

## THE WATERGROVE BROAD-BILLED SANDPIPER

A PATCH WORKERS REWARD

by Steve Atkins



Image courtesy of Bill Aspin

*(Although it is not my intention to publish finders accounts of county rarities on this site as these would normally be included in the County Bird Report, this superb finders article was not included in the 2005 County Bird Report and so deserves a chance for all to see, hence it's publication here. The original version of this document was published in the June 2005 edition of Birding North West and Steve has very kindly not only agreed to allow me to publish here but has also amended it to include recent relevant developments. I would like to thank Steve and those fortunate photographers of the bird who have allowed their images to be included with this article, most of which have never been publicly seen before, - Ian McKerchar)*

Few, if any birdwatchers outside of Greater Manchester would have heard of Watergrove Reservoir before the 21<sup>st</sup> of May 2005. It is not a particularly well known site even amongst Greater Manchester birders, and until publication of the 2004 county report did not even appear on the county map of major bird haunts! The reservoir lies in a south facing moorland valley approximately 3 miles to the north-east of Rochdale, on the south-west edge of the South Pennines, and was my local patch from 1993 to 1996 and again since 2003 when I moved back to the area. A total of 155 species has been recorded at the site since 1993, including 20 species of wader. The rarest species previously seen here was a Wryneck in September 1995.

That Saturday afternoon, although it was somewhat late in the month, I had intended going up onto the eastern ridge to look for Dotterel, which have been seen in the area on several occasions since 1995. As it is a fairly steep climb up onto the moorland plateau I left my far from lightweight telescope at home. Before going onto the moors I decided to check out the wetland pool by the hide, which is normally good for Little Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Oystercatcher and Lapwing.

The time was approximately 13.30 hours as I approached the hide. 2 Dunlin in breeding plumage and a third slightly smaller wader, which I could not identify, were feeding on the hide spit next to the path. The unidentified wader disappeared from view as it worked its way around the rocky spit. Shortly afterwards it began raining and a flock of 6 waders, which I thought were all Dunlin, flew low across the water, landing out of sight on the eastern spit, in front of the windsurfer's club house. I decided to shelter in the hide and emerged at approx. 15.00 hrs, as the rain started to ease off, to find the bird again feeding on the hide spit, this time close into the path, with 3 Dunlin. Through 8 x 42 binoculars I noted it had a slightly slimmer build than the dunlin, white underparts, what appeared to be a straight black bill, a black horizontal line running back from the base of the bill to the eye. There was a white V on the dark brown mantle. A dark crown with a buff stripe either side, dark legs shorter than the Dunlins', and a long primary projection creating a narrow pointed rear end. I began to suspect that the bird was a Broad-billed Sandpiper. However, through binoculars the classic split supercilium and breast band were not visible. I phoned Judith Smith, the Greater Manchester County Recorder and advised her that an unidentified wader, smaller than a Dunlin, but too large to be a Stint was present at Watergrove. With no previous experience of Broad-billed Sandpiper I was reluctant to say what I thought it was, for fear of sparking off a wild goose chase. Whilst on the phone the bird had disappeared from view again around the spit. By this stage I was seriously concerned that it was going to take flight before the identification could be confirmed, as two windsurfers had launched their boards onto the water just 100 metres away.

Judith gave me Chris Johnson's phone number, a local Rochdale birder, and I made a call to alert him to the presence of the bird, and returned home (luckily only a mile down the road) to get my telescope. When Chris and I reached the club house at approximately 16.10 hours Brian Fielding, whom Judith had contacted, had arrived from Bury. The wader was feeding with 5 Dunlin on the edge of the Ramsden Road causeway only 30 metres away. This is the old road that runs through the reservoir from where the windsurfers launch their boards! With the aid of a 20x magnification eye-piece on my scope it was now possible to see that the bill was slightly kinked at the end. The head pattern was now clear with the classic split supercilium either side of the dark brown crown. Light brown streaking to the upper breast was visible with blotches on the upper flanks. The mantle was very scaly, the lower feathers having black centres with buff fringes. The bird did not however display the classic Broad-billed breast pattern. It was feeding actively along the shoreline with a rapid jerking of the head. We were now 99% certain that this was indeed a Broad-billed Sandpiper, although like me, neither Brian nor Chris had seen this species before and none of us could quite believe that such a rarity had turned up at an upland reservoir near Rochdale.

Brian phoned Judith Smith, who put the news out, and set off from home near Wigan. Meanwhile Chris Johnson took as many photographs as possible, just in case it should fly off before Judith arrived. The bird was flushed by a windsurfer walking to the water's edge and flew back to the spit by the hide. In flight we could see a narrow white wing bar and a dark centre to the white rump. Luckily Roger Kennedy, the United Utilities ranger was on hand to prevent the bird from being flushed yet again by the windsurfers. Throughout this time the weather remained poor with heavy showers, and this may have prevented it from leaving the area. The bird had been under observation by the three of us for nearly an hour and a half when Judith Smith arrived and confirmed her agreement with our identification.

A few fortunate birders, including Bill Aspin, who managed to shoot some video footage in very poor light, were able to see the bird later that evening up until approximately 20.30 hours. However, despite arriving on site at 05.00 hours the following morning and conducting a thorough search of the entire shoreline Chris Johnson was unable to re-locate it. Not being an early riser, I joined him at 07.00 hours but the bird was not seen again.

“The record was submitted to the BBRC, and is the first accepted record of Broad-billed Sandpiper in Greater Manchester. An earlier record at Lightshaw Hall Flash on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1971, which was resubmitted to BBRC in May 2005, has now also been accepted. This was originally rejected on the grounds that Broad-billed Sandpiper did not occur in Britain on spring passage! In May 2005 there were two other sightings of this species at Cliffe, Kent on 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> May and on Tiree (Argyll) 31<sup>st</sup> May to 1<sup>st</sup> June. Is it possible that this could have been the Watergrove bird following a North-west trajectory? “

This was the 19th record for the North-West region, with the last previous sightings at Frodsham from May 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> 1999 (1) and Conwy, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1999 (2), assumed to be the same bird. It is interesting to note that the Watergrove bird turned up in the middle of the same date range and significant in that inland sightings of this species anywhere in the U.K. used to be very rare. However, in the BBRC’s Report on rare birds in Great Britain 2004 (3) the comment is made that “Inland occurrences, even away from the large estuaries, seem to be becoming more of a feature ...”

The record had particular significance for me as it was the first time that I had found my own BBRC rarity and just goes to show what can turn up on your local patch if you watch it regularly enough! It was the fourth BBRC rarity wader to turn up on a Rochdale reservoir, continuing the average of one per decade! The previous species were Spotted Sandpiper on Ashworth Moor Reservoir (1979), Collared Pratincole (1983) and Black-winged Stilt (1993), both on Hollingworth Lake. Let’s hope we don’t have to wait another ten years for the next one!



Image courtesy of Bill Aspin



Images courtesy pf Chris Johnson

### References

Cheshire & Wirral Bird Report 1999

British Birds 93: 532

British Birds 98: 655

**Steve Atkins, September 2006**

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