



## Whimbrel

### Kleinwulp

#### *Numenius phaeopus*

The Whimbrel breeds to the north of the Curlew *N. arquata*, its only congener in southern Africa. The breeding range is circumpolar; Rogacheva (1992) maintained that the fragmented breeding range shown for central Asia in the handbooks (e.g. Cramp *et al.* 1983; Hayman *et al.* 1986) was due to poor investigation. It migrates to almost all shores south of 35°N, nominate *N. p. phaeopus* occurring in western Europe, Africa and southeastern Asia, with the largest concentrations on tropical estuaries (Cramp *et al.* 1983; Hayman *et al.* 1986; Rogacheva 1992).

It is almost exclusively confined to coastal habitats in southern Africa; the scattering of records from the interior consists mostly of migrants in spring (e.g. Mills 1976; Herremans 1994d). There is a conspicuous gap in the distribution along the southern Namibian coastline.

The subspecies are sufficiently well marked for field identification (Hayman *et al.* 1986). The nominate race breeds from Iceland, through Scotland and Scandinavia to the western Taimyr Peninsula, where it intergrades with the race *variegatus* which breeds from the eastern Taimyr Peninsula to eastern Siberia. The race *alboaxillaris* bred further south, on the steppes to the east of the Volga River, but is now extinct (Belik 1994). These three races have occurred in southern Africa (Brooke 1974a), but the vast majority of birds in the region are nominate *phaeopus*. The fourth race *hudsonicus*, unrecorded here, breeds in Alaska and northern Canada.

The size of the nominate population has been estimated on the breeding grounds to be 600 000–700 000 birds (Rose & Scott 1994). Because Whimbrels are rare inland, the size of the population in coastal southern Africa, 3300 birds (Summers *et al.* 1987a), provides an estimate of the total southern African population.

Whimbrels and Curlews may be confused; among other features, the Whimbrel's bill is only twice as long as its head, while the Curlew's is three times as long (Maclean 1993b).

**Habitat:** It occurs on a wide variety of coastal habitats in southern Africa, from quite exposed sandy and rocky shores where single birds occasionally occur, to sheltered muddy

estuaries where the highest densities are found. The inland records are usually at large waterbodies, such as dams and pans (Irwin 1981).

**Movements:** A total of 95 have been ringed in southern Africa, and the one recovery is from within the breeding range. A bird ringed at the Swartkops River estuary (3325DC) in February 1985 was recovered at Ukhta (64°N 54°E), Russia, to the west of the Ural Mountains, in September 1991 (SAFRING). Recoveries of Whimbrels ringed in western Europe lie along the west coast of Africa as far south as the Congo River, and thus it is likely that migration to southern Africa is from eastern Europe and central Asia (Urban *et al.* 1986).

Large numbers remain in southern Africa during the austral winter, both at estuaries and on the shore: for example, at Langebaan Lagoon (3318AA) and on open shore at Cape Recife (3425BA), the median winter counts were 28% and 25%, respectively, of the median summer counts (Spearpoint *et al.* 1988; Summers *et al.* 1995).

Because of large-scale overwintering, the seasonality analysis provides little insight into the phenology of migration. Monthly counts, for example at the Swartkops River estuary, indicate arrival August–October, and departure March–April (Martin & Baird 1987).

**Interspecific relationships:** It frequently feeds and roosts in flocks with other large waders, especially Curlews, Bartailed Godwits *Limosa lapponica* and Grey Plovers *Pluvialis squatarola*.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** The number in southern Africa has increased during the 20th century (reviewed by Martin & Baird 1987). Stark & Sclater (1906) stated: 'The Whimbrel is much less plentiful than the Curlew in South Africa,' and this relationship appears to have prevailed until the early 1950s.

L.G. Underhill

Recorded in 161 grid cells, 3.5%  
Total number of records: 4060  
Mean reporting rate for range: 14.8%

