

MY STINT WITH SCITUATE'S STINTS

by P. William Smith, Hingham

Inasmuch as I may have spent more time than anyone else over the summer of 1985 with the stints at Third Cliff, Scituate, I thought I would write up my assessment of what happened. I am doing so more as ornithohistory than as any attempt to document potential ornithological records. From 27 July through 20 August I visited Third Cliff eleven times, usually for several hours, using a Questar to study the birds at close range. Hereafter I shall be referring to Lars Jonsson's superb *Calidris* illustrations that appeared recently both in *American Birds* 38 (September 1984): 853-876 and *British Birds* 77 (July 1984): 293-315 by plate number and letter, i.e., as "Bird 5b" or "Bird 2c."

I first visited Scituate on 27 July with Sue Dolder after hearing of a little Stint there on the Voice of Audubon. At that time I knew nothing of its original discovery - observers, plumage, habits, etc. I studied the roosting flock of adult Semipalmated Sandpipers, then comprising about two thousand individuals, which contained some Least Sandpipers, Sanderlings, etc. After a couple of hours I found a bird, obscured behind several others, which looked to me like a possible stint, for it showed extensive rusty edgings on the face, back, and scapulars. Frustrated by the limited view, I finally asked Sue to approach slowly, to try to redistribute the birds for a better look. Alas, a passing person with a loose dog flushed the whole roost; so I gave up.

I returned the next day (28 July) and found that Dave Clapp of Massachusetts Audubon's Marshfield sanctuary was there. He had looked for the Little on the twenty-sixth with Wayne Petersen, who had found it while birding alone on the twenty-fifth; so Dave had some idea of what the individual Wayne saw looked like. Finally I located what appeared to be the same bird I had seen the day before and studied it briefly before turning the Questar over to Dave. I thought it looked like Bird 5a, and based on Dave's secondhand description (not to mention my own desire to see a Little Stint in North America), I concluded it must be Wayne's bird. (At that point, the thought of more than one stint at Scituate never entered my head.) Unfortunately, while Dave was viewing it, the bird moved away and could not be relocated. Unbeknownst to me, Dave later described this bird to Wayne, who indicated to him that it did not sound like the stint he had seen.

I was back at Third Cliff again on 1 August, a stormy day without a soul on the beach. After looking through the roost without finding a stint, I walked farther along and noticed a lone bird feeding at the tideline. In the brief look I had before it flew, I judged it to be a stint - it looked like a classic summer adult Rufous-necked (Bird 5d). Now I was really puzzled, but in the meantime, Wayne came by. In a slightly different area than I had been concentrating on, where he had seen the Little Stint the week before, he refound his bird of 25 July. I then had a good chance

to study that one in the Questar. It was not my bird of 27-28 July. Rather, it looked very much like Bird 5b, except it seemed to lack color in the tertials and had a more frosty appearance overall than Jonsson captures. I do not think it was the bird I had seen an hour earlier on the beach, either; I did not see that one again. In any event, now two people had seen the stint of 25 July (Wayne's bird) and agreed it was unquestionably a Little Stint.

Buoyed by the news of definite confirmation, about fifty people were present at Third Cliff on 3 August, including myself. Most of the people were together and found a stint; to the chagrin of some, I could confidently tell them it was the bird I found on 27-28 July, not the one Wayne discovered on 25 July. In the meantime I had done much more reading and was beginning to think this one might not be a Little. Now with a longer and better look, I felt reasonably sure that it was a fading adult or year-old Rufous-necked. The wing coverts were lead gray, lacking any rufous; the rufous on the cheeks, back, and scapulars had a more reddish tone than the more honey-colored shade of the Little; the throat was somewhat pinkish, not white; and both the bill and legs seemed a bit shorter than those of the Semipalmated Sandpipers around it. It was much more like Bird 5e - than like 5a as I had thought the week before, but it was warmer gray and less frosty-looking than Jonsson depicts.

Later that afternoon, Bob Abrams found Wayne's Little Stint in the area which that bird favored. Being there and having seen it before, I could confirm that indeed it was the same individual I saw with Wayne on 1 August. Many people had good looks at it that day.

