

An Apparent Dunlin x White-rumped Sandpiper Hybrid

Kevin A. McLaughlin and Alan Wormington

Near Point Pelee National Park, Ontario, at about 1600h on 18 May 1994, McLaughlin approached a group of birders who were intently studying a small group of Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) at Hillman Marsh, Essex County. The birds were feeding along the shore of a water body just several feet from the main trail of Hillman Marsh Conservation Area.

The object of scrutiny was an unusual looking sandpiper that, at first glance, was thought to be a Dunlin in prealternate molt. However, several features were incorrect for that species. The bill, while resembling a Dunlin's in overall structure, was much too short for a typical individual of that species. The upperpart feathers were clearly alternate type, but were quite unlike those of a Dunlin as they lacked the extensive orange-red scapulars; instead, these feathers were slate-centred with rusty sides and grayish tips. The underparts were heavily streaked on the breast, but the characteristic large black belly patch of an alternate-plumaged Dunlin was completely missing. Puzzled, and being queried by several observers as to the bird's identity, McLaughlin then saw the bird raise its wings to reveal what appeared to be a white rump. He then stated that the bird

was a White-rumped Sandpiper (*C. fuscicollis*), feeling that he had been deceived by the bird's very close proximity of only 5 to 7 metres. However, this assessment as to the bird's identity still seemed somewhat wrong. The bill was clearly more Dunlin-like in structure, and in colour was entirely shiny black right to its base. The base of the bill lacked any trace of yellow-brown colour that would be characteristic of a White-rumped Sandpiper. Furthermore, the upperparts seemed wrong for a White-rumped, with too much rust edging to all of the scapulars and tertials. The structure of the bird was also odd for a White-rumped, as it had rather short wings, a plump body, and legs that seemed too long for that species.

While exclaiming "What the hell is this thing?" the truth was becoming clear to McLaughlin. Aware of the bird's intermediate characters, he stated in a somewhat incredulous tone of voice: "This is a hybrid Dunlin x White-rumped Sandpiper!"

The apparent hybrid sandpiper was observed regularly at the Hillman Marsh location from 18 to 20 May inclusive, although occasionally it could not be found during this period. When present, the



Figure 1: Apparent Dunlin x White-rumped Sandpiper at Hillman Marsh, Essex County, 18 May 1994. Photo by *Alan Wormington*.

bird was always with a flock of feeding Dunlins numbering about 10-15 birds. When feeding, the bird tenaciously defended a 5 metre strip of shoreline from all intruding Dunlins. The proximity of the bird to a main trail, and its exceptional tameness, allowed it to be easily viewed and photographed by many observers, including Wormington.

DESCRIPTION

Bill: The bill was black. It was slightly downcurved at its tip, recalling that of a Dunlin, but was perhaps only two-thirds the length of that species' bill. The culmen was fairly straight, while the lower mandible was a bit downcurved at

the tip. The bill was thick at the base, but tapered to a rather fine tip. It was about the length of the bird's head, or perhaps two to two and a half times the loral distance, compared to that of a Dunlin's bill of three to three and a half times the loral distance.

Head: The head had a steep forehead and a rounded crown. The crown was a mix of blackish and whitish streaks with a brown cast, particularly in the lateral crown area. There were fine black streaks on a whitish ground colour to the top of the bill. There was a broad, poorly defined white eyebrow with fine black streaks throughout. The

eyebrow broadened in the rear and ended at the nape. The lores were white-based, with a heavy concentration of fine black streaks and a bit of chestnut-brown near the bill base. The eyes were small and appeared black. Quite striking were oval-shaped chestnut-brown patches behind and below the eyes in the auriculars. The nape was a mix of black and brown streaks.

Upperparts: The mantle consisted of small black feather centres with broad grayish edges. There were two vague broad buff-white mantle lines. The forward-most upper scapulars were chestnut with small black centres. All of the remaining scapulars and tertials had solid black or dark brown centres with rusty sides to the feathers and abraded, broad, grayish-white tips. The exposed wing coverts appeared worn and were a dull brownish-gray. The visible primaries appeared faded brown. The primary tips seemed to fall a few millimetres short of the tip of the tail. A thin white wingstripe was evident when the bird extended its wings, perhaps a bit narrower than that of a Dunlin.

Tail: The rectrices appeared slaty in colour, with a thin white fringe on the outer edges and tip. The uppertail coverts were nearly all white (resembling a White-rumped Sandpiper) except for a few thin black streaks on the sides and a thin

(poorly defined) blackish bar extending up the centre.

Underparts: The underparts were white-based. The chin and throat had fine black streaking. The breast was heavily streaked/spotted black with a number of black chevrons extending down the side of the belly to about the level of the legs. Some fine black streaks extended down the flanks to the undertail coverts. There was no evidence of a black belly patch, the entire belly being white.

