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SPECIMEN OF STEPPE WHIMBREL *NUMENIUS PHAEOPUS ALBOAXILLARIS* (LOWE, 1921) IN THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEU DE HISTORIA NATURAL, MAPUTO

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TAXONOMY

SPECIMEN OF STEPPE WHIMBREL *NUMENIUS PHAEOPUS ALBOAXILLARIS* (LOWE, 1921) IN THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEU DE HISTORIA NATURAL, MAPUTO

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Summary

Examination of 11 specimens of Whimbrels Numenius phaeopus (Linnaeus, 1758) in the Maputo Museu de Historia Natural, Maputo, Mozambique on 19th May 2016 revealed a single specimen showing the characters of the distinctive taxon 'Steppe' Whimbrel Numenius phaeopus alboaxillaris (Lowe 1921). A description of the specimen is given and illustrative photographs presented. The exact collecting locality is not known, but suspected to be Maputo Bay. This is the fifth record for Mozambique and the tenth record in Africa.

Introduction

The 'Steppe' Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus alboaxillaris* is a little known taxon which breeds in the steppes of central Asia (Cramp & Simmons 1983, Morozov 2000) and migrates to the coasts of south-

eastern Africa in the non-breeding season (Allport & Allan *in press*, Allport *in prep.*). It was declared extinct in 1994 (Belik 1994) but is now known to be rare with only nine records in Africa. Four of these records are from the coast of southern Mozambique, and this area is emerging as the main known region for non-breeding season records.

The type specimen of *alboaxillaris* was collected at Inhambane in September 1906 by Claude Grant (British Natural History Museum [BNHM] specimen number 1903.10.14.292.) and there was a second specimen collected in 1882 at an unspecified locality in Mozambique by W. A. Churchill (BNHM 1897.2.26.21.). After an absence of over 100 years two birds were seen well and photographed by many birders in Maputo Bay in February and March 2016 (Allport 2016, Allport *in prep*) and this stimulated a resurgence of interest in the subspecies.

Specimen review

As part of a review of the taxon the specimen inventory was examined in the British Museum (four specimens) and the Durban Museum of Natural Science (two specimens). The Maputo Museum was visited on 19th May 2016 and a series of 11 Whimbrel specimens were reviewed. Of these seven are prepared as study skins and comprise a series taken in the Maputo Bay area, specifically Costa do Sol (2), "Maputo" (1) and Inhaca Island (4) in the period 1941-1957 (Museu de Historia Natural fiche da catalogacao nos 4762-4768). All these were found to be adult Whimbrel of the nominate form *phaeopus* showing barred axillaries.

Four other Whimbrel specimens are mounted in the museum in a diorama on public view. Access to these birds was fortunately made easier by removal of the front panels of the diorama for renovations. Three of the mounted specimens showed the characters of nominate *phaeopus* but a single bird was found to have the full set of characters of a Steppe Whimbrel *N. p. alboaxillaris*.

Description

Unfortunately the specimen was coated in dust from the renovation work so it was difficult to describe the main body plumage but the size and shape was similar to the other three Whimbrels adjacent (Fig. 1). Examination of the underwing, rump, tail and underparts revealed the following characters:

- The underwing was white with a yellowish cast. The axillaries were predominantly white with three very pale brown flecks, but no barring (Fig. 2).
- The upper rump was pure white and the lower rump showed three feathers with fine dark shaft streaks but was otherwise white. Unfortunately many lower rump feathers were missing or in poor condition due to damage from feather mites (Fig. 3).
- The upper tail coverts were pale buffish white with pale brown barring (Fig. 4).
- The tail was in poor condition too, but the four outermost on the left side were white with a buffish wash, with narrow mid-brown laddering.
- The undertail coverts, vent and lower belly were pure white with no dark shaft streaks or chevrons.

Biometrics

The specimen had the following biometrics (mm): bill – 81, tarsus – 69, wing (not fully straightened) – 258, tail – 95.

Identification

The combination of nearly white, unbarred axillaries, unmarked upper rump and sparsely marked lower rump, laddered tail pattern and unmarked ventral area are distinctive of the form *alboaxillaris* (Cramp and Simmons 1983, Allport in prep.).

Provenance

The original specimen accession records for the bird collection at Museu de Historia Natural have been lost, probably in the 1970's (*per* A. G.), but the study skins in the collection all have the data label information transcribed into a hard copy inventory held at the museum. However, only the seven study skins are listed in this inventory and there are no further data on the four birds in the diorama.

It might reasonably be assumed that the *alboaxillaris* specimen was collected in Mozambique, and very probably alongside the series of seven others prepared as study skins, all of which were taken from localities in Maputo Bay. The Costa do Sol collecting locality is *ca.* 1.5 km from the roost site where the two *alboaxillaris* were found in 2016.

The significance of this record

This is the fifth record for Mozambique and the tenth record for Africa (Allport in prep.) and further underlines the significance of Mozambique as a key range state for this taxon and (assumedly) Maputo Bay as a locality. Up to 2,000 Whimbrels have been recorded in Maputo Bay (Parker 1999) and the significance of the bay has been recently re-emphasised for shorebirds (Bento 2014). This record is yet further evidence of the importance of Maputo Bay and of Mozambique's coastal wetlands.

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Figure 1. Steppe Whimbrel *N. p. alboaxillaris* in Museu de Historia Natural, Maputo (rear centre) with nominate *phaeopus* (right) and Grey Plovers *Pluvialis squatarola* (front and left)



Figure 2. Detail of axillaries. Note clean white tone with yellowish wash and a small number of very pale brown flecks.



Figure 3. Detail of rump and upper tail coverts (tail blanked by sheet of paper to enable ease of analysis). See text for details.



Figure 4. Detail of tail pattern. See text for details.

Appendix 1: Portuguese summary

A observação detalhada de 11 espécimens de Maçarico-galego *Numenius phaeopus* (Linnaeus, 1758), no Museu de História Natural de Maputo, a 19 de Maio de 2016, revelou a presença neste museu de um espécimen portador das características distintivas do taxon "Maçarico das Estepes" (*Numenius phaeopus alboaxillaris*) (Lowe 1921). Neste artigo é apresentada a descrição do espécimen acompanhada de fotografias ilustrativas do mesmo. O local exacto de colecta da ave não é conhecido, mas presume-se ter sido capturado na Baía da cidade de Maputo. Este é o quinto registo do taxon para Moçambique e o décimo em Africa.