

Photo Quiz

Bob Curry



To state the obvious to the point of absurdity, our bird pecking at mud adjacent to a body of water is a shorebird. Moreover, the shape and proportions, including a small head, moderately long and slender bill, and moderately long legs (especially the tarsi), tell us this is a sandpiper and not a member of the short-billed, shorter-legged, large-headed plover family. The largest subfamily of sandpipers, the calidrids, with about 25 species worldwide, is well represented in Ontario, where 13 species have been recorded. This bird is one of

these, what I like to think of as the “classic” sandpipers.

A quick perusal of our bird reveals that it is a well proportioned, small sandpiper with, for its size, a rather long, slender bill which is slightly downcurved throughout its length, with a slight droop near the tip. Many readers will identify the bird, at a glance, correctly, as a **Western Sandpiper**. This is one of those species which, when we find a “real one”, we usually identify quickly and accurately. Unfortunately, there are many pretenders, and it is the ID pitfalls thus created about

which I would like to elaborate.

The Western Sandpiper is over-reported in Ontario. It is very rare on spring passage but, very occasionally at that season, can occur in small parties of up to a half dozen or more birds. On fall migration, the odd adult Western may be seen from late July into August. A few juveniles generally occur from mid-August onward. This species, which winters to a large degree within the United States, has occurred in Ontario as late as early December. The number of birds in the province fluctuates from year to year, and during some falls there are almost none. Nevertheless, some birders come to expect "their" annual Western Sandpiper, and it is this context which is rife with the possibilities of misidentification.

To help eliminate other possibilities, it is necessary to age a sandpiper. The quiz bird has immaculate crisp plumage, with sharp-edged feathers, most with light fringes. There is no sign of wear. This is a juvenile bird, likely fairly early in the fall season.

It is unlikely that Sanderling would be confused with Western as it is overall lighter in plumage, appearing checkered black-and-white in juvenal plumage, and a much more evenly pale bird as it molts to basic (winter) dress. It is a chunkier bird, with a proportionately shorter bill. Similarly, Pectoral Sandpiper should cause little confusion. Even a small "Pec" would

have pale legs, a shorter bill with a pale base, and the distinctive pectoral band of streaks across the breast.

Some potential errors may be more likely in life than with this black-and-white photograph. For example, juvenile Dunlin has the two upper rows of scapulars broadly fringed in reddish-chestnut, much in the manner of Western. One can become fixated on this mark for Western Sandpiper and fail to notice other obvious discrepancies. Juvenile Dunlin of our North American race is larger, and has vague blotchy black streaking on the underparts, and its bill is longer and more deeply downcurved. Without the reddish scapulars to see, the structural differences and scruffy underparts compared to our bird with clean white underparts would help us in making the correct identification.

Which brings us to the "peeps" or "stints", the collective name given to the small calidrids. Six species have occurred in the province. Even juvenile Least Sandpiper may be mistaken for Western, especially if one is fixated on looking for a reddish peep. The legs can be entirely dark from mud-stains, and the bill is downcurved. However, the bill is quite short and delicate, the entire upperparts are rufous, not just certain feather tracts as in Western, and there is a rufous breast band. In black-and-white, look for the delicate propor-

tions, dainty downcurved bill, and breast band.

The Baird's and White-rumped pair are quite different in shape from Western. They have long wings which extend beyond the tail, and considerable primary projection beyond the tertials. This said, juvenile White-rumped is a very likely candidate for misidentification as a Western. In life, it has reddish margins to the upper scapulars and mantle feathers. This chestnut is rather more extensive than on Western but the overall effect is markedly similar. But a White-rumped would have a shorter bill which is light at the base, proportionately shorter legs, wings which project well beyond the tail, and a neck-breast band of buffish-grey overlain with fine streaks. None of these features is possessed by our bird.

Which brings us to Semipalmated, the likeliest sandpiper to masquerade as Western. Once again, to deal first with the problem in the field, juvenile Semis can be quite rufous. Here in Ontario, we see juvenile Semis with back and upper scapulars which vary from dull buff to those which are quite reddish-buff. In fact, discussion in the summer of 1999 on the Internet chat group, *ID Frontiers*, referred to "rufous morph" juvenile Semis, and some opined that up to 10% of juveniles in some areas are this colour. In addition, some Semipalmated Sandpipers, especially

females, can be quite long-billed. Given, then, that we know that long-billed, "rufous morph" Semipalmated Sandpipers can and do occur, the need for extreme care in identification of Western Sandpiper ought to be obvious.

So let us return to the photo and examine our bird carefully. Look very closely at the left foot, which is poised above the mud. There is webbing between the middle and left toes. This feature immediately eliminates all peeps but Semipalmated and Western. So, in separating Westerns from Semipalmated, it is not necessary to see foot webbing, but if you think you have a Little or Red-necked Stint, you had better scrutinize the feet! The difficulties of distinguishing reddish Semipalmated Sandpipers from Little Stint and Red-necked Stint are even greater than the present problem, but require a different treatment than the bird quiz at hand. Although the exact location of rufous-margined feathers (the upper two rows of scapulars) would be one of several cues used in combination to identify Western Sandpiper (as in most bird identification do not use just one feature), we cannot use it in this black-and-white photo so we must resort to other criteria. The bill is indeed quite long, at least as long as the head, although it is not as drooped at the tip as in some Westerns. Moreover, the bill tapers to a relatively fine point, whereas in Semipalmated,

the bill tip is blunt or even slightly swollen. Westerns feed with the bill pointed straight down, more in the manner of Stilt Sandpiper, a feature which might help pick it out in a group of feeding Semipalmateds. Note also the distinct elongate spots forming streaks on the sides of the breast; on Semipalmated, these streaks are more diffuse or appear as a wash of colour.

In summary, in identifying juvenile Western Sandpipers, first beware of the potential for a gross error, especially confusion with Least Sandpiper, White-rumped

Sandpiper and Dunlin. However, a combination of bill length and shape, the streaking on the sides of the breast and, in life, the exact pattern of reddish-margined feathers will serve to identify most individuals. Beware, however, of some Semipalmated Sandpipers which can look very much like Westerns, especially when one is enthusiastically in pursuit of the rarer species.

Our quiz juvenile Western Sandpiper was photographed by Dan Strickland during September at Victoria, British Columbia.

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2000 OFO Annual General Meeting

Please mark your calendars now for the 2000 Ontario Field Ornithologists' AGM to be held at the Kortright Centre near Kleinburg during the weekend of 16 and 17 September 2000. We look forward eagerly to another excellent meeting after our great success at Point Pelee this past fall. Some of the events planned include guest speakers, a banquet on Saturday evening, field trips to birding hotspots for shorebirds and raptors, and the return of Ron Scovell's ever-popular book sale.

Watch for further details in the coming months. *Jean Iron*