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## SHORT NOTE

### An old record of banded dotterel *Charadrius bicinctus* from Vanuatu

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The nominate subspecies of the banded dotterel *Charadrius bicinctus* is a partial migrant. Many birds migrate from their breeding grounds in New Zealand to Australia in February-April and usually return by August-September (Lane & Davies 1987; Pierce 1999). Small numbers are recorded most years on Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands as either passage migrants or overwintering birds (e.g. Hermes *et al.* 1986; Moore 1999; Hutton 1991). Records of this species from islands north and north-east of New Zealand are more irregular. Small numbers have been seen at the Kermadec Islands, Fiji and New Caledonia (Heather and Robertson 1996; Smart 1973; Skinner 1983; Garrett & Garrett 1975; Barré & Dutson 2000). However its status in Vanuatu is less certain.

The banded dotterel was first reported for Vanuatu (then New Hebrides) by Oliver (1951), who noted there was a single record, but gave no details. The first checklist of New Zealand birds (Fleming 1953) referred to "Rothschild Collection, American Museum of Natural History" (=AMNH), presumably indicating a specimen. This has generally been overlooked; for example, Bregulla (1992) wrote that undated reports of the species from Vanuatu were noted in a wader field guide (Marchant *et al.* 1986). This was evidently insufficient evidence for Bregulla to include the banded dotterel as part of the Vanuatu avifauna, as this species did not have its own account in his book. Marchant & Higgins (1993) also considered that reports of the banded dotterel from Vanuatu were 'unconfirmed'. Several other accounts have referred to Vanuatu as being within the species' range but

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again without giving details (e.g. Turbott 1990; Heather & Robertson 1996; Doughty *et al.* 1999).

In 2000, when reviewing bird records from New South Wales found in the files of the late Keith A. Hindwood (1904-1971), I came across one page of a letter indicating there was a Vanuatu specimen of banded dotterel in the AMNH, presumably that referred to by Fleming (1953). Unfortunately, some time in the mid to late 1950s, Hindwood rearranged some of his numerous letters and filed parts of them under different species of birds. Consequently the full details of the specimen were not noted in the fragment of the letter viewed. Although the letter was apparently from a staff member of the AMNH, it is unclear whether Hindwood had found out about the record originally from the AMNH, or whether he learned of the specimen from one of his many New Zealand correspondents. Hindwood was evidently interested in banded dotterel and intended to write a paper on the species.

Upon inquiry with Paul Sweet of the AMNH I obtained details of the banded dotterel specimen concerned, AMNH 336918. This specimen has very detailed information on its tags. It was collected on 23 March 1936 by Mr L. MacMillan who collected specimens during 1935 and 1936 in southern Vanuatu in the final stages of the Whitney South Sea Expedition (Mayr 1937; 1938). The tags also note that the bird was collected at 4.30 pm at high tide on the eastern reef of 'Ejaro Tidal Lagoon' [=Itcharo Lagoon] on the north end of Aniwa, a raised coral atoll some 24 km north-east of Tanna at 19° 15' S, 169° 35' E. The specimen is a female in non-breeding plumage with buff-edged worn tertials and scapulars and fresh primaries (P. Sweet in litt.). There is no obvious breast band, only a 'diffuse dusky patch'. It has the following measurements (made by Sweet): exposed culmen 17.5 mm; tarsus 35.3 mm; wing 127 mm; and tail 59.7 mm. MacMillan gave the colour of the legs as 'lead grey, feet darker'. This is darker than one would expect for a banded dotterel. Nevertheless the measurements fit those given for this species by Marchant & Higgins (1993). In particular, the measurements of tarsus and tail are longer than those of the similarly plumaged mongolian dotterel *Charadrius mongolus*. In addition, fresh primaries are to be expected for the banded dotterel at this time of year (Marchant & Higgins 1993; Pierce 1999).

As there is only one record, banded dotterel should, at present, be considered a very rare visitor to Vanuatu. However in a recent revision of the Fijian avifauna, Watling (2001) suggested that the species was probably an annual visitor to Fiji in small numbers. As Aniwa is farther south than the sightings in Fiji, this could imply that

banded dotterel may be more regular to Vanuatu than the single record would suggest. In addition, visits to the outlying islands of Vanuatu are apparently infrequent. For example, I visited the southmost island of Aneityum with Rory O'Brien in February 2000. Upon enquiry with Aneityum locals and staff of the Vanuatu Environment Unit in Port Vila we were informed there had only been two visits by bird observers in the previous 40 years; Heinrich Bregulla, in March 1961 and Leah Nimoho and Brian Phillips in May 1998. Given the low numbers of observers, only additional visits to the southern islands will reveal the species' actual status in Vanuatu.

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Ern Hoskin was extremely patient during my scores of visits to his home looking through the Keith Hindwood Bird Recording Service files. These files have since been donated to the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW. Paul Sweet of the AMNH was generous with his time in finding the specimen concerned. Walter Boles and two anonymous referees kindly commented on a draft. Help was also received from Leah Nimoho of the Vanuatu Environment Unit in February and March 2000.

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## SHORT NOTE

### A longevity record for whitehead *Mohoua albicilla*, Pachycephalidae

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On 22 January 2001, IS saw a colour-banded whitehead (*Mohoua albicilla*) in the south-west of Little Barrier Island near the main landing site. It was on the flats, about 300 m east of the "Bunkhouse" and about 80 m from the shore. It had a metal band (M) and 3 colour-bands in the combination red/metal (left), red/white (right). The bird was clearly the dominant male of a 3-bird group. It had a bright white head and sang frequently.

Nearly 200 whiteheads were colour-banded between 1984 and 1989 by BJG and co-workers (Gill & McLean 1992). All were marked in the south-west of the island within c. 1 km of the "Bunkhouse". Since then, no other whiteheads have been colour-banded on the island (K. Da Vanzo, N.Z. National Bird Banding Scheme, pers. com.).

The colour-bands used proved to be prone to fading, especially yellow which faded to off-white, so the bird in question may have been either :

- (1) Male B-41125, red/metal, red/white, banded as an adult in January 1985.
- (2) Male B-41131, red/metal, red/yellow, banded as a juvenile in March 1985.

The second bird would not have hatched after January 1985. Therefore, the bird seen in January 2001 was at least 16 years and 0 months old. The previous longevity record for this species was 8 years and 7 months (Gill 1993). The yellowhead (*M. ochrocephala*) is also known to reach at least 16 years, in the Eglinton Valley, Fiordland (Dilks 1999).

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