FEATURED PHOTO

APPARENT HYBRIDS BETWEEN THE AMERICAN AVOCET AND BLACK-NECKED STILT IN CALIFORNIA

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Birds may hybridize more frequently in captivity than in the wild because natural isolating mechanisms can fail under captive conditions (Sibley 1994). Until recently the only documented hybrid between the American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*) and the Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*) was a bird hatched in May 1971 from a known mixed pair held in captivity at the San Francisco Zoo (Principe 1977). We report here three similar apparent hybrids in the wild.

In all cases, the presumed hybrid resembled an American Avocet but showed a dark stripe up the back of the neck, a straighter bill, a dark smudge on the face, and intermediate leg coloration. Also the white patch normally visible on the folded wing of an American Avocet was reduced so that only a narrow strip of white feathers was visible. All three wild hybrids had a fairly straight bill, slightly shorter than that of an American Avocet, with a slight upturn at the tip. In addition, all three birds appeared to have tibias longer than those of a typical American Avocet. This combination of intermediate characters and the similarity of all three wild birds to the known captive hybrid support the hypothesis of hybrid origin rather than coincidental odd mutations. The shorter bill of the captive bird may have been a sex difference. The captive bird was thought to be a male, and males of these species have shorter, straighter bills than do females.

The first apparent wild hybrid was discovered by Arnold Small and observed by a class from UCLA including Herbert and Olga Clarke on 10 March 1994. It was seen mid-morning in a sheltered pond at the Point Mugu Naval Air Weapons Station at Port Hueneme, Ventura County, where it was photographed by Robert E. Munsey, Jr. (Figure 1). Photos of this bird resemble those of the Moss Landing bird discovered only three days later, but the hybrid at Point Mugu is much paler cinnamon on the head and neck, has a less pronounced dark face patch, more extensive white on the wings, a straighter bill, and pinker legs.

The second apparent wild hybrid was found by Rosso on 13 March 1994, while he led a birding class field trip. Rosso photographed this individual in the wetlands of Elkhorn Slough on the east side of Highway 1 just north of Moss Landing Harbor, Monterey County (see back cover). This bird was observed for approximately 20 minutes in the late afternoon about 50 yards from the road. For most of that time it was solitary, but it also briefly associated with two Black-necked Stilts. Its hunting procedure was similar to that of the Black-necked Stilt, stabbing at possible food items in the cordgrass (*Spartina* sp.).

Dakin found the third apparent hybrid during San Francisco Bay Snowy Plover surveys in a closed area of salt ponds in Hayward, Alameda County, California, on 29 May, 31 May, and 17 June, 2003 (Glover et al. 2003). David Cardinal photographed this bird on two occasions. His color images were published by Sharp (2003) and Messinger (2003), and a monochrome image was published by Dakin (2003).

The cinnamon color on the head and neck of the Hayward bird was pale and diffuse, similar to that of the Point Mugu bird. The stripe of black up the back of its neck did not extend to the crown as it did on the Moss Landing and Point Mugu

Figure 1. Presumed hybrid American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*) × Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*) near Oxnard, Ventura Co., 10 March 1994.

Photo by Robert E. Munsey Jr.

hybrids. In this respect it resembled the captive hybrid at the San Francisco Zoo. A patch of gray feathers around the eye and covering the crown suggested the facial markings of a Black-necked Stilt, but these markings were paler on than the Moss Landing bird. The white area on the folded wings was even more reduced in this individual so that the wings, at times, appeared almost entirely black. The head and body shape of the Hayward hybrid was similar to that of an American Avocet. This bird was also heard to give intermediate vocalizations, but no recordings were obtained.

The copulatory behavior of these two species is almost identical (Sordahl 2001), and attempted copulation with inanimate objects has been reported for at least six of the ten species of recurvirostrids, including both the American Avocet and Black-necked Stilt (Hamilton 1975). Such similarity in copulatory behavior, combined with the reported lack of discrimination, provides additional support for the hypothesis of wild hybridization in these species.

Within the genus *Himantopus*, hybridization in the wild has been reported frequently in New Zealand between the highly localized, critically endangered Black Stilt (*H. novaezelandiae*) and the widespread Black-winged Stilt (*H. himantopus*) (Reed et al 1993, Pierce 1984, Pierce 1996, Greene 1999, MacAvoy and Chambers 1999). Thus intrageneric hybrids have been reported more often in the Recurvirostridae than intergeneric hybrids. An analysis of the distribution of hybrids in this family, however, suggests that breeding sympatry may be at least as important as genetic similarity in predicting which hybrid combinations are likely to occur.

As this article was in preparation we learned of a possible hybrid between the Pied Avocet (*R. avosetta*) and Black-winged Stilt, photographed 2 May 2004 by Gerrit Jan Klop at Culemborg, Netherlands. Photos of the bird on the World Wide Web (http:/

/members.lycos.nl/digivogels/klutig1.jpg etc.) show its strong resemblance to the Pied Avocet, but it also has a white forehead, pinkish legs, and an almost straight bill, suggesting the Black-winged Stilt. We are unaware of any hybrids previously documented between these two species. A red band above the intertarsal joint on the right leg of this individual adds to the mystery surrounding its origin and identity.

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