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# The identity of the bird known locally in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Norfolk as the “spowe”

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**ABSTRACT** In the kitchen record books of the L’Estrange family in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there are references to a bird, widely shot on the Norfolk coast, called a “spowe”. On the basis of the similarity to the Icelandic name, Gurney and Fisher assumed this to be the Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) as have all ornithological texts ever since. Internal evidence from the kitchen record books strongly suggests that the “spowe” was a winter visitor, not a passage migrant, thus throwing considerable doubt on Gurney’s and Fisher’s ascription. We suggest that it is much more likely that “spowe” was the Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*).

**KEY WORDS** Whimbrel – Bar-tailed Godwit – L’Estrange family – Hunstanton – “sporl”.

The “spowe”, sometimes called the “sporl”, was first mentioned by Gurney (1833) in his examination of the records from 1519 to 1578 in the “Household and Privy Purse Accounts” of the L’Estrange’s estate at Hunstanton, Norfolk. These records give a surprisingly complete picture of the daily lives of this aristocratic family in much of the sixteenth century, including foods consumed, the activities of the farmlands they administered, and a few details of events in their lives. Of particular interest to ornithologists is the fact that wildfowlers brought birds

shot or occasionally captured alive to the kitchens where they were sold, or given in exchange for rent.

The “spowe” became more widely known to ornithologists when Gurney and Fisher (1846), writing about the Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*), stated: “Spowe. An obsolete Norf[olk] term for Whimbrel first recorded in 1519. It derives from Old Norse *spoi* in the Scandinavian languages, however the word is also used for the Curlew”. Stevenson (1866: 213) asserted that Stanley (1848: 89) erred in thinking that “spowe” referred to the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*). Stevenson (1866) examined the L’Estrange records and argued that, since all the other birds brought into the kitchens by the local wildfowling families were birds likely to be resident on the north Norfolk coast (for example, Curlew (*N. arquata*), Grey Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*), Teal (*Anas crecca*), Wigeon (*A. penelope*) and Knot (*Calidris canutus*)), it was most improbable that “spowe” referred to House Sparrows. Also, it was unlikely that an aristocratic family like the L’Estranges would be dining on such plebeian food as sparrows. Stevenson argued that the “spowe” was in fact the Whimbrel, and noted that Gurney and Fisher (1846) were of the same opinion. His conclusion was based largely on the fact that the Icelandic and Scandinavian names for curlews or whimbrels are *spoi*, *spou*, *spof* and *spove*. It is also worth noting that trading links between Iceland, Scandinavia and Norfolk existed in the Middle Ages (Bates and Liddiard 2013). The conclusion of Gurney and Fisher (1846) and Stevenson (1866) have been widely accepted by the ornithological community (Swainson 1886; Gurney 1921; Swann 1923; Lockwood 1984) and by the *Oxford English dictionary* (2015).

We have examined the original documents from the L’Estrange family estate from the early seventeenth century to a century later than those analysed by Gurney (1833). We examined the household accounts for 1610–1613 and 1630–1642<sup>1</sup>, as well as for 1616–1621 but slightly less carefully, checking only for records of “spowe”. The remarkably detailed

accounts not only give the names of the wildfowlers who brought in the birds, but also the prices paid for them. The dates when the birds were purchased seem to reflect dates soon after the birds had been shot. This is to be expected in days before widespread refrigeration, although there is evidence from the records that birds were often retained “in store” for some time before being consumed.

Evidence that the dates when the birds were brought to the kitchen conform to the dates when they would be expected to be found in the Hunstanton area is corroborated by the large numbers of Dotterels (*Charadrius morinellus*) documented. All the dates when the Dotterels were brought to the kitchen coincide closely with dates when Dotterels migrate through the area at present.<sup>2</sup> Of 192 Dotterels recorded in our sample, all were brought in between 20 April and 20 May in the spring, and 6 August and 8 October in the autumn. According to Taylor *et al.* (1999), migration times for Dotterels at present are between mid April and late May, and between mid August and mid September.

In contrast, the “spowes” were all shot between September and February indicating that they were winter visitors rather than passage migrants, a pattern different from the occurrence of Whimbrels given by Taylor *et al.* (1999) who record them in Norfolk from late April to mid May and again from early July to early October.

Either “spowes” were not Whimbrels, or there has been a massive change in distribution and migration since the early seventeenth century. Neither seems likely and none of the earlier ornithologists hinted at changes (although rapid changes in migration patterns in birds are not unknown (Berthold 2001)). Stevenson (1866) stated that

Whimbrel visits us regularly in spring and autumn, on its passage to and from its breeding grounds, and though a few may be seen occasionally in March and April, the appearance of the main body in May ... this species is always spoken of as the “May bird” ... [It is] rarely if ever seen in the winter months.

