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Photo Quiz

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April 2004 Quiz

Glenn Coady

This issue's photo quiz is of a shorebird, in anticipation of the imminent return of these sometimes difficult to identify birds to Ontario. It is obvious that this bird is not one of the long-legged, large-billed species like a curlew, godwit, avocet, stilt, yellowlegs or Willet. It is not squat and plump like a woodcock or snipe, and it is not gaudy in plumage like turnstones, phalaropes or oystercatchers. It is not plain-backed in pattern like the belted plovers of the genus *Charadrius* (Semipalmated Plover, Wilson's Plover, Snowy Plover, Piping Plover, Killdeer) and lacks the large-eyed, large and round-headed appearance of the larger plovers of the genus *Pluvialis* (American Golden-Plover and Black-bellied Plover). It lacks the slim, longer-necked, small-headed profile of an Upland Sandpiper.

One of the first things that we notice about this bird is that it has black legs. This one feature alone eliminates a host of other shorebirds like Solitary Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, both dowitchers, Ruff, Wandering Tattler, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Purple Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and Least Sandpiper, all of which have yellow or greenish-yellow legs. Beware that you are assessing true leg colour in shorebirds though, and

not merely apparently dark, mud-caked legs. We are able to see from this fine photograph that this bird appears to have truly black legs.

I think it is fair to say that most observers would quickly and intuitively recognize this bird as one of the dark-legged, medium-sized shorebirds of the genus *Calidris*. Of those species seen in Ontario, this group includes Red Knot, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, Sanderling, Baird's Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Little Stint and Semipalmated Sandpiper.

Another structural clue that would be very useful in identifying this bird would be the size and shape of its bill, and in the field, we would likely be able to assess this with some patience. However, working from this single photo of a bird with its bill deeply placed in the mud, we are unlikely to discern much about bill size and shape.

Our quiz bird does not appear to be a good match for a Red Knot. It lacks the sturdy, "pot-bellied" profile characteristic of Red Knots, and lacks the warm, brick red ventral colour of alternate-plumaged Red Knots or the cold uniform grey plumage of their basic plumage. Red Knots, even at the nest, are not likely to show legs this dark.

Sanderling can be ruled out by the lack of any hint of black

plumage usually visible on the leading edge of the bend in the wing. This is usually apparent in Sanderlings in any plumage. Our quiz bird does not demonstrate any of the very pale grey coloration of basic-plumaged Sanderlings, nor any hint of the bright rufous neck and chest of its alternate plumage.

Similarly, our quiz bird shows none of the dark rufous neck and breast colour of a Curlew Sandpiper in alternate plumage, nor the cold, pale silvery grey of that species in basic plumage.

Our bird shows no hint of the bright rufous upperparts or the large black ventral patch on the belly of an alternate-plumaged Dunlin. Also, it is not consistent with the plain and uniform brownish-grey back, wings and head of a basic-plumaged Dunlin.

Having eliminated these other large *Calidris* sandpipers, we are left with only the smaller, dark-legged members of the genus that are commonly referred to as the “peep” sandpipers—Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Little Stint, White-rumped Sandpiper and Baird’s Sandpiper.

Our quiz bird shows a pale rufous colour in the crown and auriculars, and pale rufous-buff edges to some dark-centred scapular feathers. It is heavily spotted in the nape, neck and breast, with streaking extending down the flanks. It shows an obvious white supercilium. This general pattern is shown in varying degrees in both

Western Sandpiper and White-rumped Sandpiper (and more rarely Semipalmated Sandpiper) in alternate plumage, although the rufous areas tend to be much brighter than our quiz bird on an alternate-plumaged Western Sandpiper. In that regard, our bird is a better fit for White-rumped Sandpiper.

One field character that stands out quite well in this photo is how long and attenuated the rear end of the small sandpiper appears. This is due to the very long extension of the primaries, which we can clearly see extending well beyond both the tail and the tertials. This trait conclusively eliminates the three smallest and shortest-winged of the dark-legged peeps—Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper and the accidental Little Stint.

The quiz bird is thus one of the two long-winged peeps, either a White-rumped Sandpiper or a Baird’s Sandpiper. Baird’s Sandpiper does not demonstrate flank streaking like our quiz bird; tends to have much less profuse spotting of the chest, neck and nape; and has limited rufous and buff edging and more grey notching to its dark-centred scapulars. It also tends to have a less distinctly streaked and more buffy-washed breast than our quiz bird.

Reflecting back on that mostly buried bill, we notice one more field character that further confirms our growing confidence in our quiz bird’s identification. We can clearly discern a paler pinkish-red base to

the lower mandible. This is a very good diagnostic character of White-rumped Sandpiper at any age. In adults on the breeding territory, this basal portion of the lower mandible can actually become a bright red.

This **White-rumped Sandpiper** in alternate plumage was pho-

tographed by Mark Peck at Lagoa do Peixe, Brazil, on 2 May 1999.

The White-rumped Sandpiper breeds from northern Hudson Bay, northward across the southern arctic islands. It winters as far away as southern Chile. In both spring and fall, it tends to be one of the later shorebird migrants in Ontario.

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