

# THE PRACTICED EYE

## Pectoral Sandpiper and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper

photographs from VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology)  
at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia



Adult Pectoral Sandpiper in summer at Barrow, Alaska. Photo: J. P. Myers/VIREO (m01/99/027).

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**I**N THE GENUS *CALIDRIS*, THE GENUS of the derisively named “peeps” and “stints” and various other difficult shorebirds, the Pectoral Sandpiper (*C melanotos*) has one trait that should be appreciated by struggling birders. It is not the largest of its group, nor the most colorful, nor the most distinctive—but it does show practically no seasonal variation. Other shorebirds may have three utterly different plumages, depending on season or age, but Pectoral Sandpiper hardly varies. Learn the Pectoral at one season and you will know it all year.

Until recently, it was safe to say that identification of Pectoral Sandpiper involved only one strong contender Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*), which is closely similar only in adult breeding plumage. This simple comparison was muddled somewhat by the unveiling of Cox’s Sandpiper, a pesky varmint described as recently as 1982, evidently a long-distance migrant that could theoretically show up anywhere in the world. Cox’s Sandpiper receives some attention elsewhere in this issue, but the focus of this “Practiced Eye” is on Pectoral Sandpiper as it compares to the reasonable alternative, the Sharp-tailed.

One of the more northerly breeding sandpipers in the American and Siberian arctic, the Pectoral winters mainly in southern South America. On passage through North America it is most common through the Great Plains, especially in spring, but fall migrants are quite widespread.

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper is a northern Siberian breeder, wintering mainly in Australia. In North America it appears mostly as a fall migrant or stray: sometimes in good numbers in Alaska; regularly, in small numbers, in British Columbia and Washington; irregularly, in very small numbers, farther south on the Pacific Coast; and rarely elsewhere, including the Atlantic Coast.

The vast majority of the Sharp-tailed found in North America (especially outside Alaska) are juveniles, and most appear between mid-September and late October. In juvenal plumage the Sharp-tailed is quite distinctive, and often noticeable because of its rich colors: rufous or chestnut on the upperparts, and bright orange-buff on the breast. No other *Calidris* matches these colors, and the effect is more likely to suggest a juvenile Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) or even the juvenile of the Pacific race of Lesser Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis dominica fulva*).

Bright color alone is not quite enough for a safe identification of Sharp-tailed, however. Some Pectorals are brighter than others, and some fresh juvenile Pectorals have fairly bright chestnut on the crown and back, and a buffy wash on the breast. The juvenile Sharp-tailed is also distinguished by details of pattern, so that it would be equally identifiable in a black-and-white photograph.

Pattern of the underparts is the most obvious difference. While Pectoral Sandpiper always has moderate to heavy streaking that extends down to a sharp cutoff on the lower breast, the juvenile Sharp-tailed has only fine streaking across the upper breast and down the sides. The lower breast on juvenile Sharp-tailed is unmarked orange-buff, shading evenly into the white belly. Juvenile Sharp-tailed also has a very conspicuous pale supercilium, almost unmarked, that often seems to become broader behind the eye; the Pectoral's supercilium tends to be less conspicuous, more invaded by dusky streaking, and narrower behind the eye. The appearance of an eye-ring is often more noticeable on Sharp-tailed.

Adults in breeding plumage can be more tricky to separate. In full breeding plumage, Sharp-tailed is marked like Pectoral on the upper breast, but has a light spotted effect fading out on the lower breast, and large chevron-shaped marks extending down the sides and flanks and onto the undertail-coverts.



Juvenile Pectoral Sandpiper, September, in New York. Photo: Thomas H. Davis/VIREO (d03/3/023).



Juvenile Pectoral Sandpiper. Photo: Robert Villani/VIREO (v05/2/075).



Close-up of adult Sharp-tailed Sandpiper on wintering grounds in Australia. Photo: S. Holohan/VIREO (h09/1/022).



*Juvenile Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Photo: Mark Stocku/VIREO (s17/1/005).*



*Juvenile Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Photo: Thomas H. Davis/VIREO (d03/3/024).*



*Juvenile Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Photo: Peter G. Connors/VIREO (c05/1/050).*

Pectoral Sandpiper has only light streaking on the sides and flanks, and the sharp demarcation on the lower breast is the predominant feature of its pattern. In late summer and fall, however, Sharp-taileds in transitional stages can lose many of the obvious marks on the flanks while retaining the streaks on the breast, and they can look surprisingly similar to Pectoral at this point. Such birds should be identified with great caution, with close attention to the precise pattern of the lower breast and flanks. A conspicuous eye-ring on adult Sharp-tailed may also be a good clue.

Distinguishing the two species in winter will rarely be a problem here, since Pectoral Sandpiper is extremely rare in North America at that season, and Sharp-tailed is strictly accidental then. Winter plumage in the Sharp-tailed looks like a very dull version of its juvenal plumage, with the orange-buff of the breast replaced by dull gray-buff, and the upperparts mostly dull gray-brown. The crown may retain a hint of chestnut.

Behavior and habitat choice in migration seem to be similar for the two species, but the Sharp-taileds that I have watched have often been rather slow-moving, spending long periods picking deliberately at the mud in a small area.

Differences in structure are worth noting, and can be especially helpful in spotting subtle adults. Sharp-tailed Sandpiper tends to have a slightly shorter and straighter bill than Pectoral Sandpiper, and often looks flatter-headed and shorter-necked. Sharp-tailed also tends to be more rotund in silhouette; and although its legs average slightly longer than those of Pectoral Sandpiper, the heavy-bodied shape may make it look a little shorter-legged in proportion. As in so many other cases, the best way to prepare for recognizing the rarity (Sharp-tailed) is to become thoroughly familiar with the more common species (Pectoral). The best way to become a skilled birder is to spend time looking carefully at common birds.

