

## AT A GLANCE

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October 2000



Photograph by Wayne R. Petersen


Placing this month's photo quiz bird into its proper order and family should not be difficult for anyone other than a real neophyte. The mystery bird's long legs and long and slender bill, noticeably striped and cryptic plumage pattern, and what appear to be fairly long and tapered wings all suggest that the bird is a shorebird of some type. The large order Charadriiformes is represented in North America by the shorebird families *Jacanidae*, *Haematopodidae*, *Recurvirostridae*, *Charadriidae*, and *Scolopacidae*. Of these five groups, the jacanas, oystercatchers, and stilts and avocets are quite unmistakable and clearly do not resemble the shorebird in the picture. In addition, since none of the North American plover species possess ventral streaking as prominent as those of the mystery shorebird, the bird must belong in the family *Scolopacidae* (sandpipers and their allies).

Knowing that the bird is a sandpiper still leaves more than thirty species, so a further narrowing of the field is desirable. A careful consideration of the list of Massachusetts shorebird species can be a helpful way to begin the elimination process. For example, members of the genus *Tringa* (i.e., yellowlegs and Solitary Sandpipers) are long-legged and slender-looking without heavy ventral streaking. Similarly, Willets, Whimbrels, and godwits are very long-legged and have much

longer bills than does the mystery bird. Spotted Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstones, Red Knots, and most of the other shorebird species other than peep-sized species, such as Baird's, White-rumped, Western, Semipalmated, and Least sandpipers, lack ventral streaking in all plumages. Dowitchers, woodcocks, and snipes all have very long, straight bills.

Using this approach to narrow down the choices brings the short list to one that includes the Upland Sandpiper, Sanderling, Pectoral Sandpiper, Purple Sandpiper, and Dunlin, in addition to the peep listed above. A look at the leg coloration in the photo, even in black-and-white, suggests that the legs are light in color rather than dark. This critical detail further reduces the options to Upland Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, and Purple Sandpiper. Upland Sandpiper can at once be eliminated because the pictured bird does not have the long, slender neck, short, straight bill, and the erect carriage of an Upland Sandpiper. Purple Sandpiper, while structurally quite similar to the pictured sandpiper, does not exhibit such a sharply defined streaked breast; instead, its breast appears more evenly gray, usually with streaks running down the flanks and mid-belly.

The only remaining choice is between an adult Least Sandpiper and a Pectoral Sandpiper in any plumage. Although these two species bare a superficial resemblance to one another, the Pectoral Sandpiper is quite a bit larger (8.75 inches compared to 6 inches) and chunkier, and in all plumages has a more distinct band of streaking across the upper and mid-breast than does the Least Sandpiper in alternate (breeding) plumage. Juvenile Least Sandpipers have very fine breast streaks that are confined only to the sides of the upper breast. Also, the streaking on a Pectoral Sandpiper sharply contrasts with the white of the lower breast and belly and does not show the ragged lower edge to the streaking that is often typical of adult Least Sandpipers. And finally, the much longer and heavier bill of a Pectoral Sandpiper is bicolored, typically having a dull yellowish base – a feature just barely discernable in the photograph.

In summary, the pictured shorebird is a Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*), the crisp breast streaking, broadly fringed scapulars, wing coverts, and tertials indicating that the bird is a juvenile. The mystery bird in the picture was photographed in October in Middleborough, MA. Pectoral Sandpipers are locally uncommon to common Bay State migrants in both spring and fall, and they are one of the shorebird species almost as likely to be encountered inland as along the coast. 

Wayne R. Petersen

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## AT A GLANCE

Photograph by David M. Larson



Can you identify this bird?

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

Dear Birders Exchange,

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David Allen



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Warmest holiday wishes to all,

Betty Petersen  
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