

WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER BILL COLOR: A CAUTIONARY NOTE

The recent note in *Bird Observer* "A Little-known Field Mark for White-rumped Sandpiper" by Leif Robinson and Ted Raymond (14: 292, December 1986) requires, I believe, some clarification. I am concerned that the article may convey to some readers the impression that all White-rumps have a pale base to the lower mandible and that, therefore, any sandpiper of that size and shape lacking the pale area is a Baird's Sandpiper. Such is not the case.

Most **breeding-plumaged** White-rumps do, indeed, have a relatively conspicuous orange or pinkish area at the base of the mandible. The extent and intensity of this pale coloration does vary however and on some individuals or under some circumstances can be very difficult to see. Additionally, this pale area is often faded and occasionally **absent** in worn adults as well as in juveniles during the late summer and fall. Thus, contrary to the authors' supposition, the utility of this field mark decreases during the late summer and is of limited use during the period when Baird's Sandpiper is most likely to be seen in the northeast. At this season, some White-rumps do have an entirely black bill as depicted in the illustrations referred to by Robinson and Raymond.

Although I have limited experience with Baird's Sandpiper, my impression is that their bill is all black in any plumage. However, in *Shorebirds* (Hayman et al. 1986), Baird's bill is described as "blackish, sometimes tinged greenish at the base." In fact, some of the other small calidrids show (though rarely) a bit of paleness at the base of the bill also, though the color tends to be very dull yellowish-brown or grayish rather than the distinct orange or pink, characteristic of White-rumped Sandpiper.

While the pinkish base to the mandible, when present, may be useful in identifying White-rumped Sandpiper, it should not be considered to be 100 percent diagnostic. Bill structure (slightly decurved and blunt-tipped in White-rumped; straight and relatively thin-tipped in Baird's) and various plumage characteristics (described in *Shorebirds* and elsewhere) remain more useful and reliable criteria for separating these two similar species.

Blair Nikula

ADDITIONAL COMMENT on Field Mark for White-rumped Sandpiper

In the process of proofing this piece for the December 1986 issue, the following editorial comment made by Richard Forster was inadvertently omitted in the final copy: "Many shorebirds show pale lower mandibles. Although it may be unique among peeps, this field mark is shared by Pectoral Sandpiper and, if relied on solely, could lead to misidentification of that species."

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