

UNUSUAL UNIDENTIFIED SANDPIPER AT LITTLE CREEK  
WILDLIFE AREA, DELAWARE: SEPTEMBER 13, 1987

by Harvey Mudd

[**Editorial Note:** The following letter accompanied Harvey Mudd's notes.]

9507 Wadsworth Drive, Bethesda, MD 20817

February 27, 1988

*Today I received a copy of the December 1987 issue of Bird Observer, which includes the articles on the Cox's Sandpiper at Duxbury Beach, September 15-22, 1987....In view of your request that readers "send us their observations," I thought you might be interested in the enclosed field notes and comments about an "unusual unidentified sandpiper"...at Little Creek WLR [sic], about eight miles east of Dover, Delaware [September 13, 1987]...We contemplated we might be seeing a Cox's Sandpiper, but ...we never resolved the identification to our own satisfaction and had to leave the matter open.*

*The written material and the photographs in Bird Observer, now available to me for the first time, certainly retrospectively enhance my suspicion that we may, indeed, have seen a Cox's. However, for reasons given on page 3 of the original notes, I still do not feel justified in going further than raising this as a strong possibility. I would be most interested in seeing copies of the "detailed notes" taken by Mark Kasprzyk or other material which affords a better idea as to what was actually seen on the Duxbury bird...I hope [my] comments are useful to you and others in Massachusetts. If anyone there cares to discuss our sighting further, please feel free to contact me by mail or telephone [301-530-7322].*

On September 13, 1987, Paul DuMont and I led an Audubon Naturalist Society field trip to the Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge and to the Little Creek Wildlife Area in Delaware [Pettingill 1977: pages 56, 64]. From 4:30 to 5:15 P.M. we studied an unusual sandpiper from the embankment at the northwest corner of the Little Creek impoundment. We were looking east over a distance of 150-200 yards with the afternoon sun at our backs providing good light. I used eight-power binoculars and a zoom telescope (Swift, 15X-50X).

The bird was initially noted by DuMont, who studied it for several minutes through his telescope, and then called me over. His only comment was, "Look at this," which meant to me that he had a bird presenting some feature of interest and that he did not want to prejudice my view by revealing his thoughts. Because of the group situation, I did not have time to take detailed field notes, but I did register the specific points of interest, and these are now being written unchanged several weeks later [September 30, 1987]. Several other members of

the group were present and studied the bird. I believe they agreed on most or all of the features I noted, but I am writing the present material independently and without consulting any other person as to his recollections.

The bird was similar in size, overall shape, and stance to a Pectoral Sandpiper, perhaps at the larger end of the size range for this species. The bird differed from all the juvenile Pectoral Sandpipers present by having a gray rather than a brown coloration to the dorsal parts. Many of the feathers of the mantle possessed dark centers with broad lighter gray margins, giving a striking scaly appearance at the distance of viewing. There was no lighter V-mark on the mantle, such as could be seen on the Pectorals. The throat and upper breast were heavily streaked, similar to the Pectorals, but the lower margin was distinctly less discrete and the streaking blended more into the white lower breast. The bird was in a roosting position, and views of the bill were limited to several occasions, each lasting two to four seconds, when the bird momentarily looked around. The bill was notably longer and more decurved than those of nearby Pectorals, so much so that I wondered about some aberrant form of Stilt Sandpiper. There was an obscure light supercilium. Behind and below the eye, a reddish brown area was just visible. The crown was not noted to be rufous. The legs were similar in color to those of Pectorals, perhaps a little darker. Twice the bird flew some distance before alighting and immediately resuming its roosting position. In flight, the center of the rump and upper tail coverts were seen to be dark with white borders, at least as prominent as those of Pectorals. Wing stripes were not prominent. The roosting behavior of this bird was in striking contrast to all the other waders in the vicinity -- Pectorals, Stilt Sandpipers, dowitchers, yellowlegs, and various peep, all of them feeding actively.

