, pale cinnamon or rufescent cheeks and flanks, barred lower flanks, white triangular area on the back, and characteristic "dowitcher jizz" or "gestalt." Identification of this bird as a dowitcher *Limnodromus* was greatly facilitated by the presence of the other shorebirds in the flock, including especially other long-billed species, the Willet *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*, the Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*, the Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*, and the Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*.

I identified the dowitcher as an individual of the Short-billed species, *Limnodromus griseus* (Fig. 1), on the basis of its conspicuously short bill (for a dowitcher!), which was longer, but



Limnodromus

Tongoy, Chile

22 Jan. 1997

François Vuilleumier

Figure 1. Probable *Limnodromus griseus* observed at Estero Tongoy, IV Región, Chile, on 22 January 1997. Note relatively short bill, relatively short legs, barring on flanks, and markings of scapulars and wing coverts. From a drawing by François Vuilleumier.

not much longer, than the head, pale tan-beige at the base, darker at the tip; its relatively short legs (for a dowitcher!), yellowish-olive in color; its rather heavily barred underwing coverts (clearly seen on a couple of occasions, when the bird gave flight intention movements; see Fig. 2); its barred, pale cinnamon-colored lower flanks; its pale cinnamon-colored and lightly speckled cheeks; its broadly edged, dark brown scapulars and some wing coverts. The bird at Tongoy looked much like the individual depicted in a color plate on page 152 (lower photo) in Wilds and Newlon (1983). On dowitcher identification, see the detailed treatments by Nisbet (1961), Wilds and Newlon (1983), and Hayman *et al.* (1986).

Although I have had much field experience with both *Limnodromus griseus* and *L. scolopaceus* during migration in the United

States, my identification of the Tongoy bird as *Limnodromus griseus* must remain tentative. First, I did not collect the bird, and there is consequently no voucher specimen. Second, I did not photograph the bird, hence there is no photographic record to refer to. And third, I did not hear the bird call, which is a pity as the calls of *Limnodromus griseus* and *L. scolopaceus* are quite distinct and diagnostic (see, e.g. Wilds and Newlon 1983: 154).

DISTRIBUTION OF THE GENUS *Limnodromus*

The genus *Limnodromus* (the Latin name means marsh-inhabiting, Jobling 1991: 131) includes three species (e.g., Sibley and Monroe 1990: 239) of long-billed snipe-like shorebirds (on the etymology of the English vernacular name, dowitcher, see Choate 1985: 19). One of

these species, the Asian or Asiatic Dowitcher *Limnodromus (Pseudoscolopax) semipalmatus* (Pitelka 1948, Sutton 1949, Rand 1950, Nisbet 1961), does not occur in the Western Hemisphere (e.g., Hayman *et al.* 1986: 362-363, plate 49, map 185).

The other two species, the Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus*, and the Long-billed Dowitcher *L. scolopaceus*, are very closely related to each other. Indeed, Peters (1934: 272-273) treated them as members of a single species. Hellmayr and Conover (1948: 140-145), however, recognized them as separate species. In his classic monograph, Pitelka (1950) clearly established that *griseus* and *scolopaceus* are two separate species. Furthermore, Pitelka (1950) described the geographic variation within *griseus*, recognizing three subspecies with geographically separate boreal summer (breeding) ranges: *griseus* (breeding in eastern Canada), *hendersoni*

(breeding in central Canada), and *caurinus* (breeding in southern Alaska).

The two American species, considered to form a superspecies (American Ornithologists' Union 1983: 203-204, Sibley and Monroe 1990: 239), breed allopatrically in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic tundra of the United States and Canada. *Limnodromus scolopaceus* also breeds in northeastern Siberia (American Ornithologists' Union 1983: 203-204, Hayman *et al.* 1986: 180, 360-362).