Legs and Feet: These were a shiny black, with the leg length perhaps a bit shorter than a Dunlin's.

Size: In direct comparison to adjacent Dunlins, the bird's overall body size was slightly smaller.

Vocalizations: Calls were heard on a number of occasions by Wormington. These consisted of a slightly raspy "chip" and an almost squeal-like "creep". These calls thus resembled one of the assumed parent types, or a combination thereof.

Age Determination: The faded brown colour on the visible folded primaries suggests that the bird was in first alternate plumage, with recently acquired alternate scapulars, mantle feathers and tertials contrasting with worn nine month old primaries.

DISCUSSION

At the time of observation, the authors were well aware of the extreme rarity of hybrid shorebirds. However, had it not been for the extreme tameness of this so-called "Hillman Sandpiper" and its presence along a heavily-used trail, it is quite probable that this bird would have gone undetected. Based on this assumption, one could argue that hybrid shorebirds in general might be going unnoticed on a regular basis. Only recently has it come to light that the possibility of encountering a hybrid shorebird is more likely than once believed.

There are, of course, several accounts describing the "Cox's Sandpiper" in Australia (for example, see Parker 1982), which has been shown by Christidis et al. (1996) on the basis of molecular analysis to be a hybrid between Curlew Sandpiper (*C. ferruginea*) and Pectoral Sandpiper (*C. melanotos*). There is a photographic record involving a supposed juvenile Cox's Sandpiper from Massachusetts (Kasprzyk et al. 1987, Vickery et al. 1987), which has since been disputed (Monroe 1991, American Ornithologists' Union 1998). "Cooper's Sandpiper," known from the unique type specimen taken in 1833 on Long Island, New York, is believed to be a Curlew Sandpiper x Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*C. acuminata*) hybrid (Cox 1989, 1990; Monroe 1991). Additional new or suspected hybrids to appear recently on the scene include a pre-

sumed Baird's (*C. bairdii*) x Buff-breasted (*Tryngites subruficollis*) Sandpiper in Massachusetts (Laux 1994), an apparent Dunlin x Purple (*C. maritima*) Sandpiper in Great Britain (Millington 1994), and a bird in Newfoundland thought to be a Pectoral x White-rumped Sandpiper (Bain and Shanahan 1999).

Armed now with the knowledge that hybrid shorebirds are produced occasionally, it seems likely that experienced shorebird observers will soon detect additional examples of suspected hybrids involving new combinations of adult types.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to Ron Pittaway and Ron Tozer, who provided references and made comments on a draft of the manuscript.

Literature Cited

- American Ornithologists' Union.** 1998. Check-list of North American Birds. 7th edition. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- Bain, M. and D. Shanahan.** 1999. Cross Canada round-up: August and September 1999. *Birders Journal* 8: 210-228.
- Christidis, L., K. Davies, M. Westerman, P.D. Christian, and R. Schodde.** 1996. Molecular assessment of the taxonomic status of Cox's Sandpiper. *Condor* 98: 459-463.
- Cox, J.B.** 1989. Notes on the affinities of Cooper's and Cox's Sandpiper. *South Australian Ornithologist* 30: 169-181.
- Cox, J.B.** 1990. The enigmatic Cooper's and Cox's Sandpipers. *Dutch Birding* 12: 53-64.
- Kasprzyk, M.J., R.A. Foster, and B.A. Harrington.** 1987. First Northern Hemisphere record and first juvenile plumage description of the Cox's

Sandpiper (*Calidris paramelanotos*).
American Birds 41: 1359-1364.

Laux, E.V. 1994. Mystery sandpiper. *Birding*
26: 66-68.

Millington, R. 1994. A mystery *Calidris* at
Cley. *Birding World* 7: 61-63.

Monroe, B.L. Jr. 1991. A reconsideration of
the Massachusetts "Cox's Sandpiper".
American Birds 44: 232-233.

Parker, S.A. 1982. A new sandpiper of the
genus *Calidris*. *South Australian Naturalist*
56: 63.

Vickery, P.D., D.W. Finch, and P.K. Donahue.
1987. Juvenile Cox's Sandpiper (*Calidris*
paramelanotos) in Massachusetts, a first
New World occurrence and a hitherto
undescribed plumage. *American Birds* 41:
1366-1369.



Figure 2: Presumed Dunlin x White-rumped Sandpiper at Hillman Marsh, Essex County, 19 May 1994. Photo by Alan Wormington.

Kevin A. McLaughlin, 30 Bingham Road, Hamilton, Ontario L8H 1N4

Alan Wormington, R.R. 1, Leamington, Ontario N8H 3V4