

FIRST AND SECOND RECORDS OF RUFIOUS-NECKED SANDPIPER  
(Calidris ruficollis) FOR MASSACHUSETTS

by Richard R. Veit, Boston, and Wayne R. Petersen, Whitman

On June 24, 1980, eight observers including the senior author identified a Rufous-necked Sandpiper at the north end of Monomoy Island, Massachusetts. The group had travelled to Monomoy with the intention of studying a Little Stint (Calidris minuta) which had been discovered there the previous week by Blair Nikula (Nikula, 1980). Because the Little Stint was still present, and at times associated closely with the Rufous-necked Sandpiper, we had the unusual and invaluable opportunity to study these two Palearctic species together.

The Rufous-necked Sandpiper bore a superficial resemblance to the approximately 15 Semipalmated Sandpipers (C. pusilla) that were also present in the area in that the bird possessed essentially gray and blackish upperparts and a short and stubby bill. Closer inspection revealed a uniformly pale cinnamon/rufous throat and upper breast, which was bordered below by a diffuse necklace of dark neutral gray speckles, broadest at the base and tapering to a fine line at the center. The throat was not nearly as brightly colored as that of an alternate-plumaged adult, and in certain lights it was practically invisible. The rest of the underparts were snowy white. The forecrown was conspicuously whitish, yielding a "white-nosed" effect, with two broad and sharply-defined whitish supercilia extending from the lores to the auriculars. The crown and back contained a mixture of fresh alternate plumage and abraded basic-plumage feathers, the former being neutral gray, while the latter had blackish centers and buff or grayish fringes. The upper wing coverts were a dark neutral gray and appeared to be heavily worn.

The legs were blackish, and the feet lacked any webbing. This effect, which was shared by the Little Stint, was distinctly different from the clubfooted impression conveyed by the partial webbing on the feet of the Semipalmated Sandpipers.

On several occasions, the Rufous-necked Sandpiper and the Little Stint stood close enough to one another that the structure of their bills could be critically compared within the same telescope field. There was a perceptible gradation in bill size from Semipalmated to Rufous-necked to Little. The Semipalmated Sandpipers had the longest, deepest bills, with the most prominently expanded tips when viewed from above, while the bill of the Little Stint was finely pointed, slender, and short. That of the Rufous-necked Sandpiper appeared to be intermediate with respect to length and depth at the base, with a drooping tip which expanded slightly. Thus, the bill of the Rufous-necked Sandpiper most closely resembled a diminutive version of that of the Semipalmated Sandpipers.

The Little Stint was an adult in alternate plumage. Although the age of the Rufous-necked Sandpiper could not be ascertained without studying differential primary wear in the hand, this individual appeared to have attained a partial alternate plumage, thus resembling several unambiguous one-year-old birds that the senior author examined in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

On July 17, 1980, an adult Rufous-necked Sandpiper in alternate plumage was identified at Third Cliff, Scituate, Massachusetts by Wayne Petersen where it was studied at leisure by numerous observers. The Scituate bird remained for one week, during which time Petersen was able to make detailed observations of its plumage and structural characters, a summary of which follows. The bird's throat and sides of face were rich cinnamon/rufous, while a suffusion of this same color was noticeable on the nape and crown. The crown was finely streaked with dark gray, and there was a prominent pale "V" extending from the base of the bill to the eyes, but not beyond. The chin, as well as the underparts below the upper breast, was whitish. Just below the cinnamon gorget, there was an obvious band of dusky spots which extended to the sides of the breast, but did not continue down the flanks. Close observation also revealed a distinct eye-ring, similar to that of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper (Tryngites subruficollis).

The bill and legs were black, and the feet were plainly seen to be unwebbed when the bird walked about on the rocks. In shape and size the bill was very similar to that of the Semipalmated Sandpipers; however, it was not as thick, especially at the base.

The dorsal coloration was a brownish gray with a slight trace of rusty margination to the feathers, but not nearly as colorful as in the Little Stint. The prominent large black centers to the tertials that are so characteristic of Little Stints were conspicuously absent. Several (1-2?) of the longest upper wing coverts were rusty, and there appeared to be two faint lines running down the edges of the mid-back, apparently due to off-white feather edgings of the mantle feathers. These marks, nonetheless, gave a very different effect from the similarly described "V" of the Little Stint.

Contrary to the information given in Wallace (1974), the wing tips on this bird extended beyond the tail, thus giving the bird a rather elongated appearance, suggesting the similarly structured White-rumped Sandpiper (C. fuscicollis). In flight the outer tail feathers appeared distinctly paler than those on Semipalmated Sandpipers; however, the wing stripe was comparable in length and prominence to that of that species. While feeding, the bird seemed to use its wings much more for balance than the adjacent Semipalmated Sandpipers as it fed amongst the rocks at the tide line.

The Monomoy bird remained until June 28, and the Scituate bird stayed until July 24; each was identifiably photographed in color. These observations constitute the first and second records for Massachusetts, and the fourth and fifth records for eastern North America. This species was previously recorded at Ashtabula, Ohio, on July 21, 1962 (Ahlquist, 1964), at Guilford, Connecticut, on August 25, 1975 (Finch, 1976), and at Biddeford Pool, Maine, on July 16-21, 1977 (Vickery, 1978). All except the Monomoy bird were adults in alternate plumage, which immediately raises the question of how many immatures have occurred and escaped detection.

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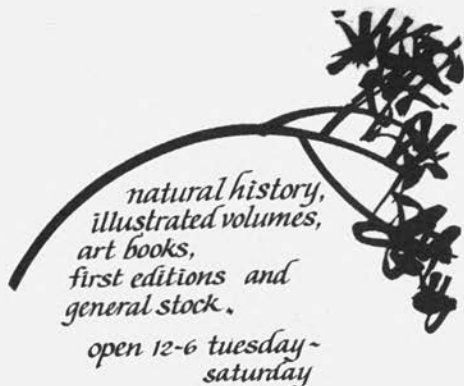
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RICHARD R. VEIT, currently a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, is working with Richard Forster on a new book, Birds of Massachusetts, which will be published by the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

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