

WHERE TO LOOK FOR THE BUFF-BREASTED SANDPIPER

by Richard A. Forster

That Alan Strauss should feel compelled to describe his initial encounter with a Buff-breasted Sandpiper is a tribute to that bird's grace and subtle beauty. The Buffbreast's neat, immaculate plumage consisting of extensive buff-cream on the head, neck, and upper portions of the underparts is unique among shorebirds. This sombre beauty is further recognized by its short dark bill, rounded head, and slim neck. The soft part colors are also distinctive with bright yellow legs and a dark eye on the "blank" appearing face. In many respects, it resembles a bright, miniature Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramis longicauda*).

Before discussing where to look for a Buff-breasted Sandpiper, it may be helpful to discuss when to confidently seek a Buffbreast and in what habitat to search for it. The bulk of the migrants pass through central North America between the Mississippi River Valley and the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains in both spring and fall enroute to breeding and wintering grounds. Fortunately for us, a limited number of fall (more appropriately late summer) migrants pass down the west coast of Hudson Bay and make a landfall along the Atlantic coast from the maritime provinces south to New Jersey and, rarely, farther south. This flight comprises almost entirely juvenile birds in crisp, fresh plumage. In some years the first migrants begin to appear during the first days of August, but normally their initial appearance is not until the last ten days of the month. Most of these migrants pass through during a brief period between August 25th and September 10th. Narrowing this limited period even further, peak counts invariably occur between August 27th and September 5th. In years past, the pursuit of Buff-breasted Sandpipers was a traditional Labor Day weekend ritual. In recent years, Buffbreasts have been increasingly reported in the latter part of September with these individuals tending to remain in the area for a longer period of time. While Buff-breasted Sandpipers are being recorded later than in past years, they are still rare in October.

The habitat in which Buff-breasted Sandpipers occur is equally limited. Look for them in recently plowed fields, short grass areas such as airports, golf courses, and similar areas of extensive low-cut grass, and in areas of recently cut salt marsh hay. In periods of low water or drought, they may be found along the exposed edges of lakes, reservoirs, or other large water bodies. They are sometimes encountered along the high tide wrack line of coastal beaches where they deliberately stalk their preferred insect prey. They can often be found among Lesser Golden Plovers or Baird's Sandpipers, species with similar dietary and habitat preferences. Even a Killdeer flock is worthy of scrutiny.

In Massachusetts, Buff-breasted Sandpipers are most readily observed in

the agricultural fields of northern Essex County. Areas that are most favored are the fields along Scotland Road in Newbury, the access road to Plum Island, the island itself, and the fields along Routes 1A and 133 in Ipswich and Route 133 in Essex. Typically, the areas in which they are likely to occur vary from year to year due to crop rotation and viewing may be possible only from the road. Whenever the observer sees appropriate habitat it is always worth checking.

The recent emergence of sod fields at Cumberland Farms on the Middleboro and Halifax town line has added another location where Buff-breasted Sandpipers may be found. This area can be easily viewed from roads adjacent to the fields. For the adventuresome, South Monomoy Island annually attracts Buff-breasted Sandpipers along pond edges, sedge flats, and Hudsonian moors. They are less frequently encountered along the wrack line of the more accessible North Monomoy Island. The Katama Plains area of southeastern Martha's Vineyard has also proved attractive to Buffbreasts.

Other areas where Buffbreasts have proved to be less than casual in occurrence are the coastal beaches at Third Cliff in Scituate, Duxbury Beach, Plymouth Beach, and the outer beaches of Eastham and Orleans. They may occur more regularly on Nantucket Island along the south coast especially at Miacomet Golf Course. Buff-breasted Sandpipers are decidedly rare inland. Look for them along large bodies of water with extensive edge areas during low water periods. The birds are most frequently recorded inland in the extensive agricultural fields of the Connecticut River Valley with Northampton being a preferred site. However, the knowledgeable observer knows that at the right time and place, anything is possible.

Buff-breasted Sandpipers normally occur as single individuals or in small groups of up to six. They are among the tamest shorebirds, and if the observer exercises proper caution they can be viewed and photographed at close range. If you should have the good fortune to encounter a Buff-breasted Sandpiper, take the time to study this unpretentious gem of the shorebird clan. You will not be disappointed.

RICHARD A. FORSTER has been concerned with bird distribution, breeding, and vagrancy throughout his career as a New England ornithologist. Although he has led bird tours throughout the world, the focus of much of Dick's work has been the Sudbury River Valley and Essex County in Massachusetts.

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