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Broad-billed Sandpiper

Jamaica Bay, New York

Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*) at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Gateway National Recreation Area, Queens, New York, in late August 1998. Field characters include the dark mantle with pale streaks, dark crown and auriculars with a prominent pale supercilium, long, rather straight bill kinked downward at the tip, and sparsely streaked buffy breast. The breast pattern and fresh, buff-fringed wing coverts indicate juvenal plumage. Photograph/Arthur Morris/Birds as Art

WILLIAM L. BENNER *

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FINDING THE BIRD

On the morning of Thursday, August 27, 1998, I was making my way north along the east side of the freshwater East Pond at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Broad Channel, Queens Co., NY, looking at shorebirds. The sky was overcast, but the light was excellent. I was birding alone, using my usual 10x50 binoculars, with no telescope. Mixed-species flocks of shorebirds were feeding along the edges of the pond. High tide would be at 12:56 PM, and the several hours before high tide are usually the best shorebirding at Jamaica Bay, since the rising water in the Bay forces the birds into the pond-edge habitats. This seemed to be the case this morning, as there were many birds along the shore.

At the northeast corner of the East Pond, a trail leads north away from the pond and through the Phragmites. As I approached this final corner, I scanned all of the shorebirds in that cove. Virtually all were stints, a mixture of Semipalmated (*Calidris semipalmatus*) and Least sandpipers (*C. minutilla*). Also present were a few Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*). One somewhat larger shorebird stood out; through the binoculars, it became a Pectoral Sandpiper (*C. melanotos*), of which I had seen several already that morning.

I looked at a smaller shorebird next to the Pectoral. Immediately, I knew I was looking at something unusual. It was clearly smaller than the Pectoral, but slightly larger than a nearby juvenile Least. My first distinct impression, however, was that it was very dark, and that it showed a tremendous amount of contrast—that is, dark feathers dorsally with almost white edges, giving a black-and-white “streaked” look.

My next impression was of the bill, which was long, black, straight, and had a distinct downward kink at the very tip. It was longer than any bill of any stint I had ever seen. Then, I quickly noted the head—dark overall, with a blackish line through the eye, dark lores and a dark forehead, and a double supercilium.

When this last mark registered, I knew this was an outstanding bird. But, though I had

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my copy of *Shorebirds* by Peter Hayman, John Marchant, and Tony Prater in my backpack, I forced myself to watch the bird as long as I could and to try to inch closer for better looks. When I first spotted the bird, I was about 30 meters from it. By slowly walking obliquely towards the bird and closer to the reed edge, I was able to get within about 10 to 15 meters without unduly alarming it. At least once during this stalking, the bird, along with all of the other shorebirds in the cove, flushed, wheeled, circled over the water, and settled back down in the same spot and began feeding again. Peregrine Falcons had been harassing the shorebirds for several days here on the East Pond, and all morning the flocks had been restless.

Eventually the bird flushed but did not return, instead landing further west along the north edge of the pond, at the mouth of the outlet stream. The view was now more distant, but the bird was still clearly dark, contrasty, and stripe-headed. At this point, I jotted down some quick field notes (Benner 1998).

While I was writing these notes, however, the bird flushed again, along with the other nearby peep. I had been able to follow the bird in the air the previous times that it flushed, due mostly to its overall darkness. I clearly saw both a definite wing stripe and a white-edged dark rump and tail as it flew. This last time it flushed, however, I lost it in flight (it did not tend to stay with a flock, but was a bit "off" from the wheelings of any nearby flock). Some of the shorebirds landed again in the area, others continued down the pond. When all had landed, I was unable to locate the bird again. The entire period for which I had been able to observe the bird amounted to less than five minutes.

At this point, I looked in my *Shorebirds* book and quickly identified the bird as a Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*) in either molting adult alternate plumage or in juvenal plumage. The bird apparently did not have any of the rufous edges pictured in the juvenal-plumaged birds, and it also had a darker head and face than pictured for a juvenile. But, it did not have the darkly streaked breast of an adult in full breeding plumage, so I tentatively identified the bird as a molting adult. (This turned out to be an error, I later discovered, and my repeating of this tentative identification of age to the hotlines may have helped to add to the initial confusion regarding the bird's age.)

During this entire period, I was alone. Several times I scanned in all directions along the shorelines, hoping to see another birder, but

there were no other people visible. I spoke to a birder I saw after the bird flushed, David Klauber, who said that he had seen me leave the other side, and that while I was circling around a Peregrine had come along and flushed everything. He promised to keep a close eye out for the Broad-billed and continued southward.

I exited the northwest corner again and walked very quickly south down the highway so that I could report the bird to the people at the refuge headquarters, as well as to the rare-bird-alert people, which I did. Several other birders, including Jamaica Bay regulars Al Ott and Mildred Penzer, and I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening along the north edges of the East Pond hoping to relocate the bird. We were unsuccessful. Numbers of shorebirds overall were much lower than they had been earlier in the day, which is the usual pattern at the East Pond on a falling tide.

