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TWO LITTLE-KNOWN JUVENILE SHOREBIRDS

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Our knowledge of shorebird identification, age determination, and status along the Pacific coast and elsewhere in North America was only in the fledgling stage in 1977 when Prater, Marchant, and Vuorinen published their groundbreaking *Guide to the Identification and Ageing of Holarctic Waders*. Additional major reference works (e.g., Hayman, Marchant, and Prater 1986, Chandler 1989, Paulson 1993, and Rosair and Cottridge 1995) and a myriad of shorter articles about shorebird status and identification have been published over the ensuing 23 years. Nevertheless, several species remain difficult field-identification challenges. I discuss here two plumages with which few birders in western North America have field experience.

The lower photo on this issue's back cover depicts a mid-sized shorebird with grayish upperparts, grayish and whitish underparts, and a medium-long straight bill. Most birders will recognize it as a tattler. The familiar Wandering Tattler (*Heteroscelus incanus*) breeds in Alaska, extreme eastern Siberia, Yukon, and northern British Columbia; it winters along rocky shores from central California (very rarely farther north) south to South America and on islands throughout much of the Pacific Ocean west to eastern Australia. It is a very rare to casual migrant through the interior West, accidental farther east. The Gray-tailed Tattler (*H. brevipipes*) breeds in northern Siberia and winters throughout much of the western Pacific, with the Wandering on many islands, as well as along the mainland coast from eastern Asia to Australia. In North America it is a rare but regular migrant in both spring and fall through western Alaska, where southbound birds include both adults and juveniles. Records to date suggest the species may be more numerous in late summer and early fall (late July to mid-September, with a few to early October) than in spring (mid-May to mid-June). There are also several records for farther east in Alaska (e.g., at Barrow, Seward, and Middleton Island). In the lower 48 states a juvenile was at Ocean Shores, Washington, on 13 October 1975, and an adult was at the Lancaster sewage ponds in the southern California interior on 23 July 1981 (Paulson 1986, 1993). Three sight reports of Gray-tailed Tattlers from coastal northern California during May 1998 coincided with an unprecedented "invasion" of Bristle-thighed Curlews (*Numenius tahitiensis*) (Roberson et al. 1998), although to date none of the 1998 reports has been accepted by the California Bird Records Committee.

Differentiating the two tattler species can be difficult. As in most shorebird identification challenges, ascertaining the bird's age is one of the first requirements. This bird is a juvenile, on the basis of the distinct pale edges, notches, and spots visible on the mantle, scapulars, wing coverts, and tertials. In fact, the extent of these notches and spots is an important distinction between the two species. In the juvenile Wandering, these pale markings vary from narrow pale fringing to more extensive fringing, sometimes with limited pale spotting along the edges of some of these same feathers. In the juvenile Gray-tailed, these pale notches and spots are more extensive still, especially on the coverts and tertials, as this bird shows. Another character useful in separating the two species is the color of the flanks. In the Wandering the sides and flanks are strongly washed with gray, whereas in the Gray-tailed they are more whitish (Paulson 1986) and thus contrast more with the gray wing. Among approximately eight calling (see below) juvenile Gray-taileds at Gambell, Saint Lawrence Island, Alaska, during early September 1998 and 1999, I found that most had at least a faint gray wash to the sides and upper flanks, as this individual shows, and were not as clean white as Paulson (1986, 1993) implies.

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Other distinctions between the two species in juvenal plumage include the tendency for the Gray-tailed to be slightly paler gray above, often with a slight brownish tinge (which this bird showed under brighter lighting), and to show a broader, more extensive whitish supercilium, which often extends farther forward to meet across the forehead, as well as farther back behind the eye (Paulson 1986, 1993, Hirst and Proctor 1995, Rosair and King 2000). This last character varies from individual to individual, however. Additional characters that may be variable or difficult to use in the field include the Gray-tailed's contrastingly paler uppertail coverts and tail feathers, slightly paler gray breast, slightly shorter primary projection, shorter nasal groove (a valuable in-hand character) (Paulson 1986, 1993, Hirst and Proctor 1995, Rosair and King 2000), and use of a wider range of habitats, including mudflats and sandy beaches. But Wandering Tattlers, especially migrants, occasionally use these same habitats.

Differences in flight calls are the safest means of separating the two species. The Wandering Tattler gives a series of strident whistled notes of variable number (from two to almost ten) but all on the same pitch. The Gray-tailed gives a two-noted whistled upslurred ploverlike *tu-wheet*. Rarely it adds a weak introductory note, yielding three syllables. The bird in this photograph repeatedly gave calls typical of the Gray-tailed. I photographed it at Gambell, Alaska, on 6 September 1999.

The upper photo also shows a juvenile, as evidenced by the extensive pale and rusty fringes to the mantle feathers, scapulars, coverts, and tertials. Though no easy size comparisons are possible, it still appears to be a fairly small shorebird. The darkness in front of the eye and on the forehead is the result of matted feathers. One identification that might be suggested is a juvenile Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*). But this bird has an obvious blackish patch on the lower breast and upper belly, a pattern unlike the Pectoral's on the wing coverts and tertials, an entirely dark bill that appears too long and slightly droopy, and black legs. The blackish patch and black legs also help to eliminate the rarely seen juvenal plumage of the Rock Sandpiper (*C. pilocnemis*). This bird is, in fact, a juvenile Dunlin (*C. alpina*). Given that the two subspecies of the Dunlin widespread in North America (*C. a. hudsonia* and *C. a. pacifica*) molt from juvenal plumage into largely basic plumage *before* they leave the arctic, few North American observers have seen this plumage in the field. Subspecies *pacifica* breeds in western Alaska and winters along the Pacific coast; subspecies *hudsonia* breeds farther east, in Canada, and winters in eastern North America. The third subspecies breeding in North America, *C. a. arctica*, nests in northern Alaska and winters in Asia. Unlike those of the other two forms, adults of this race may migrate south in alternate plumage. Identifying this slightly smaller subspecies along the North American Pacific Coast is likely possible only through in-hand bill measurements of birds of known sex (Paulson 1993). I am unsure whether or not juveniles of this race migrate before molting. The Dunlins of Scandinavia and Greenland, *alpina* and *arctica*, migrate earlier in the fall than the North American subspecies and, like most other species of shorebirds, molt after they migrate (Paulson 1993). The Dunlins arriving earliest along the Pacific coast south of Alaska typically appear in mid-September. First-year birds seen during September and October have already molted largely into first basic plumage, with only a few juvenal buff- or rusty-fringed scapulars and possibly a little of the dark belly patch remaining. I photographed the bird featured on the back cover at Gambell, Alaska, in late August 1999.

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