

JOHN RAKESTRAW

chasing a ghost

It sat atop a glass display case in the back corner of the room. I was immediately drawn to the mounted specimen. Like the other pieces in the collection of this little nature center in Maine, this mount was obviously old. The feathers were worn and faded. One of the leg wires was bent, causing the mount to lean unnaturally to one side. My first impression of the mount was “Eskimo curlew.” The bird was small, with a short, evenly curved bill. The handwritten sign on the counter simply said “Curlew.”

I have been enamored with Eskimo curlews since I was very young and saw the Hanna-Barbera animated special *Last of the Curlews*, based on the excellent book of the same name by Fred Bodsworth. The story describes the plight of the last two Eskimo curlews during their grueling migration and their ultimate deadly encounter with Man. I was depressed for months

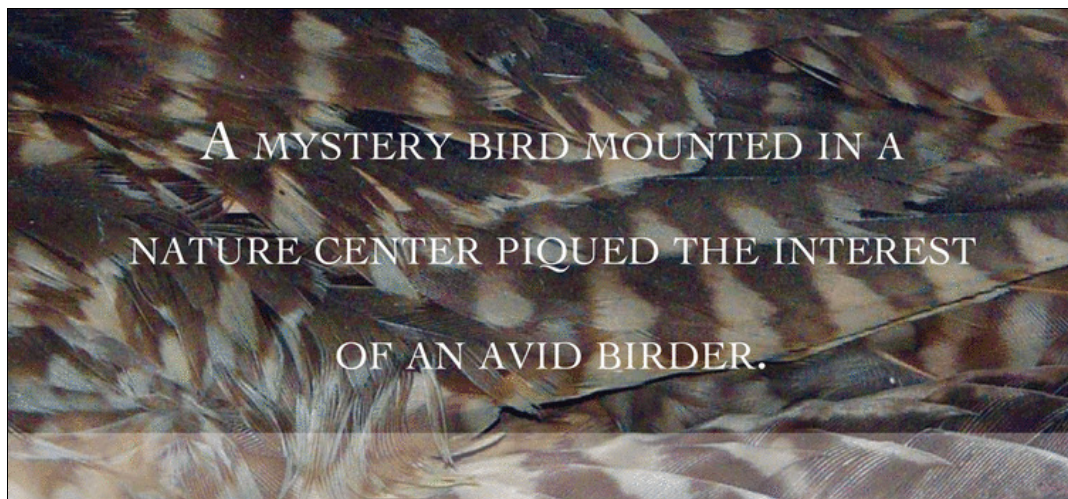
after seeing that show.

Over the years my depression turned to guarded hope. Intellectually, I was not optimistic about the continued existence of this species. Great flocks of Eskimo curlews once darkened the skies above the Great Plains in March and the shores of New England in September. The flocks were gone by 1900. Only a few scattered individuals were seen in the first half of the 20th century. The last confirmed sighting of an Eskimo curlew was in 1963, when a bird was shot in Barbados. But I have always retained the hope that a few of these birds still make their annual flights between North and South America, and Eskimo curlew has always been the species I most desire for my life list.

So when I saw this tattered specimen, I felt both a rush of excitement and an ache of sadness. If this was indeed an Eskimo cur-

GARTH MCELROY

This whimbrel looks very similar to an Eskimo curlew, which may or may not be extinct.



I POSTED PHOTOS OF THE MOUNT ON MY BLOG,
AND ASKED BIRDERS ON TWO DISCUSSION LISTS
TO OFFER THEIR OPINION.

lew, it would be a connection to the species that had haunted me since childhood, even if it was just this bird's corporeal remains. And yet, few things grieve me more than seeing photos, video, or mounts of extinct species, the tangible evidence of what has been senselessly lost.

Was this ratty specimen the ghost of my beloved curlew? The label was no help. "Curlew" could have easily referred to Hudsonian curlew, the name formerly given to the whimbrel. I asked the gentleman who was working in the nature center about the mount. He didn't know its history or identity.