Both *Limnodromus scolopaceus* and *L. griseus* migrate south in the boreal autumn (austral spring). They have partially overlapping migration routes and wintering ranges. *Limnodromus griseus* spends the boreal winter (austral summer) along coastal regions from California and Florida in North America southward to South America, to south-central Perú along the Pacific coast and to northeastern Brazil along the Atlantic coast (Meyer de

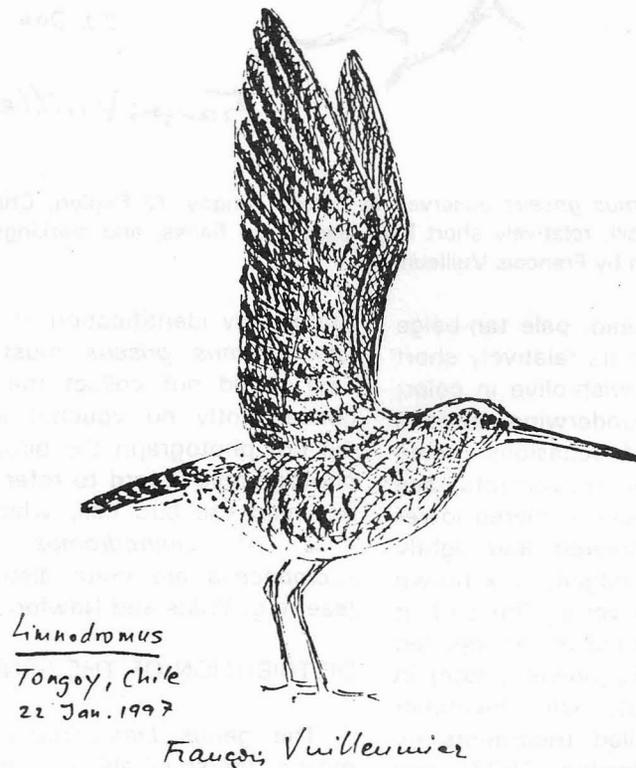


Figure 2. Probable *Limnodromus griseus* observed at Estero Tongoy, IV Región, Chile, on 22 January 1997. The bird is lifting its wings in a flight intention movement. Note heavy barring of underwing. From a drawing by François Vuilleumier.

Schauensee 1966: 97, Meyer de Schauensee 1982: 79, Blake 1977: 580-582, American Ornithologists' Union 1983: 203, map 183 in Hayman *et al.* 1986: 180). *Limnodromus scolopaceus* also spends the boreal winter along coastal regions from California southward, but its occurrence in South America is either "casual" (Meyer de Schauensee 1966: 96, Meyer de Schauensee 1982: 79), "doubtful" (Blake 1977: 583), or "open to question" (American Ornithologists' Union 1983: 204).

The above description of migration routes and boreal winter ranges suggests that the species to be expected along the Chilean coast is *Limnodromus griseus*. However, *L. griseus* has not been reported from Chile (e.g., Hellmayr 1932, Philippi 1964, Araya *et al.* 1992, Araya *et al.* 1993, Araya *et al.* 1995, Howell 1996).

Limnodromus IN SOUTHERN SOUTH AMERICA

The status and occurrence of *Limnodromus* spp. in southern South America are still unclear. Hayman *et al.* (1986: 360) stated that *L. griseus caurinus* "migrates mostly close to the Pacific coast, and winters from N California to Peru," and that *L. griseus griseus* "winters North Carolina to Florida and south through the Caribbean to Brazil." Hayman *et al.* (1986: 360) added that *griseus* was a "Vagrant Galapagos and probably N Argentina." Koepcke (1964: 53) wrote of *L. griseus* that in Perú, it migrates "hacia el Sur hasta el área de Pisco." Of *L. scolopaceus*, Hayman *et al.* (1986: 361) wrote that it "winters in S USA and Central America, rarely south to Panama, but there are no certain records in S America."

