

Apparent hybrid White-rumped Sandpiper x Dunlin at Rock Point Provincial Park

James Pawlicki

ON 19 AUGUST 2008, BILL WATSON AND I travelled to Rock Point Provincial Park on the north Lake Erie shore near Dunnville, in Haldimand County, to follow-up on a mystery *Calidris* sandpiper first identified as such on 17 August by David Gordon, Holly Sweeny and Bill Watson. We found the sandpiper on the rocky shore among several Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*), Semipalmated (*C. pusilla*), Least (*C. minutilla*) and White-rumped Sandpipers (*C. fuscicollis*). Structurally, its plump body shape, short-neck, and fairly long, drooped bill suggested a Dunlin (*C. alpina*). Our tentative identification was a juvenile Dunlin, due to the dark-centred, pale-edged upperpart feathers, and weak breast band of streaks continuing down the flanks. Unusual was the lack of black streaking

on the belly typical of juvenile Dunlins (Sibley 2000, O'Brien *et al.* 2006). As the bird flew around, we assessed its size as slightly larger than the White-rumped Sandpipers, while also noting its dark-centred uppertail coverts. Not considering a hybrid at the time, we identified the bird as a Dunlin in near full juvenal plumage, speculating that it had molted its black belly feathers into first basic plumage.

Since juvenile Dunlins are very rare in mid August this far south of their Arctic breeding grounds, photos were placed on the internet and a request for comments was made to the internet's ID-Frontiers bird identification discussion group. The most detailed responses came from Kevin McLaughlin of Hamilton, Ontario and Kevin Karlson of Cape May, New Jersey.

Figure 1. Apparent definitive alternate/first alternate White-rumped Sandpiper x Dunlin. Visible are the heavily-worn brownish wing coverts and tertials contrasting with the black-centred, rufous-edged mantle and scapular feathers. Rock Point Provincial Park, Haldimand County, 23 August 2008. Photo: Tom Thomas



Each noted that the sandpiper was clearly not a juvenile, but rather an adult, or in its second-calendar year due to the presence of worn brownish wing coverts retained from a previous basic molt, making it at least a year old. It was not possible to age the bird as being in either first alternate or definitive alternate plumage. At this point, I suspected that it was a hybrid because its features did not fit any known species of shorebird. The bird remained at Rock Point until at least 23 August, when it was last observed

and photographed (Figures 1 and 2) by Tom Thomas of Hamilton, Ontario. Summarized below is a description of the bird highlighting the features that suggest a hybrid between White-rumped Sandpiper and Dunlin.

Description

Size: The size was similar to that of a Dunlin, being just noticeably larger than the White-rumped Sandpipers, and slightly smaller and less chunky than the Sanderlings.



Figure 2. Apparent definitive alternate/first alternate White-rumped Sandpiper x Dunlin. Visible are the black legs, white wing stripe and dark centre to the rump and uppertail coverts. Rock Point Provincial Park, Haldimand County, 23 August 2008. Photo: Tom Thomas.

Body Structure: Overall the body structure was rather short-necked and full-chested, giving it a plump appearance that was very Dunlin-like. The rear end appeared attenuated due to the fairly long primary projection, more than is typical for adult Dunlins, suggesting the influence of a long-winged *Calidris* species such as White-rumped or Baird's Sandpiper (*C. bairdii*).

Bill: The bill was all black and fairly long with a slight droop at the tip. It appeared noticeably longer than any White-rumped Sandpiper present, and perhaps slightly shorter than typical for a Dunlin, although within the range of variation.

Legs and Toes: The legs were black and of typical length for a medium-sized *Calidris* sandpiper, being fairly short and not extending past the tail tip when in flight. The black legs should rule out possible influence from pale-legged *Calidris* species such as Pectoral (*C. melanotos*) and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (*C. acuminata*). The toes also appeared blackish and lacked semipalmations.

Plumage: The head was patterned with fine black streaks that were rusty-based on the auriculars and crown, setting off a prominent whitish supercilium that extended to the nape. The underparts were white, with a weak band of blackish and rather thick arrow-like markings across the breast, which continued as longer, pencil-thin, streaks down to the rear flanks. As previously stated, the individual feathers on the upperparts, includ-

ing the mantle and scapulars, contained blackish centres with fairly broadly-rufous edges. All of the wing coverts, tertials, and a few of the lower scapulars were brownish with slightly-paler and faded edges, indicating worn basic feathers retained from the previous fall. In flight, the bird showed an obvious dark centre to the uppertail and rump, although looking closely at Figure 2, it is apparent that the dark centre was thinner, and consisted of white-edged dark grey feathers, as compared to the more extensive solidly-black uppertail coverts found on Dunlins. Also apparent in flight, and illustrated in Figure 2, was a white wing stripe comparable to that of both Dunlin and White-rumped Sandpiper. The obvious lack of a black belly patch clearly eliminates all subspecies of Dunlin in alternate plumage, while the bird's larger size and lack of rufous bases to the upperpart feathers rule out Western Sandpiper (*C. mauri*). Additionally, Baird's Sandpiper influence can be eliminated based on the combination of a whitish-based breast and streaking on the flanks, while the lack of both rufous feathers on the underparts and rufous bases to the scapulars eliminates influence from Curlew Sandpiper (*C. ferruginea*). Figure 3 illustrates a molting first-cycle Dunlin (*C.a. hudsonia*) to compare with the hybrid

Conclusion

McLaughlin and Wormington (2000) documented the first Ontario occurrence of an apparent hybrid White-rumped Sandpiper x Dunlin present at Hillman



Figure 3. Dunlin undergoing its first prebasic molt for comparison. Note the brightly-edged juvenal wing coverts, tertials, and primaries, and newer first basic grey scapulars among the brighter juvenal scapulars. Also note the sparse black belly streaking, much of which has been molted into basic plumage by mid September, but would be present in mid August. Ontario Beach Park, Monroe County, New York, USA, 20 September 2008. *Photo: James Pawlicki.*

Marsh, *Essex*, from 18-20 May 1994. The Rock Point individual is the second documented provincial record of this presumed hybrid combination. Although hybrid shorebirds are very rare, several apparent hybrids have been documented over the last 10 years, especially between members of the genus *Calidris* (O'Brien *et al.* 2006). A small number of these hybrids have been between White-

rumped Sandpiper and Dunlin, with the majority occurring on the east coast of North America (Wilson 2005, Nikula 2007, Bonomo 2008). It is noteworthy that nearly all of these apparent hybrids show a combination of Dunlin-like size and structure, and have a plumage pattern nearly identical to White-rumped Sandpiper except for a dark centre to the uppertail coverts.

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James Pawlicki, 70 Gaslight Trail,
Williamsville, NY 14221 USA