The bird looked small to me, but birds in the hand seem

small compared with the views we have of living birds through high-powered optics. The bill didn't look right for a whimbrel. Whimbrel bills tend to extend straight out from the head before curving down. This bird had an evenly curved bill. The pattern on the head was pretty strong, even on this faded specimen. Most accounts of Eskimo curlew describe a muted pattern on the crown, lacking a strong center stripe. Audubon's portrait of Eskimo curlews (a gut-wrenching scene of a live curlew trying to rouse another bird that has been shot) shows a very strong head pattern. Have our ancient study skins faded enough to mute this mark, or did Audubon get it wrong?

I posted photos of the mount

**Museum specimens
don't always look
like a live bird. Is
this an Eskimo
curlew?**

on my blog, and asked birders on two discussion lists to offer their opinion. Some birders, including a few who had access to study skins, thought the mount was indeed an Eskimo curlew. Others thought the bird was a whimbrel, albeit a diminutive one. Some said the key marks needed for identification were not visible in the photos.

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There are problems identifying a bird that few living people have ever seen. We



Checking the underside of the mount's wings gave the author the answer he was seeking—though not the answer he had hoped for.



have a few written descriptions, some old illustrations, very few photos, and some skins, most of which are more than 100 years old. No one really knows what an Eskimo curlew should look like.

A few days later, I went back to the nature center to have another look. I was hoping the proprietors would allow me to examine the mount more closely. If this was an Eskimo curlew, it needed to be documented. If the species is extinct, all remnants, no matter how old and tattered, need to be preserved. I entered the building and found no one there. I went to the back corner where my ghost was standing. I was still alone. My desire to know overcame my sense of propriety. I ignored the signs that read “Do not touch. Old mounts contain cyanide” and gently turned the bird around.

The first thing I

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checked was the wing projection: how far the wing tips extended in relation to the tail. On this mount, the wings fell considerably short of the end of the tail. On a live bird, this trait would suggest a whimbrel, because the wing tips of an Eskimo curlew would extend beyond the tip of the tail. But when a bird is mounted, the wings could be positioned anywhere. There is no way to know how that bird held its wings in life.

I had to see the underside of the wings to make a positive identification. The undersides of an Eskimo curlew's wings are cinnamon with solid gray primaries. Whimbrels lack the cinnamon tone and show strongly barred primary feathers. I couldn't see the underside of this mount's wings. If I tried to open the wing of this ancient specimen, it would surely snap off, and I would be a vandal at best, a desecrator of holy relics at worst. But feathers are flexible. I gently grasped the tips of the primaries with my thumb and index finger and peeked underneath.

I was greeted by bold tiger stripes of brown and tan. This was a whimbrel, a small dainty whimbrel with a petite bill. The hope of even a post-mortem connection with my Eskimo curlew was gone.

More than that, this little whimbrel had cast doubt on all the sight records for Eskimo curlews that have been reported over the past few decades. A young or runt

whimbrel, like this specimen, looks very much like an Eskimo curlew. Without a clear view of the underwings, or at least the wing projection, a small curlew along the Atlantic coast in autumn cannot be positively identified. The gently curved bill that would suggest an Eskimo curlew is more likely—given current populations—attached to a young whimbrel. Maybe a few Eskimo curlews still make the rounds between North and South America, but proving their existence will require either excellent photos or a specimen, neither of which has been obtained in almost half a century.

Of course, if I really wanted to see remnants of an Eskimo curlew, I could go to a museum that housed a mount or study skins. But there was something exciting about the prospect of finding a forgotten or unknown specimen. It would have been like finding a first printing of Peterson's field guide at a garage sale.

And so I continue to wait for some connection with an Eskimo curlew. Perhaps, just perhaps, my connection will be made with a living specimen, rather than a tattered ancient mount in the back corner of a nature center. 🦅

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