

TATTLERS

AN IDENTIFICATION COMPARISON TABLE

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Characteristic	GREY-TAILED		WANDERING	
General	Tattlers are easily distinguished from other shorebirds, the upperparts being entirely plain mid grey plumage, both in nonbreeding and breeding. Flight shows darker grey underwings. A Tattler whose breeding plumage has any bars on the rear central belly or under-tail coverts is most likely a Wandering, but the Grey Tattler is the more common			
Breeds	Northern Siberia		Eastern Siberia + Central & Southern Alaska	
Size	24 / 27 cm		26 / 28 cm	
Bill	Medium Length, Heavy			
Nasal Groove	Difficult to see, but highlighted when wet			
	½ length of bill		½ length of bill	
Feeding	Darts about mudflats, sandbars and beaches, bobbing and teetering between dashes		Usually solitary when feeding or resting. Sneaks about rocks, probing, teetering	
Habitat	Coastal: forages in intertidal pools, shallows, soft surfaces of mudflats and sand beaches as well as rock ledges, reefs. Often perches on branches, posts, or jetties: Roosts in groups, same or mixed species		Almost entirely confined to rocky shorelines, wave-washed tidal platforms and exposed reefs around headlands or high islands. Likely to use these sites, or occasionally jetties, to loaf or roost.	
Voice	Flight call distinctive – fluid, musical, but slightly mournful. Drawn out ' too-weet ', initially falling in pitch, then rising sharply in the final ' eet ' Also as a rapid sequence, slightly sharper, rising in pitch and accelerating ' weet-weet-weet-weet-weetweetweet '		Sharp rippling trill of 5 – 10 piercing notes, lasting ½ to one second. Evenly pitched, accelerating but fading slightly in strength Also a flute like alarm call of just one or two notes	
	NON-BREEDING	BREEDING	NON-BREEDING	BREEDING
Build	Slightly larger, heavier build	As non-breeding		As non-breeding
Bill	Yellow tint		Slightly heavier	
Head & Hindneck	Mid-grey		Mid to Dark Grey	
Back & Wings	Dark grey		Mid to Dark Grey	
Primaries (at rest)	Usually level with or only slightly longer) than tail-tip		Wings usually extend well beyond tail-tip	
Legs	Medium length Thick Bright yellow to yellow ochre		As Grey-tailed	
Eyebrow	Broad White Extends just behind eye	Narrow White Does NOT extend behind eye		
Breast & flanks	Pale grey Finely streaked (looks even in colour)	Become darker with chevrons on breast & flanks	Even Mid grey	Covered with dark grey chevrons on white
Throat	White		As Grey-tailed	
Neck	White changing to Pale Grey			Always heavily barred from neck to belly or further back
Chest/breast	Pale Grey	Narrow barring	Darker grey than G-t T	
Belly	White			White belly to under tail
Flanks			Usually has more grey on flanks than G-t T	
Coverts - Upper tail	Paler rump when fresh		Uniform grey	
Coverts - Under tail				Barred
Back	Plain light to mid grey		Darker grey than G-t T	
In Flight	Upperparts – mid grey			
Underwing			Dark grey	

The following comments are extracted from a letter by T. Lindsey, Australian Museum, Sydney.
(Scanned from RAOU Atlas Newsletter, No.10 June 1979 by Bob Forsyth)

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Except in breeding plumage, I know of no morphological features by which the Grey-tailed and Wandering Tattlers can be distinguished other than the following.

Bill. The tip of the bill, distal to the end of the nasal groove is 15 mm or less in the Wandering Tattler compared with 17 mm or more in the Grey-tailed. If there exists any overlap or ambiguity with regard to this feature, then it is outside my experience. It is usually much more marked than these figures may suggest, and it is often obvious even in the field. It is almost the only good field character.

Rump colour. The rump of the Wandering is usually plain grey, lacking the whitish fringes characteristic of the Grey-tailed. Very occasionally this can be picked out in the field.

Size. The Wandering Tattler is slightly the larger of the two (wing usually more than 170 mm compared with usually less than 170 mm for the Grey-tailed). This is of virtually no use in the field, although, of course, if the observer reports that the bird seemed bigger than most Grey-tailed to him, then this may constitute valuable collaborative evidence.

Colour and behaviour. In my experience, the Wandering Tattler in the field in non-breeding plumage usually looks noticeably darker and duskier than the Grey-tailed. There are also, to the very experienced eye, subtle differences in proportions and mannerisms almost impossible to evaluate objectively. The call is very distinct, but its value depends very much on the circumstances of the observation and the common sense of the observer. A long trill, for example, might be cut off at the start, so that only the first few notes are uttered, thus appearing to the observer as a call of only a few notes. Similarly in the reverse: a bird under great stress, excitement or whatever might utter a longer series of notes than usual, making a standard call of 2 or 3 notes become a long trill. These considerations aside, for a call heard several times from a bird not unduly stressed, the differences are distinctive and reliable. The pattern, or length of the call is perhaps more distinctive than the "sound" on the whole.

Two other features are of potential value in establishing the identity of a bird in the field or evaluating the report of such an observation. The two are in a sense involved with each other, but I will mention them separately. The first is that, in my experience the Wandering Tattler is a much less sociable bird, even on the west coast of N. America where it is common. The application of this fact might be thought to be nullified in this country by its scarcity (the bird is so rare that it could hardly be expected to occur in flocks!) but there are some circumstances where it can be useful. I would for example, be highly dubious of a report of a Wanderer seen consorting with a flock of Grey-tails.

The second feature is one of habitat, although again it ought to be interpreted with care. Wandering Tattlers have a marked preference for rocky areas — reefs, rock ledges and similar areas where the surf is active; Grey-tailed on the other favour mudflats, clearings in mangrove swamps, even ocean beaches on occasion. This ecological feature is very distinct, but again requires careful evaluation. After spending low tide feeding on a rock ledge, for example, a Wandering *might* repair to a mudflat to rest during high tide — particularly if such an area were the only resting place available. On the other hand Grey-tailed Tattlers are rather more adaptable, and may be found on rocky situations as well as their more favoured mudflats. This distinction may seem useless, but my point is that *some* use may still be made of it. Thus a case for a Wandering Tattler identification is seriously weakened if the observation took place on a mudflat, but a solitary tattler seen on a surf-beaten reef is immediately suggestive.

In sum, I regard discrimination between the two tattlers as one of the most difficult problems among waders on the Australian list. It can be done, but reliable identification requires a lengthy period of careful-observation by all but the most experienced — and as a personal opinion, I would add only then if that experience includes *both* species. I think the crux of the matter is the length of the observation. Wanderers tend to be warier than Grey-tailed, but even so, using a 20X telescope, I have usually managed to stalk close enough to get a satisfactory look at the bill — and this attempt often has the additional effect of affording several opportunities to hear the call.

So a satisfactory report of a Wandering Tattler should include a detailed plumage description together with observer's comments on call, behaviour and habitat, and length of observation.

Prater, Marchant and Vourinen's (1977) *Guide to the Identification and Ageing of Holarctic Waders* (Field Guide No. 17, British Trust for Ornithology, Beech Grove, Tring, Herts. England) is a fundamental reference which cannot be too highly recommended.

Birding-Aus 22/12/2003 Keith Brandwood

<http://menura.cse.unsw.edu.au:64800/2003/12/msg00346.html>

In regards to ID W/Tattlers the wing projection past the tail is not reliable. I still believe you need to hear the call or see the nasal groove to be 100%, but you need to be within 20/30 metres with a scope in good light to see the groove.

References	Page	
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