

Two useful points to consider when identifying shorebirds are the relative age of the bird and the plumage worn by the individual in question. Sandpipers characteristically have three distinct plumages: juvenal, winter (basic plumage), and breeding (alternate plumage). In most species, juvenal plumage is normally worn from several weeks to three months after losing the downy natal plumage, but the precise duration varies among species. The basic plumage eventually replaces the juvenal plumage and is typically worn until the spring of the year following the bird's hatching. At that time, basic plumage gives way to alternate plumage, which is usually held at least until midsummer in most species. From that point forward, shorebirds alternate between winter's basic plumage and summer's alternate plumage. However, the timing and method of plumage acquisition varies from species to species.

Juvenile sandpipers, such as the one in the photograph, often display wide, pale margins on the feathers of the back, scapulars, wing coverts, and tertials. The centers of these feathers are often clear and unmarked, and in certain species the feathers are richly colored. Overall, shorebirds in juvenal plumage have a crisp, sharp, and scaled appearance compared to the more complex and often worn appearance of adult feathering (typically seen on adult shorebirds migrating through Massachusetts in the fall). The view of the pictured bird allows the reader to clearly see the broad feather edging and dark feather centers. A careful look, however, also reveals that scattered among the dark, pale-edged juvenal feathers are a few uniformly pale gray feathers. These pale gray feathers represent incoming basic (winter) plumage which indicates that the bird is molting from juvenal to first winter plumage. The picture was undoubtedly taken in September or early October, when juvenile sandpipers are molting into basic plumage.



Photo by Roger Everett

Now that we know the bird is a molting juvenile, we should concentrate on the bird's bill shape, leg length and color, prominent eyebrow stripe (supercilium), and overall structure to identify the species. The obviously long, droopy tip to the bill seems suggestive of a Dunlin. However, the bird's prominent supercilium, long, pale legs (notice the lower portion of the bird's left leg which is not in a shadow), and dark capped appearance all argue against that species. Instead, all of these features clearly indicate that the bird is a Stilt Sandpiper (*Micropalama himantopus*). The long, pale legs also distinguish the mystery bird from a Curlew Sandpiper in a corresponding plumage.

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

We give avid birders something
few binocular and
telescope stores can.

Help.

We at the F.C. Meichsner Co. don't just talk to our customers about optical equipment. We listen to them, too.

And when you've been listening to people for 72 years, you can't help but learn a thing or two.

Like what birders want in a pair of binoculars—and what they don't.

So when you're about ready for a new spotting scope, binoculars, or repairs on equipment you already own, give us a call.

We accept most major credit cards, and we'd be happy to let you do most of the talking.



F.C. Meichsner Co.

182 Lincoln St., Boston, MA 02111

(617) 426-7092

