

OUT-OF-SEASON RED-NECKED PHALAROPES IN CENTRAL PANAMA

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Abstract.—Two Red-necked Phalaropes (*Phalaropus lobatus*) were recorded on the north-western shore of Panama Bay in late June 1987. These constitute the first record for this species in tropical America during the boreal summer. One of the individuals, which was injured, was still present two months later. This and earlier Panama Bay records suggest that some Red-necked Phalaropes migrate through the Caribbean and cross Panama on their way to their South American wintering grounds. The extensive salt-flats on the western side of Panama Bay are being destroyed by shrimp farms. Conservation of the salt flats is urgent.

INFORME DE PHALAROPUS LOBATUS DURANTE JUNIO EN PANAMA

Resumen.—En junio de 1987 dos individuos de *Phalaropus lobatus* fueron observados y fotografiados en la bahía de Panamá. Estos constituyen el primer informe de esta especie durante el verano en la América Tropical. Uno de los individuos, herido en una de sus patas, permaneció en el área unos dos meses. Este informe y otros más tempranos de Panamá sugieren que algunos falaropos migran a través del Caribe y cruzan la tierra del istmo en su viaje migratorio de invierno hacia Sur América. Los salitrales en la parte oeste de la bahía de Panamá están siendo destruidos para el cultivo de camarones. Es de gran urgencia la conservación de ese habitat.

On the morning of 24 Jun. 1987, we encountered two Red-necked Phalaropes (*Phalaropus lobatus*) near Aguadulce on the Pacific coast of central Panama (8°10'N, 80°30'W). They were swimming in a shallow pool alongside a road through the Playa Caleta salt-flats, about a kilometer from the shore of Parita Bay (the northwest corner of the Bay of Panama). We approached to within a few meters of the birds for photographs. The presence of a clear white wing-bar eliminated the possibility that they were Wilson's Phalaropes (*P. tricolor*), which are regular visitors to the area. We identified them as Red-necked, rather than Gray Phalaropes (*P. fulicaria*), on the strength of the long thin, all-black bill and the overall proportions of body and wings. Both birds appeared to be immatures, though they were in slightly different stages of plumage (Fig. 1). One had a brownish crown and hindneck, and dusky breast, and fitted the description for juveniles given by Hayman et al. (1986), though we did not note buff or orange on the wings. Its left leg was immobile while swimming and appeared broken.

On 29 Aug. 1987, Cooke located a Red-necked Phalarope with a broken leg in the same locality. Presuming it was the same bird, its plumage had become grayer. The crown was black, rather than brownish, and a broad dark stripe stretched from nape down the hind-neck. A grayish patch was



FIGURE 1. Two Red-necked Phalaropes (*Phalaropus lobatus*) on a salt-flat pond near Aguadulce (Panama), 24 Jun. 1987. The juvenile (left) had a broken leg and was still present on 29 Aug. (Photo: M. Bush.)

visible in the crook of the neck and extended onto the upper breast. No buff or brown feathers were noted on the scapulars and the back was uniformly grayish. The legs were blackish. The bird was made to call and uttered a deep "quirp."

As far as we know, this late June sighting is the first record of the Red-necked Phalarope at the peak of the boreal summer in tropical America. Hayman et al. (1986) state that juveniles leave Arctic breeding grounds in August and that post-juvenile molt continues until the next spring. Hence, it is likely that our darker individual was hatched in the summer of 1986. Its failure to move north, as well as the prolongation of immature traits, could be related to the apparent leg injury.

Northwestern Canadian and Alaskan populations of Red-necked Phalaropes migrate southwest towards the favored wintering grounds off Peru. Below California, their movements are largely pelagic (Hayman et al. 1986): they are regular, and sometimes abundant in the off-shore waters of Mexico, Central America and Colombia, where they have been recorded between early August and late May (Friedmann et al. 1950, Hilty and Brown 1986, Murphy 1936, Ridgely 1976, Stiles 1984). The ultimate destination of northeastern Canadian birds is obscure, but it is likely to be an upwelling zone in the South Atlantic. Red-necked Phalaropes are

seen in large numbers in Canadian, New England, and Carolina waters during migration (Harrison 1983: 430, Lee 1986). Cooke's field notes report a Red-necked Phalarope on another pool in the Aguadulce salt-flats on 11 Nov. 1969. In 1985, there were six on 25 Sep., six on 27 Sep., nine on 28 Sep., two on 29 Sep. and one on 1 Oct. These birds, in addition to the scattered individuals reported from the Caribbean (Bond 1984: 242, Voous 1983: 113) and highland Costa Rica (Blake 1977: 599), might be strays from either of the two migration routes mentioned above. However, flocks of Red-necked Phalaropes have been observed at the northern edge of the Bay of Panama (Panama City and Otoque Island), only 60–70 km from the Caribbean coast (Ridgely 1976: 106, Wetmore 1965: 433). We suggest that some eastern nearctic populations migrate through the Caribbean and overland across the Lower Central American Isthmus (as suggested in Tuck and Heinzel 1985: 249), using lakes and shallow salt-pools as staging posts.

The Bay of Panama has been declared a hemispheric and regional reserve of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (Myers et al. 1986). In spite of this international action, the extensive salt flats between Aguadulce and Chitré, on the western side of the bay, are rapidly being converted into commercial shrimp farms. Local conservation groups need continued international support to help them save this important habitat, which attracts other uncommon migratory and wintering shorebirds (e.g., the Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*) and Stilt Sandpiper [*Calidris himantopus*]).

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