

# TEREK SANDPIPER IN MASSACHUSETTS: FIRST RECORD FOR EASTERN NORTH AMERICA

by David Stemple, Jim Moore,  
Ida Giriunas, and Marsha Paine

BETWEEN 3:00 AND 3:15 PM ON June 23, 1990, Stemple stopped at the Salt Pans observation area at the north end of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, Plum Island, Newburyport, Massachusetts. There, at the edge of the pond, from a distance of about 40 feet, he observed a Terek Sandpiper (*Xenus cinereus*) through Zeiss 10x40 dialyt binoculars. Nearby was a Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*). The sandpiper was moving around actively and soon began giving a two-note, *tewk-tewk* call. Within a minute or two it flew off toward the south end of the pond. Stemple recognized the bird as a Terek Sandpiper almost immediately, a species he had seen several times in Australia in January 1989. The identity of the bird did not, however, diminish his sense of disbelief, since he could think of only one other record in the lower United States,

and that in California in 1988 (Yee *et al.* 1988). No other birder was present.

Stemple hastily scribbled descriptive notes about the bird and then drove to the south end of the pond to try to relocate it. Within a few minutes, he flagged down Moore to tell him about the Terek Sandpiper in the area. Soon thereafter, Giriunas and Paine joined them and helped locate the bird. It was found on the far side of a narrow southerly extension of the main pond in the company of three Wilson's Phalaropes, a dowitcher and a few Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*), all on the muddy edge of the water about 75 yards from the observers' position. The sandpiper was actively moving and flying around. Moore, Giriunas, and Paine were able to observe the bird in their scopes as well as in Stemple's Questar telescope. After a few minutes, all of the shorebirds flew off to the south. The Terek Sandpiper was not seen

again, although hundreds of birders searched for it over the next 30 hours.

The following description has been compiled from notes written independently by the four observers during or immediately after the encounter. The bird's bill was at least twice as long as that of a Wilson's Phalarope's, all dark, slender, and upturned. The upperparts were seen as very light gray, brownish, smoky-gray, or gray-brown; Moore noted that the bird was slightly darker than a winter-plumaged Sanderling. It was definitely lighter than the Wilson's Phalaropes. Giriunas and Moore observed black markings along the upper edge of the folded wings. Stemple noted a dark eyeline bordered by diffuse areas lighter than the face color. The underparts were light or white. The legs were orange-yellow or dark orange; Paine and Stemple remember that they looked almost red in some light. Paine noted that the legs were shortish, giving the bird a dumpy look, and Moore thought the head appeared small. The bird was slightly smaller than the Wilson's Phalaropes, although when bill length was taken into account, it might have been as long. At the initial observation, Stemple saw barred edges to the tail as the bird walked. In flight the rump and tail were dark, and the secondary feathers had obvious white trailing edges; these features were seen by Stemple when the bird flew from one end of the pond to the other.

The sky was overcast during observation, but the light was good. All four observers are experienced birders familiar with New England birds. Giriunas and Stemple have both seen Terek Sandpipers before: Giriunas in Alaska and Kenya, Stemple in Australia. All observed field marks, other than the tail barring, are characteristic of Terek Sandpiper. The combination of features is diagnostic. Barring on outertail feathers is a feature not described in accounts of Terek Sandpiper, although Singer

depicts a fully-barréd tail in two bird guides (Bruun 1979, and Robbins *et al.* 1983). Puzzled by this, Stemple visited the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard and examined the twenty-one Terek Sandpiper specimens there. All specimens are in alternate or juvenal plumage. While all showed barréd uppertail coverts, with widely varying degrees of contrast, and most showed some barring on the outer edges of the two central rectrices, only four specimens (two adult males and two adult females), had contrasting barring on the outer webs of the outer rectrices. These four also exhibited high contrast in uppertail covert barring. From the fact that none of the juveniles showed any contrast in tail barring or uppertail coverts, as well as from the date and observed features, we believe the bird to have been an adult in breeding plumage. Cold fronts moved across Canada during the two weeks before June 23, which adds force in this case to the common assumption of a Siberian origin for palearctic shorebird vagrants.

The Terek Sandpiper breeds from Eastern U.S.S.R. to Finland and winters mainly in the area bounded by Africa, Southern Asia, and Australia. It is an annual visitor to Alaska, mostly to the western Aleutians. In North America outside Alaska, there are only two prior confirmed records, both on the Pacific coast: July–August, 1987 in British Columbia (Tweit and Mattocks 1987), and August–September, 1988 in California (Yee *et al.* 1989). A third published record is of an “unverified, possible sighting” in July 1972 at Churchill, Manitoba (Houston 1973). This is the first record of Terek Sandpiper in Eastern North America to our knowledge. Records have been increasing in Britain recently, where most records are from May and June. Records from Alaska do not show clear evidence of increased occurrence there (Tobish, pers. comm.).

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