On subsequent days many people came, and some may have seen a different bird and called it "the" Little Stint, as I had originally. Others may have been confused by juvenile Least Sandpipers. It became increasingly evident that different people were describing the same bird in different terms, while others were describing different birds similarly. It all seemed to hinge on a person's experience and skill in understanding and describing a bird's feather patterns and hues, plus the optics used, the light conditions, the bird's posture, and many other variables including the opinions of others present (group psychology). By mid-August, however, I started to believe that some people were indeed seeing still other stints, even though I was not.

The climax (for me) came on 16 August, another stormy day. I was there alone and saw Wayne's bird (now paler), my bird of 27-28 July, two birds that looked to me like classic juvenile Littles (Bird 2c), and another bird or two that may have been stints of some sort. One gave an unfamiliar trebled call-note. Unfortunately, disturbance by bathers on the following days made it difficult to study the roost, and a change in weather caused a large exodus of birds. On 18 and 20 August, there were many fewer people present and no apparent stints.

In summary, from my experiences, present at Scituate were

- a classic 5b adult Little Stint from 25 July through 16 August.
- a stint nearly like 5e, almost certainly an adult Rufous-necked from 27 July through 16 August.
- a possible 5d adult Rufous-necked Stint (1 August), not definitely seen by others.
- two probable 2c juvenile Little Stints, seen 16 August (and earlier?), plus possibly others, either Little or Rufous-necked.
- a hundred or more Least Sandpipers and a few thousand Semipalmateds, mostly adults but with an increasing number of juveniles as August wore on, in all sorts of plumages, not just the classic ones depicted by Jonsson.

Finally, I would like to comment a bit. Recent stint identification papers may revolutionize peep-watching and should result in many more claims of palearctic stint sightings. I am delighted to have my horizons broadened in this fashion, and Lars Jonsson, Dick Veit, and Peter Grant deserve a lot of credit for this great leap forward. Nevertheless, fine-point identification papers largely present snapshots of the species they discuss. They may not emphasize or even completely review the variation in plumage characters, measurements, behavior, etc. among individuals of each species, nor the inevitable perceptual, if not absolute, overlap between some individuals of different species. Even if they do, readers may not grasp everything as intended by the authors. Some juvenile Least Sandpipers at Scituate were brighter and more extensively rufous than even the juvenile Little Stint depicted by Bird 2c; they showed one or more prominent white Vs on the back, the legs seemed dark in shadow, and they did not look much like Bird 2e, the standard young Least. Many people expected Little Stints to look, well, "little" (which they do not compared to their American cousins). Some young Semipalmateds (based on webbing between the toes) had considerable rufous feather edgings and were much buffier overall than the Bird 1d standard; their plumage looked to me a lot like Bird 1b, the standard juvenile Rufous-necked Stint.

As records, I believe most peep identifications based on knowledge at this point should be considered hypothetical no matter how reputable the observers or how thoroughly described the bird. Birders, of course, want binary ticks for their lists, but the reality is that separation of many individuals of these species under field conditions is still more art than science. I would only except photographically-proven or well-documented reports of classic individuals based on lengthy studies by numerous, experienced, independent observers over an extended period of time under a variety of observational conditions (or in the hand). Thus, although there seem to have been multiple palearctic stints present at Scituate this summer, almost certainly of two species, in my view, only the classic adult 5b Little Stint seen 25 July through 16 August and diagnostically photographed by Rick Morus of Worcester [see W. R. Petersen, "A Second Record of Little Stint" in *Bird Observer* 13 (October 1985): 278-279] and possibly

by others, qualifies as an ornithological record. The rest of the sightings seem more like interesting and possibly instructive reports. I am thrilled to suspect now that a small fraction of the peep passing through Scituate this year were palearctic stints. We need to learn more about how to observe them, how to separate them from their nearctic cousins and from each other. Perhaps 1985's visitors were just isolated vagrants. But it would be very exciting if they were part of a yet-to-be-discovered pattern!

I especially want to thank George and Dot Tyler of Scituate. Without their hospitality and forbearance at the unnerving onslaught of visitors, most of us "peepers" would not have even reached Third Cliff during the summer of 1985!

P. WILLIAM SMITH, a research associate of Manomet Bird Observatory, has demonstrated a keen interest in the problem of establishing creditable records of vagrants in North America. He is a former regional editor for *American Birds* and has served on the New Jersey Bird Records Committee. He has addressed this subject in *American Birds* [39 (Fall 1985): 255], "Jackdaws reach the new world," and in *Bird Observer* [13 (August 1985): 190], "What Is A Record?"

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