

This month's photo quiz features the second consecutive mystery shorebird species. Some of the tips provided in last month's At A Glance analysis can be put to use in unraveling the identity of this month's mystery shorebird.

Last month's description included a discussion on determining the age and plumage of an unfamiliar shorebird before actually pinning it down to species. For example, shorebirds in juvenal plumage typically have broadly edged, or fringed, wing coverts, back, and scapular feathers. In addition, the presence of only a few fine breast streaks, largely confined to the sides of the breast, tends to be typical of sandpipers in this plumage.

Clearly, the mystery sandpiper is not so patterned, especially on the back and breast. Instead, it seems to have a peculiarly even-textured back, apparently devoid of conspicuous streaks, and is notably dark about the head and face, save for an indistinct light spot in front of the eye. Considering these facts, the presence of the bird's notably pale-fringed wing coverts, especially in contrast to the otherwise uniform back, indicate that the bird is in its first-winter (basic) plumage, a plumage in which the juvenal wing coverts are typically retained, even though the body plumage otherwise has the features of an adult in winter (basic) plumage.

Having determined that the mystery sandpiper is an individual in first-winter plumage, note that the legs appear to be light, although the photo rendition is ambiguous in this regard. More importantly, the bill is relatively long, curved, and stout; the flanks are prominently streaked; and the overall appearance of the bird is chunky, rather than slim and delicate as in last month's Semipalmated Sandpipers.

This combination of features, particularly the smooth, dark head and back; pale spot in front of the eye; stout and slightly decurved bill; and light-colored legs point to the identity of this bird as a Purple Sandpiper (*Calidris maritima*) in first-winter plumage.

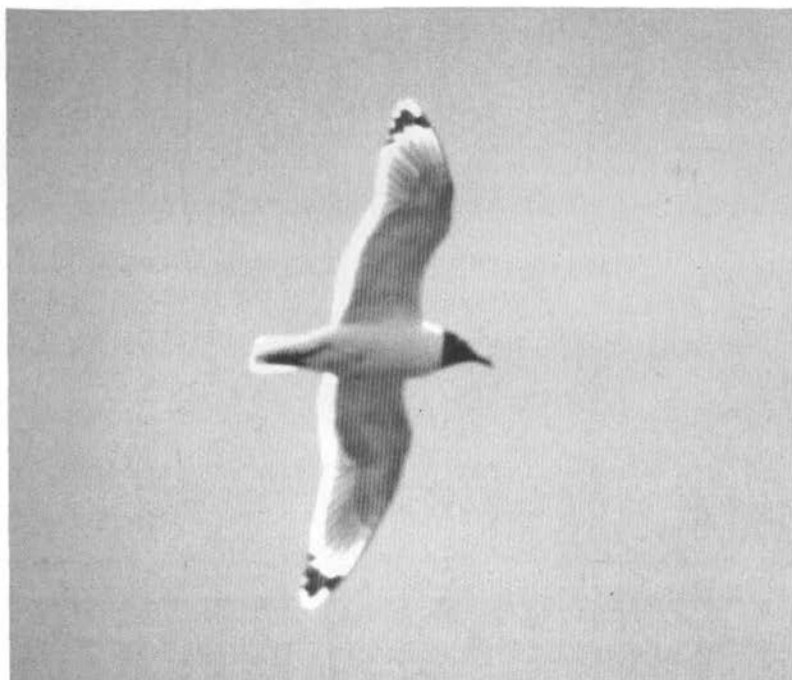


While the Purple Sandpiper is not likely to be seen in summer in Massachusetts, it is locally common in winter on rocky islands off the coast.

Photo by
William B. Long.
Courtesy of MAS.

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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