The following day, Friday, August 28, 1998, I arrived at the Refuge in the morning, intending to spend the entire day, if necessary, trying to relocate the Broad-billed. High tide was about 45 minutes later than the day before, perhaps 1:45 PM. Hurricane Bonnie was also passing, just to our south, and the outlying cloud bands intermittently traveled from south to north over the refuge, though it did not rain.

I scoured the East Pond during the morning and early afternoon but did not find the Broad-billed Sandpiper. When I arrived back at the Refuge headquarters about 4 PM, I read in the log book that a birder, Don Davis, had reported sighting the Broad-billed from the south end of the West Pond, at about 2 PM. I quickly decided to walk along the West Pond to try to see the bird as well. I made my way to the southern end of the Pond and began scanning the shorebirds. I was joined shortly by two refuge staff members, Christopher Olijnyk and Lenny Lampel, but we were unable to locate the bird.

The Refuge staff members drove on west and north around the West Pond, but I remained in the vicinity of the southwest corner, scanning the shorebirds mingled in with the multitude of loafing ducks. I knew from past experience (since this is often a good spot to see Baird's Sandpipers at this time of year) that it is very possible to overlook birds here. In the past I have suddenly discovered new birds in flocks I was sure I had looked over several times already. And suddenly, there it was—the Broad-billed Sandpiper, feeding in the foam along the very edge of the waterline. At first it was working its way eastward along the edge, but a few anxious moments of observation seemed to indicate that it might remain in the area feeding for a while. It was almost exactly 4:30 PM.

I quickly turned and ran toward the headquarters, hoping to catch someone before they all left for the day. I soon met another birder with a telescope, Paul Castle from Wiltshire, UK. He listened to my rapid tale and agreed to look for the bird in the corner of the pond. I continued onward, running and walking and running again, and found one of the Refuge staff still at the headquarters building. He called the others on the radio, and I ran back toward the bird, where they would meet me. When Christopher and Lenny arrived, I, and they, and Paul, and Kevin Jones from Mineola, NY, and a couple of other birders whose names I never learned, found and watched the Broad-billed Sandpiper at fairly close range, in good to excellent light, for the next 45 minutes. To add to our good fortune, Paul had seen Broad-billed Sandpiper twice before in the UK and immediately agreed with the identification. At this point, I tentatively revised my estimation of the bird's age, thinking now that it was more likely a juvenile. The bird eventually flew off with a group of shorebirds southwestward over the Terrapin Trail, but as events over the next few days proved, it did not go far.

The sandpiper was relocated by others the next morning,



Juvenile Broad-billed Sandpiper with a juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper at right, and a larger sandpiper (perhaps White-rumped) facing away at left, Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Queens, New York, late August 1998. Note the large size relative to Semipalmated Sandpiper, proportionally short legs, long bill with a sharp downward break at the tip, and hunched posture. Photograph/Arthur Morris/Birds as Art

Saturday, August 29th, on the west side of the West Pond, near where it had been last seen the evening before. Fortunately, this location is much more accessible than the East-Pond area where it was originally seen. The word quickly spread, and dozens of birders were able to see the bird that day. It remained here along the West Pond for the next seven days. It seemed to be remarkably faithful to one 20-meter stretch of shoreline, and tended to return to this spot even when repeatedly flushed by hunting falcons. The last day or two of its residence it began to wander more, occasionally moving to the southeast corner of the pond, to the spot where it had been first seen on August 28. It finally departed with a coldfront the afternoon of September 4th, but not before it was closely observed by hundreds of birders.

DESCRIPTION

Size and Shape. The bird was decidedly smaller than a White-rumped Sandpiper (*Calidris fuscicollis*) and closer to the size of a stint. More specifically, it was very slightly larger than Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers when feeding adjacent to them, but approximately the same size as the largest nearby Western Sandpipers (*C. mauri*).

These observations suggested that the bird was relatively small for a Broad-billed Sandpiper, which has been described as "almost overlapping with the smallest Dunlins (*Calidris alpina*)" (Hayman et al. 1986). Total length measurements for Broad-billed Sandpiper are reported as 16–18 cm., while Dunlin are 16–22 cm., White-rumped Sandpiper 15–18 cm., and Western Sandpiper 14–17 cm. (del Hoyo et al. 1996; Hayman et al. 1986). This Broad-billed also seemed to be relatively short-legged, as would be expected. Tarsus measurements for Broad-billed Sandpiper are reported as 2.0–2.4 cm., as compared to 2.2–3.0 cm. for Dunlin, 2.3–2.6 cm. for White-rumped Sandpiper, and 2.0–2.5 cm. for Western Sandpiper (Hayman et al. 1986). The small size indicated that this bird was most likely a male.