If “spowes” were not Whimbrel, what were they? Certain species can be ruled out because they were also documented in the kitchen accounts including Curlew, Grey Plover, Knot, Lapwing (known as Bastard Plover (Ray 1678)) (*Vanellus vanellus*), Golden Plover (known confusingly as Green Plover (Ray, 1678)) (*Pluvialis apricarius*), Dotterel, Sea Dotterel (that is, Turnstone) (*Arenaria interpres*), Redshank (*Tringa totanus*), Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) and Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*). The smaller waders were lumped under the communal names of “stintes”. Among non-waders mentioned were Teal, Wigeon, Shelduck (“Shell Ducks”) (*Tadorna tadorna*), “Mussel Ducks” (probably Scaup (*Aythya marila*) (Swainson 1886; Newton 1896; Swann 1913)), Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*), Partridge (*Perdix perdix*), Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) and Blackbird (*Turdus merula*), as well as pigeons, larks, and buntings.

There are two other indicators that may point to the identity of the birds in the kitchen accounts. Some of the birds were paid for and the payment recorded. These costs are not always easy to interpret. In general, the payment for a Curlew was ten pence, a Green Plover six pence, a Knot was three or four pence, a Dotterel three pence, while a Grey Plover and a Turnstone were two pence. “Stints” were valued at three for a penny. The only reference we found to the cost of “Spowes” was in 1633 when the kitchen paid four pence for a pair, suggesting that it was not a particularly favoured food.

The other clue comes from the groupings of birds. Some were brought to the kitchens mainly as single birds or pairs, whereas others were brought in larger numbers. “Spowes” were sometimes brought to the kitchen in groups of 10 or more. Of the “spowes” in our sample, 50 were brought in on just four dates, strongly suggesting it was a bird that occurred in flocks.

We suggest that “spowe” was the local name for Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*) which is a common winter visitor to the Norfolk coast. Bar-tailed Godwits feed in flocks, are similar in appearance to Whimbrels apart from bill shape, and are large enough to be worth more than Dunlins and Sanderlings which comprised most of the “Stintes” brought to the L’Estrange kitchen.

There are also references to “Fedoes” in the Hunstanton kitchen books from the 1500s (Gurney 1921), perhaps indicating to Black-tailed Godwits (*Limosa limosa*) which nested in the area during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Newton 1896). However, they would have had a different temporal pattern of appearance from the winter-visiting Bar-tailed Godwits. The names “Godwyts” and “Yarwhelps” were local Norfolk names for godwits (Ray 1678; Swainson 1866; Newton 1896), suggesting that there may have been both confusion and different local names even within Norfolk. Sir Thomas Browne, the famous seventeenth-century Norfolk naturalist, mentioned the “Yarwhelp” as delicious eating. Moffett (1746) also described the “Fedoe” or “Godwits” as good eating when “fattened at home with pure corn” and from his description he was clearly referring to Black-tailed Godwits. Stevenson (1866) recorded that the Bar-tailed Godwit appeared in Norfolk in greater numbers as a passage migrant than as a winter visitor, but the larger numbers of birds brought to the kitchen in the winter months probably reflects the greater demand for wading birds during the harsher winter season. Other largish waders that were not mentioned in our sample of the kitchen books include Oyster-catcher (*Haemantopus ostralegus*), Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*) and Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*). Greenshank can probably be ruled out as it too is a passage migrant, but the other two are possibilities.

If “Spowes” are not Whimbrels, what name was used for the Whimbrel? Although fewer birds were brought into the kitchens during the autumn than in midwinter, it is possible that some Whimbrels were also shot by the wildfowlers. We suspect that although the

wildfowlers would have known the difference between Curlews and Whimbrels, they may not have used different names when bringing the birds to the kitchens. It is noteworthy that the prices paid for “curlews” varied considerably, from sixpence halfpenny to one shilling (twelve pence). Perhaps the cheaper ones were Whimbrels.

One final piece of evidence relates to the name itself. In the Scandinavian languages the names of both the curlews and godwits end in -spov. The Swedish names: Småspov and Storspov (i.e. small and large “Spov”) for Whimbrel and Curlew; and Rødspov and Myrspov (red and moor “Spov”) for Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwit, respectively. Perhaps Gurney did not delve deeply enough into the questions of the names.

On balance ,we consider that “spowes” were Bar-tailed Godwits, which now are, and probably were then, regular winter visitors to the north Norfolk coast.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Norfolk Record Office: original mss MF/RO 640, 641 and 642 (microfiche copies).

<sup>2</sup> There are two exceptions to the statement that dotterels were shot only during the migration period and both almost certainly refer to “Sea-dotterel” which is and was a local name for Turnstone (Ray 1678). One was on 4 November 1610 when four Curlews, two “Spowes” and a Dotterel were brought in, and the other was on 14 December 1633 where six dozen Stints, a

Knott and a Dotterel were brought in. In both cases, birds closely associated with the sea shore were brought in with the “dotterels”.

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