

FIELD NOTES


A Foot-vibrating Solitary Sandpiper

Richard W. Hildreth

On August 25, 2001, along Alligator Lake Road in Maine, I stopped near a small beaver pond hoping to find some dragonflies. At the edge of the road is a narrow strip of alders which screens the view of the pond. I walked along the road looking for an opening in the alders so I could peer out over the pond. When at last I found a small opening I saw no dragonflies, but I did see a Solitary Sandpiper, *Tringa solitaria*, busy feeding about fifteen inches away. It did not seem to be disturbed by my presence, so I stopped to watch it for about fifteen minutes.

The sandpiper was wading around in the shallow pond with water up to its knee joint. It was probing with its bill, sometimes deeply so the water surface reached its eye, but mostly just inserting the tip of the bill into the water. The bill was rapidly opening and closing; the bird appeared to be snapping up many small prey items. The water in the pond was very clear so that I could see the bottom, which was muddy. The bird was sinking into the soft mud as it waded along.

What especially caught my attention was the body movement of the bird as it fed. Spotted Sandpipers almost constantly teeter as they feed; Solitary Sandpipers also sometimes teeter. This bird, during feeding or just prior to feeding, appeared to be trembling, the entire body vibrating. Close examination through my ten-power Swarovski binoculars revealed what was going on. Just before and sometimes during feeding episodes, the bird would move its leg up and down in the mud very rapidly. One leg at a time was moved in this manner, and the bird frequently switched legs. The effect of this rapid leg vibration was to shake the entire bird and give the impression that it was trembling.


Since these episodes of foot vibrating were usually immediately followed by vigorous episodes of probing and feeding, it might be that the foot vibrating caused small prey items to move and reveal themselves, to be snapped up by the bird. 

Odonate Hunting at Wizard Pond

Richard W. Hildreth

The Maine Public Reserve Land tract at T10 SD includes Black Mountain. The well-maintained and relatively easy trail up the mountain climbs through the woods to a glacially rounded bedrock knob at about 960 feet, descends steeply into a narrow ravine to about 830 feet, and then ascends steeply to the main, bare, rounded bedrock summit of the mountain at 1094 feet. In the ravine, between the two peaks, is a small (about 500 feet long), elongated body of water called Wizard Pond.

On September 1, 2000, at about 10:00 a.m., I was standing on the shore of the pond at the southern end, hunting for odonates. I had already collected one yellow-legged meadowhawk (*Sympetrum vicinum*), one lake darner (*Aeshna eremita*), and one variable darner (*Aeshna interrupta interrupta*). I had netted (and released) six more darners, all *interrupta*. I saw several pairs fly by in the "wheel" position, also *interrupta*. From my vantage point I could see the entire pond; about forty large darners, presumably *interrupta*, were flying just above the water, mostly along the edges of the pond.

I was not the only odonate hunter present. I saw a Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) fly out of the woods and chase the big darners over the pond. It flew down from the trees and pursued the darners rapidly just above the water. The darners were grabbed in the bird's talons. Not every sortie made by the Merlin was successful, but there was a capture for every two or three attempts. When a darner had been captured, the Merlin flew to a perch and ate it. Through my ten-power binoculars I could see the bird holding the darner with one foot while eating it. I saw the Merlin catch and eat four big darners in about fifteen minutes. It then flew off into the trees and was not seen again. 



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