The bird seemed to have a fairly short neck and to have wings slightly longer than or equivalent to the tail. It sometimes presented a fairly "dumpy" posture, with a slightly hunched, almost snipe-like appearance. This posture and attitude, coupled with its short legs, may have contributed to its tendency to appear small when compared with other similar-sized shorebirds.

Head. The bird's head, overall, looked dark with white streaking, although the chin and face below the eye were light. The forehead was almost blackish. It had a black line through the eye, a bold off-white supercilium, then blackish above that, then a buffy thinner supercilium above that, then a very dark brown crown. The double supercilium was easily visible. When the bird was seen head-on, the head looked almost like that of a little snipe, however lacking the central crown stripe. Overall, the bird's head appeared fairly dark, which made the eyebrow stripes stand out. The bird almost looked as if it had black lores, for example, unlike the pale forehead and face of, say, a Semipalmated Sandpiper. All of this dark feathering as well as the brighter supercilia faded and blended behind the crown into an evenly dark gray, finely streaked, hind neck. This individual had some bilateral variation in its supercilium pattern. On the right side, the classic split supercilium was clearly visible. On the left, however, the upper supercilium appeared smudged and indistinct. When closely examined, this resolved into an additional splitting of this smaller, upper supercilium into two at its posterior end, which caused its indistinct appearance.

Upperparts. This sandpiper was dark overall. Each dorsal feather seemed to be almost black, but the feather edges on the mantle, scapulars, and tertials were very pale buff, almost white, giving the bird the look of a streaked black-and-white-backed bird. It especial-

ly seemed to have a whitish line along the scapulars on each side when seen from the back. When I first saw it on August 27, it reminded me immediately of Pechora Pipit (*Anthus gustavi*), which I had just seen in May 1998. In flight, it revealed a dark rump with white sides, as well as white sides on the tail. Rufous edges were not evident on any feathers at first glance. Later, prolonged observations by myself, and especially by others with better optics, revealed some rufous edging on the tertials, as well as the slightest tinge of rufous on some mantle, scapular, and covert feather edges. Most of the wing coverts were blackish with prominent pale buff fringes.

Underparts. The breast was the only warmly-colored, buffy area on the bird. The breast was indistinctly or lightly streaked with blackish, overlaying a pale brownish-buff wash that was most noticeable just at the bend of the wing. This pale buffy color extended in a few spotty, pale streaks along the flanks just under the folded wing. The breast markings ended ventrally in an abrupt semicircle across the lower breast. Below that the lower breast and belly were pure white, except for those few faint buffy spots or streaks along the upper flanks.

Bare Parts. The bill was very long, longer in proportion to the size of the bird's head than any other stint I have ever seen. The bill seemed to be all black when I first saw it. Later observations proved that the upper mandible was black, but the lower mandible was black only for the outer two-thirds, while the basal third was brownish. The bill shape was somewhat deep at base but fairly thin overall, and straight, with a pronounced downward droop at the tip. Seen from above the bill was very broad-based with an abrupt narrowing towards the middle. The bird's legs were almost the same brownish color as the base of the lower mandible, but with a greenish-gray cast.

Behavior. The bird tended to feed most often right at the water's edge. Never did I personally observe it feed in water deep enough to touch its belly feathers. Also, it never ventured up on to the dry beach while I observed it. It did not seem to associate with any other particular shorebird species or individuals, except in passing. In fact, it more often tended to have aggressive encounters with other similar-sized shorebirds. It did seem to be slightly more aggressive in defense of its feeding territory, particularly a small wet mudflat area on the water's edge, perhaps 3 or 4 meters in length, located along its preferred stretch of shoreline.

The bird did not vocalize during any period when I observed it. The bird was not banded, and the plumage appeared to be fresh, unworn, and in excellent condition.

The fresh, unworn plumage, the very sparsely streaked, buffy breast, lack of dark streaks along the flanks, the presence of very narrow rufous fringing on the upperparts, and the broad buff edging on the coverts led me to conclude this bird was a juvenile.

DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS

Two subspecies of *Limicola falcinellus* are recognized. The western race, *L. f. falcinellus*, breeds in Scandinavia and northwestern Russia and winters in eastern and southern Africa through Arabia to western and southern India and Sri Lanka. The eastern race, *L. f. sibirica*, breeds in eastern Russia and winters from northeast India and Bangladesh through Southeast Asia and Indonesia to Australia. (del Hoyo et al. 1996; Cramp and Simmons 1983).

