

## Sighting and unusual behaviour of a short-billed Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* in Oslo Fjord (Norway)

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During an ornithological survey of the inner Oslo Fjord from Rolfstangen in Akershus county, to the west of Oslo, on 23th October 2013 one of the authors (Rix) had an interesting sighting, which is reported here.

A brown coloured bird was seen flying out low over the water with a Crow *Corvus* sp. chasing it. At first it looked like a Sparrowhawk, but then the brown bird splashed down into the sea, an unusual behaviour for a Sparrowhawk. Through the binoculars it was clearly identified as a Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*, but this was not normal behaviour for that species either. The bird sat on the water for a few minutes and then managed to take off and flew low and weakly towards land. It disappeared into a small bay not far from the viewing point and a couple of Crows started calling and had clearly seen it. The two Crows flew up from the water's edge ahead but it was not possible to see anything else, as the view was obstructed by a rocky outcrop. A short while later a couple of brown feathers were noticed in the water. Climbing down towards the water

there was this amazing view of the Woodcock cowering at the water's edge and visibly shaken but still alive. This bird was clearly not in good shape and had a bill that was only half the length it should be. At the attempt to pick it up, it tried to swim away, but clearly was not liking it. It came back into land, adopted a strange posture with its tail raised and allowed to be handed and picked up. It was extremely light and thin and not in a good shape. Soon after it was placed under a thorny bush, safe from the Crows. It was still there 30 minutes later but without showing much sign of life.

This report is quite interesting, because, as a rule, shorebirds do not swim (cf. Del Hoyo *et al.* 1996), whereas in this case the woodcock landed in the sea, swam and took off again easily (see Figs 1-3). It would seem strange, however, that terricolous birds whose habitat is often in close proximity to streams and/or water sheets, couldn't swim if necessary, even if they do not belong to the swimmers.

Undeniably is the documentation of such an unusual



Figure 1. Woodcock flying off from the water.



**Figure 2.** Woodcock just after its flying off from the water.

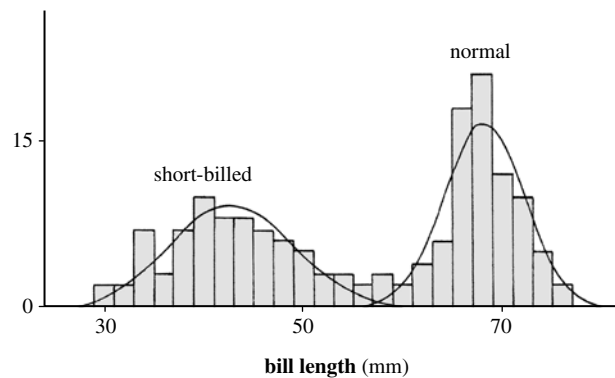


**Figure 3.** Short-billed Woodcock observed on 23<sup>th</sup> October 2013 in the inner Oslo Fjord from Rolfstangen in Akershus county

behaviour, together with the unusual morphology of the same woodcock (with a very short bill, half of what is considered normal, never photographed in nature, but of which a noteworthy case study exists) a rare opportunity, to which appears appropriate to add some more brief information, based on a pool of 528 birds captured between 1960 and 1992, interval in which the information in this regard has grown almost exponentially every 5 years (Burlando *et al.* 1994). The first capture of a short-billed

specimen has officially taken place in Brittany in 1933, followed sporadically by others until 1960 (Fraguglione 1983) and now it is possible to state that they involve basically all the Countries of the Western Palearctic where the species is hunted.

Statistic elaboration of a casual sub-sample of 78 Woodcocks matched to another equivalent taken from a “population” of 411 normal Woodcocks, has expressed a bimodal frequency curve (mean: 44 and 69 mm, respec-



**Figure 4.** Distribution of bill length in samples of short-billed and normal-billed Woodcock.

tively). Bhattacharya's method shows two gaussians, indicating a discontinuity in the variability of the bill's length between Woodcocks with short bills and those with normal bills (Fig. 4). Among the short-billed Woodcocks, no sex or age related differences could be seen, which in the contrary has been observed among the normal-billed Woodcock (Aradis *et al.* 2015)

The most plausible hypothesis about the origin of this phenomenon is related to the teratogenic or mutagenic effects of some yet unknown substances present in the environment, as yet still unknown are the regions from where these individuals originate; not to be underestimated is the very high frequency of shape anomalies (maxillary and mandibular prognathism, deformations around the middle of the upper rhamphotheca), that also reduce the ability to catch the prey.

Furthermore, it is now established in birds that significant changes in other key structures associated with foraging can occur at very short time scales. It has been shown

that bill structure can change in merely decades, driven by differences in foraging opportunities and subtle changes to the foraging task (cf. Grant & Grant 2014 in Martin 2017).

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