

While the photo caption invites the reader to ". . . identify this bird?", the photo actually depicts six individual birds; however, they are all the same species. A careful look at the six shorebirds at once reminds us why birds in this group can often seem particularly tedious to identify. They all look marginally different, yet remarkably similar. Variations in the stage of molt, season of the year, age or gender, and the bird's specific plumage at the time it was photographed are all elements to consider in identifying an unknown shorebird photograph. Several important features at once reveal themselves in the photograph. The well-defined breast streaking and the apparent necklace across the midbreast suggest that the birds are adults in alternate (breeding) plumage. Shorebirds, especially "peep," in basic (winter) or juvenal plumage tend to have few breast streaks, which if present are largely confined to the sides of the breast. In addition the back pattern of juveniles is often scaly in appearance, an effect created by the broad, pale feather edgings on the scapulars and wing coverts that generally characterize this age class of shorebirds. Shorebirds in basic plumage are typically pale and uniform gray on the back.

Because the shorebirds in the photo are neither strongly streaked below nor strongly scaled on the back, it is fair to assume that they are adults in alternate plumage. Their bills are uniformly straight and tapered, with no obvious thickening at the base or droop at the tip. The bills are also fine and slender, not blunt and stout. The fine and slender bills and the overall small and delicate build of the birds removes the chunkier and bigger-headed Sanderling as a possibility. This suggests that the birds are one of the several small sandpipers that are collectively called peep (e.g., Baird's, White-rumped, Western, Semipalmated, Least).

The birds are not Baird's or White-rumped sandpipers because these species show an obvious primary projection beyond the tail due to their particularly long primaries. The Least Sandpiper and the much larger and more robust Pectoral Sandpiper can be eliminated on the basis of their pale leg color. The mystery peep clearly have blackish or dark legs.

The choice lies between Western and Semipalmated sandpiper. The birds are Semipalmated Sandpipers (*Calidris pusilla*.) In alternate plumage the Western Sandpiper is much more heavily patterned than Semipalmated Sandpiper, especially on the breast and flanks, which are prominently marked with distinctive chevron-shaped markings. Furthermore, the bills of adult Western Sandpipers are noticeably thickened at the base and would appear longer and droopier at the tip than those of the Semipalmated Sandpiper.



Deborah Howard took this picture at Plymouth Beach in May. Courtesy of MAS.

AT A GLANCE

Photo by William B. Long. Courtesy of MAS.



Can you identify this bird?

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

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