

ABOUT THE COVER: Least Sandpiper

The Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*) is the smallest of the North American peep, just smaller than the Semipalmated Sandpiper with which it frequently associates. It can be separated from the latter by its generally browner coloration, more slender bill, and by its yellowish or greenish legs. Juvenile birds in fresh plumage are more brightly colored than adults. Bright rufous edges to the feathers of the crown and upperparts create a bright orange-brown glow, and there is a creamy white, incomplete V pattern on the sides of the back. This bright plumage rapidly wears and fades, and by late October most Least Sandpipers are in drab winter dress.

These birds are foraging generalists, usually picking rather than probing, and eating a wide variety of insect, crustacean, and even plant foods. They may twitter when foraging and when flushed utter a "kreeep" or a long "screeeee." They frequent beaches, particularly in spring, and during migration in May are found on the open mudflats of Newburyport Harbor by the thousands. However, this species often forages out of the water, on the muddy edges of pools or in marsh grass—tame little brown sandpipers that roam the *Spartina* edges of the shallow pannes at Plum Island.

Least Sandpipers generally arrive in our area from the first week in May on the way to their tundra breeding grounds (Alaska east to Newfoundland and south to Nova Scotia), and stragglers linger through early June. On July 12, 1979, a freshly dead downy chick was found on Monomoy, establishing the first known breeding record for Least Sandpiper in the Lower Forty-eight (reported by Kathleen S. Anderson in *American Birds*, November 1980, 34: 867). The adults arrive back in Massachusetts from early July through early August, followed shortly by the brightly colored juveniles, which become prevalent by the third week of August. The birds stop over to fatten up for the flight to their wintering grounds in southern United States, Central America, and the northern half of South America. But some of these tiny birds also fly nonstop from Canada to South America.

This species is monogamous. The males sing and display both on the ground and in elaborate flights with alternating bursts of rapid wingbeating and gliding, rising sometimes to thirty meters or more and singing continuously. The male also does most of the incubating of the clutch of four eggs and most of the caring for the downy young. The adults forage in communal feeding areas away from the breeding territory.

This widespread and common sandpiper currently poses no conservation problems. It is part of the superspecies that includes the Old World stints, several of which it closely resembles in some plumages, particularly if leg color is not clear, providing a significant challenge to birders who think they may be viewing a vagrant stint in their scopes.

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