

BUFF-BREASTED SANDPIPERS IN MIDDLEBORO

by Alan E. Strauss

Editor's Note. This article begins a series of occasional articles on some of the most sought after species in the New England region. Each article will include an account of one birder's encounter followed by a "Where to Look" guide for those who seek their own encounters with the featured species.

During the fall of 1989, southern New England was treated to an unusually large number of Buff-breasted Sandpipers (*Tryngites subruficollis*). On August 30, I was fortunate enough to be passing by Cumberland Farms in Middleboro, Massachusetts, where I spotted a Buff-breasted Sandpiper with some Black-bellied Plover and Killdeer. The Buffbreast was a life bird for me and I spent considerable time carefully studying it. Most obvious was the rusty cream color on the sides of its face and neck. This coloration was apparent even as the bird walked across the newly plowed field. Although the bird did have an erect stance, short bill, light eye ring, and yellowish legs, it did not show the extensive buff color illustrated in the Peterson field guide, *Eastern Birds*. In fact, the warm buff color stopped midway down the breast. I was confused.

I slowly approached the bird to obtain better views and to take some photographs. This bird had to be a Buffbreast, but perhaps it was an immature. As I approached, the bird flew in an erratic zigzag pattern similar to a snipe. I missed my photo opportunity.

I walked toward the general direction of where the bird flew but could not relocate it. "That's birding," I thought philosophically and headed back to the car. I drove farther down the road, scanned the open field, and stopped along the way to peek over the hedges in hopes of finding the bird again. Luck was with me and I spotted the bird again. As I watched the Buff-breasted Sandpiper, I noticed that it walked pigeonlike, bobbing its head. Later I learned that this was common behavior and is called "head-lagging" (Stout 1967).

Before long I detected four more Buff-breasted Sandpipers. They seemed to cluster in a loose group, walking at a quick steady pace, and occasionally freezing in an erect posture to escape detection when sensing possible danger (Pough 1951). When they began to walk again, they lifted their legs quite high at each step, their long toes conspicuously hanging downward.

Eventually, one of the birds raised its wings vertically, exposing a silvery white wing lining. As it flew off, it made a low-pitched trilled p-r-r-reet. The five birds flew low over the ground, in tight formation, and changed direction frequently. In flight, the wing tops appeared brown with the leading edge darkest. The birds' necks were pulled tightly toward their bodies, giving them a bulky appearance. After making a wide arc, the five Buff-breasted Sandpipers

landed again. They walked along the furrows in the field, feeding as they went. Buffbreasts eat insects, especially beetle larvae and adults, as well as spiders and some aquatic plant seeds (Terres 1980).

I later learned that immature Buff-breasted Sandpipers have less buff than adults. On the east coast, almost all Buff-breasted Sandpiper sightings in the fall are young birds. In August, September, and October 1989, Buff-breasted Sandpipers were found in Rhode Island (Daniel Finizia, personal communication), and several sightings of one to six birds were reported in Middleboro. They were also reported at Plum Island, Nantucket, Monomoy, and Newbury, Massachusetts.

Buff-breasted Sandpipers breed locally on the arctic mainland from Point Barrow, Alaska to Franklin Bay and northward on the arctic islands (Stout 1967). During fall migration a few reach the east coast as early as the beginning of August, but the main passage occurs in September. Buff-breasted Sandpipers are generally considered to be rare and, at one time, it was believed that these birds were on the way to extinction. Hunting pressure caused a sharp decline in populations during the late nineteenth century (Hayman et al. 1986). The wintering grounds for these "grasspipers" are in central Argentina. The major migration route goes through western interior Canada across the United States east of the Rocky Mountains.

On their nesting grounds, male Buff-breasted Sandpipers gather in groups on an open area called a lek and each male defends a small territory used exclusively to attract females. The males engage in elaborate courtship behaviors such as repeatedly raising and lowering their wings and flashing the white underwing linings. Females respond to this enticement, visit the lek, mate, and then leave to build the nest and raise the young (Mace 1986). Like many other arctic shorebirds, the nest consists of a thinly lined depression in the high, dry reindeer moss that constitutes the barren tundra. Eggs, usually four to a nest, are pale buff and blotched with brown (Pough 1951).

When I examined my photos, I realized that these birds blend in extremely well among the grass and soil clods. I would guess that they are equally well camouflaged on their breeding grounds.

References

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ALAN E. STRAUSS, an archaeological consultant in Providence, Rhode Island, previously published an article in *Bird Observer* (December 1990) on another encounter with a life bird, the Northern Saw-whet Owl.



Buff-breasted Sandpiper

Photos by Robert H. Stymeist