

# Photo Quiz

by  
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Answer to Photo Quiz in *Ontario Birds* 9 (2) : **Least Sandpiper**.

There is a stigma in birding circles that considers shorebirds too difficult to identify. Nowhere is this feeling stronger than with the "peeps" -- the smaller shorebirds. While they can be tricky, with practice it is possible to identify most individuals occurring in our region fairly easily. So, don't give up -- there is hope.

With most shorebirds, there are essentially three plumages to consider: adult breeding, adult non-breeding, and young of the year. And their identification becomes much easier if you determine the age first. Older feathers will be worn (ragged edges), faded and generally less bright, while new feathers, as seen on juveniles and spring adults, will be bright, often edged or tipped in a light colour, and give an overall "clean" look. Until recently, representation of peep plumages in field guides was often misleading or incorrect, and this has sustained the stigma.

Our bird shows very bright edgings on many of the scapulars and contour feathers, and the "clean" look of the feathers is evident. It also has fairly well-defined markings on the throat and breast; therefore, this Least is a breeding-plumaged adult. While a juvenile would have bright edgings, it would lack the crisp marking on the breast (they would be present but indistinct). Also, in very

fresh feathers, there is a distinctive warm wash across the breast of young birds (which is lacking here).

So now that we have a little moult background, let's tackle the identification. The small peeps that normally occur in Ontario are Least, Semipalmated, and Western. The first two are common migrants in spring and fall, while the Western is primarily a scarce fall migrant; the latter is very rare and frequently (?) misidentified in the spring. I have not dealt with stints in this quiz since they are very rare (only one record of one species to date in Ontario), and their identification can be very difficult. There are, however, good papers and books available on that subject if you want to tackle them.

The two larger peeps, White-rumped and Baird's, can be ruled out on a few features. Both have fairly long, straight bills and very long wings that extend far out on the body. Both these features give Baird's and White-rumped an obviously leaner, tapered look, while the Least in this photograph shows the characteristic "chubbiness" of the smaller peeps. Also, the legs on this bird are light, not black as in Baird's and White-rumped. These two are also quite a bit larger so if you saw this bird beside a larger peep, the size difference would be obvious.

Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers remain to be ruled out. Western is fairly easy to eliminate. A Western should show a noticeably

longer bill than our bird. Both Least and Western have downcurved bills, but the effect is usually slight on the Least. Western would also have extensive red/orange areas on the shoulder, and distinct, dense black markings (often arrowheads) going down the sides of the flanks to at least the legs. A Western often shows noticeably long legs, and they should be black.

Semipalmated can be ruled out on a few features. On the Least, light markings on the coverts form two light "bars" running from the shoulder over the back -- easily visible in this bird. Semipalmated does not show this bar effect. A Semipalmated would have a bill similar in length but it would be somewhat heavier and have a slight bulbous look at the tip. The Least's bill ends in a clear point, not a blob. Like Western, the Semipalmated would have black legs, not light. Young Semipalmateds can have

greenish legs, but adults should be dark. Also, light-legged birds feeding in dark muck can come out with dark legs, so caution is needed when judging leg colour; but most of the time it's straightforward.

Finally, a few impressions between Semis and Leasts would be in order. Adult Semipalmated (and most juveniles) appear grey-brown in colour, while Leasts always look red-brown. The overall effect is that Semis are a paler, greyer-looking bird, while Leasts are darker. For some reason this seems to me to be most obvious when they are flying by, and is especially true of worn adults. Worn Leasts have lost most of their bright feather tips, leaving only a dark brown back. When the plumage is heavily worn, a Least will stand out as strikingly darker than a Semi.

Now for something completely different. Our next quiz bird is a passerine. Good luck.

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