Hellmayr and Conover (1948: 145) listed two South American specimens of *L. griseus griseus*, one from Colombia and one from Brazil. *L. griseus* has been recorded on two occasions in Rio Grande do Sul, southern Brazil (Belton 1994: 150-151). *Limnodromus griseus caurinus* is reported by Blake (1977: 582) from "ECUADOR and central PERU, rarely to Arequipa (Mejía)." Fjeldså and Krabbe (1990) wrote (1990: 170) of *L. griseus*: "N Am. migrant to coasts of northern S Am. - is sometimes seen at 3700 m near Cuzco, Peru (B. Walker)." Note that Hughes (1970) did not mention any *Limnodromus* from the Mollendo district of southern Perú. The American Museum

of Natural History (AMNH) has four specimens of *Limnodromus griseus* in gray non-breeding plumage from coastal central Perú. These birds do not resemble the bird I saw at Tongoy.

Olrog (1979: 96) stated that *L. scolopaceus* "llega ocasionalmente hasta el este de Buenos Aires (San Clemente del Tuyú)." Blake (1977: 583) however wrote that "The occurrence of *scolopaceus* south of Panama is doubtful.

Most, if not all, records (none recent) for Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Argentina probably are misidentifications of *L. griseus*. A possible exception is a female dowitcher (this species?) in breeding plumage collected at "Curi-Lauquen," Cape Santo Domingo, Buenos Aires, Argentina, October 25, 1942. This specimen, with immaculate white abdomen and bill length of 69.5 mm., was deposited in Mus. Arg. Cienc. Nat., Buenos Aires. For additional details and photograph of this bird see Zotta [sic], 1942, Hornero 8: 171-76." This specimen had been cited earlier by Hellmayr and Conover (1948: 141) as being the "one record [of *scolopaceus*] for Argentina." I discuss this bird further later in this section.

In apparent contradiction with Olrog's (1979) statement about *scolopaceus* in Argentina, Blake (1977: 581), under *griseus*, wrote that "Two dowitchers in winter plumage observed by C. C. Olrog on a beach at Cape San Antonio, Buenos Aires, in November, 1962, are the second records for Argentina. They are presumed to represent this species [i.e., *griseus*]." The contradiction is cleared by Olrog (1963: footnote to page 137) himself, who had written that the birds he had observed at Cabo San Antonio were "evidentemente *L. griseus hendersoni*," whereas the specimen cited by Zotta (1942) was *L. scolopaceus*. Later, however, Olrog (1967: 294) did not mention *L. scolopaceus* from Argentina, but wrote the following about *L. griseus*: "Fue citada una sola vez para la Argentina (Zotta, Hornero, 8: 171, 1942). En noviembre de 1962 se observaron dos ejemplares juntos, en la orilla del mar, en el cabo San Antonio, ambos en plumaje invernal." Similar information was repeated by Johansen (1969: 186). In a recent work, de la Peña (1992: 129-130) listed *L. scolopaceus* as a migrant in Argentina ("llega hasta Buenos Aires"), but did not mention *L. griseus*. In their field guide, Narosky and Yzurieta (1989: 118)

described and illustrated *L. scolopaceus* for "Costas de mar en B. Aires," and added in a footnote that "*L. griseus* muy parecido, podría también aparecer en costas bonaerenses." Canevari *et al.* (1991) discussed only *Limnodromus scolopaceus* for Argentina and did not mention *L. griseus*. In volume I Canevari *et al.* (1991: 202-203) gave a distribution map and a color illustration, and in volume II (Canevari *et al.* 1991: 183) they stated: "Ocasional en la Argentina, donde se la ha citado varias veces en la Provincia de Buenos Aires."