When it became clear that no one in our group could confidently identify our bird to species, we began to refer to the wader identification guide by Hayman, Marchant, and Prater (1986). I considered and discarded Stilt Sandpiper (wrong overall configuration, rump should not have dark center, too much streaking on upper breast, mantle feathers wrong for basic plumage); Ruff (bill wrong shape, too gray on dorsal parts, too much streaking on upper breast, head too large relative to body); and Dunlin (wrong overall shape and size, too much streaking on upper breast, bill perhaps too short).

A reasonable possibility seemed to me to be an unusually late adult Pectoral Sandpiper fading into basic plumage. The overall size and configuration, the color of the mantle feathers, the heavy streaking on throat and upper breast, the leg color, the obscure supercilium, the barely visible chestnut color of the ear coverts (the last feature agreed very well with figures 199c and 201a in Hayman, Marchant, and Prater) -- all seemed consistent with this hypothesis. Against it were the length and more marked decurvature of the bill, the notably less sharp

demarcation of the breast streaking, and the statistical fact that most Pectorals "still in North America in Sept-Oct are juveniles" (Hayman et al., p. 375), attested to by other Pectorals seen that day.

While perusing plate 82 in Hayman (p. 201), I noted that the dorsal portions of our bird resembled in detail that shown in figure 201a (adult prebreeding Cox's), and the coloration of the head and upper breast was like that of figure 201b (adult nonbreeding Cox's). In particular, our bird seemed to resemble a Pectoral in ways that a Cox's does and to differ from a Pectoral with respect to bill length and decurvature and in lacking a sharp demarcation at the lower border of the breast streaking, just as described for Cox's.

A half-serious remark that "the only thing this bird really agrees with is Cox's Sandpiper" was, not unexpectedly, greeted with some laughter and remarks that no wonder it was resting so much; it was tired after its flight from Siberia or Australia. After some time, the bird remaining at an unsatisfactory distance in an unsatisfactory position, we passed on to other things. I am not sure that any of our group, including me, really took the possibility of Cox's very seriously.

The next evening at home I reviewed the evidence and came to the conclusion that the most likely possibility was that the unidentified sandpiper had indeed been a late adult Pectoral fading from alternate to basic plumage. About a week later I experienced severe misgivings about this conclusion when I learned that a Cox's Sandpiper had been discovered at Duxbury, Massachusetts, on September 20 [reason for error in date given below], just six days after our sighting at Little Creek. Surely one had to entertain the possibility that a small flight of Cox's had distributed itself up and down the eastern seaboard of United States and that we might have seen a member of this species.

The purpose of this note is not to claim that we did indeed, even in retrospect, identify a Cox's Sandpiper in Delaware. The disadvantages of distant views which prevented closer study of plumage features and colors of bill and legs, the frustratingly fleeting glimpses of the elusive bill, and of course, our unfamiliarity with Cox's contributed to our failure to entertain this possibility with sufficient seriousness. There is the added difficulty that Cox's may turn out not to be a valid species, but rather, as suggested in Hayman et al. (p. 377), a "stereotyped hybrid."

However, I do think there is at least a serious chance our bird was a Cox's and that it is therefore worthwhile to "raise the consciousness" of Delaware and other East Coast birders to the remote possibility that sooner or later a Cox's Sandpiper (whatever taxonomic status may eventually be assigned to that form) may occur here again. It is well to be prepared to observe the details that would confirm such a sighting.

[**Editor's note:** The above notes were slightly edited by *Bird Observer* for publication, and the author appended a footnote explaining that they were written about September 30, 1987, and have not been altered. It was not until Harvey Mudd received the December issue of *Bird Observer* on February 27, 1988, that he learned the Duxbury bird was first noted, not on September 20, but on September 15, 1987, only **two** days after the Little Creek bird described here.]

#### REFERENCES

- Pettingill, O. S., Jr. 1977. *A Guide to Bird Finding East of the Mississippi*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hayman, P., J. Marchant, T. Prater. 1986. *Shorebirds, An Identification Guide*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

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