The Broad-billed Sandpiper is a bird of wet boreal bogs during the breeding season. It occurs locally in small numbers in widely scattered, relatively inaccessible breeding sites. It often nests on the top of a tussock (Hayman et al. 1986) in the wettest boggy areas of lowland or montane tundra, though often adjacent to swampy meadows within birch or coniferous forest (Cramp and Simmons

PRIOR NORTH AMERICAN REPORTS OF BROAD-BILLED SANDPIPER

| Location | Date | Source |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| Adak I., Alaska | 19 August 1977 | Day et al. <i>Auk</i> 96:189-190 |
| Shemya I., Alaska | 30 August to 6 September 1978 (min. 5) | Gibson <i>Condor</i> 83:65-77 |
| Shemya I., Alaska | 3 September 1986 | <i>American Birds</i> 41:131 |
| Buldir I., Alaska | 28 August 1989 | <i>American Birds</i> 44:142 |
| Hartlen Pt., Nova Scotia | 9 September 1990 | McLaren & Maybank <i>American Birds</i> 46:48-50 |

1983; Richards 1988). No more than a few pairs nest in any one bog (Richards 1988).

The Broad-billed Sandpiper is a scarce bird, even in those areas where it normally breeds, winters, or occurs during migration. Worldwide, the bird is not endangered, with a total population estimated at 13,000 to 22,000 pairs for the nominate *falcinellus* and ca. 16,000 pairs for *sibirica* (del Hoyo et al. 1996). However, only in a few wintering or passage areas can it be considered common. During the non-breeding season, one site in Australia holds approximately 6,000 individuals and another over 1,500; four sites on the Arabian peninsula hold 1,000 or more birds; and seven sites in Southeast Asia hold 100 or more individuals. It is also reportedly "common" on the coast of Pakistan in the winter (del Hoyo et al. 1996). In addition, there are a few important staging areas during migration, notably an area hosting 6,000 or more individuals in the southern Ukraine (del Hoyo et al. 1996). Yet in many areas, and especially for many Western European birders *L. falcinellus* remains elusive.

ORIGIN

One of the most important unanswered questions about this Broad-billed Sandpiper individual is its origin. Any answers to this question, however, are mostly speculation.

Captive origin is extremely unlikely, as I am not aware of any zoos or private collections that keep Broad-billed Sandpipers, and the possibility of any other human-assisted transport seems remote. The question, then, is which of the two races is most likely to show up on the eastern coast of North America. While some non-breeders remain in the wintering range all year (Hayman et al. 1986), this bird was judged to have been a juvenile. Therefore, it must have come from one of the breeding locales.

Both *falcinellus* and *sibirica* are known to breed only in areas distant from the eastern United States—Scandinavia for *falcinellus*, and central and eastern Siberia for *sibirica*. The primary European migration stops and wintering grounds of the Broad-billed Sandpiper, presumably *falcinellus*, are mainly east of a line drawn from the Baltic countries south through Italy (Cramp and Simmons 1988).

There are five records for North America, including four records of at least eight individuals from the western Aleutians and one from Nova Scotia (see table). All Alaskan birds have been juveniles, and these occurred from 19 August to 6 September (ABA 1990). Fall Aleutian records suggest that *sibirica* occasionally strays eastward. The one other Western Atlantic coastal record occurred in Nova Scotia on 9 September 1990 and was of a bird in basic plumage, thus presumably adult, not juvenile (McLaren and Maybank 1992).

Sibirica is more likely based on prevailing wind direction. Scandinavian birds would have to travel against the prevailing westerly winds, whereas those same winds could help to push a Siberian bird across Alaska and Canada to the northeastern United States. Some have suggested, when discussing other species, that this makes vagrancy from Europe westward to North America fairly rare. While this may make a *sibirica* individual more likely, it does not prove this individual's origin.

Pondering plumage characters does not give clear answers either. *Sibirica* is supposed to have a "less well defined" supercilium (Hayman et al. 1988), but this is difficult to assess on a lone bird. It is possible that *sibirica* averages brighter in spring (Hayman et al. 1988) and perhaps in fall plumages than does *falcinellus*. Given that this individual showed very little rufous at all, *falcinellus* might thus seem more likely. P. Leader (pers. comm. "Re: Ageing of Broad-billed Sandpiper @ Jamaica Bay NWR [sic]." BIRDWG01 Internet discussion group), however, stated that both spring adults and autumn juveniles of *sibirica* in Hong Kong tend to fall into one of two categories, either rufous (the well-described, typical form) or gray (i.e. not rufous), although N. Lethaby (pers. comm. "Re: Broad-billed Sandpiper in Jamaica Bay age and molt?" BIRDWG01 Internet discussion group) noted that *sibirica* juveniles in September in Korea were extremely bright. This individual at Jamaica Bay seemed to fall into the gray category. It is not clear whether *falcinellus* juveniles also follow this dimorphic pattern; if they do, this character is not helpful in separating the two.

Pending acceptance by the New York State Avian Records Committee, this record constitutes the first occurrence of Broad-billed Sandpiper in the Lower 48, and the sixth record for North America

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