Clearly, there is confusion in the literature about the status of *Limnodromus spp.* in Argentina, and only, perhaps, the specimen from Estancia Curi-Lauquen, mentioned above, may represent a positive identification. This bird was described in detail by Zotta (1942), who indicated that it was registered as N° 6168a in the Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales. Zotta (1942: 174) gave the bill length of this specimen, a female, as 69.5 mm. According to Wilds and Newlon (1983: 154), females *griseus* have bills 56-68 mm, females of *scolopaceus* bills 65-80. The tail pattern of this specimen, illustrated by Zotta (1942: 172) shows wider black bars than white bars, a character usually found in *scolopaceus* (Wilds and Newlon 1983). Thus, on the basis of bill size and tail pattern, the Curi-Lauquen specimen would appear to be *scolopaceus*. It would nevertheless be good if an ornithologist with extensive experience with *Limnodromus* were to verify the identification of this specimen.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary and conclusion, the evidence cited above suggests that:

- (1) *Limnodromus scolopaceus* has probably been COLLECTED once in Buenos Aires Province, Argentina;
- (2) *L. griseus* MAY have been SIGHTED once in Buenos Aires Province, Argentina, and HAS BEEN recorded twice from Rio Grande do Sul, southern Brazil;
- (3) *L. griseus* HAS BEEN recorded regularly from central and southern Perú; and
- (4) the observation of a single individual of *Limnodromus*, identified as a probable *L. griseus*, at Estero Tongoy, central Chile, on 22 January 1997, is apparently the southernmost

record of the genus and species along the Pacific coast of South America, and the first record for Chile.

This record is brought to the attention of Chilean ornithologists, who should carefully examine large flocks of shorebirds, especially those including boreal species, and search for other *Limnodromus* in these associations. If other *Limnodromus* are discovered in Chile, specimens should be collected for unequivocal identification of these difficult species. I would be happy to examine these specimens and to compare them with the large series at the AMNH. If collecting proves impossible, special attention should be paid to the call notes of these birds, which were described by Nisbet (1961: 352) and Wilds and Newlon (1983: 154). Hayman *et al.* (1986: 360-361) essentially repeated the information published in these two earlier papers. Nisbet (1961: 352) wrote that "The difference in flight-notes is usually considered in North America to be the most reliable field distinction between the two species..." For the benefit of readers who might not have ready access to Nisbet's (1961) or Wilds and Newlon's (1983) papers, in *British Birds* and *Birding*, respectively, I quote the descriptions of the calls given by these authors below. Personally I prefer the descriptions given by Nisbet (1961) because they correspond better to the sounds I hear the birds emit.

According to Wilds and Newlon (1983: 154) *Limnodromus griseus* has "mellow" calls, "*tu-tu* or *tu-tu-tu*, sometimes expanded to several syllables" and its "most typical alarm-note sounds like that of a Ruddy Turnstone [*Arenaria interpres*]." Nisbet (1961:352) had earlier written that "The usual flight-note of Short-bills [*griseus*] is a triple *küt-küt-küt* or *chü-chü-chü*; this call faintly resembles that of a Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) or a weak cry of a Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*), but is faster and much less musical than either, with a metallic quality which slightly suggests the rattling call of a Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*). The *küt* note is often uttered singly, grading over into a sharp *kyit* which is sometimes given in a rattling series when the bird is startled."

Limnodromus scolopaceus emits "a high, thin *keek*, ... usually given as one or two notes" and "A disturbed bird often gives several shrill, sharp *keeks* or an accelerating series of five or

six harsh notes" (Wilds and Newlon 1983: 154). Nisbet (1961: 352) wrote: "The usual call of Long-bills (*scolopaceus*) is a shrill, prolonged *keek*, sometimes uttered in groups of three or more, and becoming a rippling trill if the bird is flushed suddenly."

As a final remark, please note that, although Wilds and Newlon (1983: 154) stated that "All calls of both species appear to be diagnostic" they added that "Dowitchers, however, may be irritatingly quiet even when deliberately flushed, especially single birds in a flock of birds of the other species." This, unfortunately, was the case of the single dowitcher I observed on 22 January 1997 at Estero Tongoy.

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