

## ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

This is the second consecutive issue that Julie Zickefoose's art has graced *Bird Observer's* cover. Julie worked for six years as a field biologist for The Nature Conservancy before turning to full-time freelance art. She contributes regularly to magazines from *Ladybug* to *Bird Watcher's Digest*, for which she is a contributing editor. Book illustration credits include the Academy of Natural Sciences, for which she is contributing illustrations to the multivolume work *The Birds of North America*.

Julie has shown her work at Harvard University, the National Zoo, the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, and the XIX International Ornithological Congress. She also sings and plays in a band, The Swinging Orangutans, whose members include her husband, Bill Thompson III, editor of *Bird Watcher's Digest*. Julie can be reached at Indigo Hill Arts, Route 1, Box 270, Whipple, Ohio 45788.

M. Steele

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## AT A GLANCE *October 1996* \_\_\_\_\_ *Wayne R. Petersen*

Shorebirds are always interesting, and when they are seen at dusk (or underexposed in printing!), they can be especially difficult to identify. Because of the obvious darkness of October's mystery photo, identification needs to be based on a series of soft impressions rather than one or two obvious field marks.

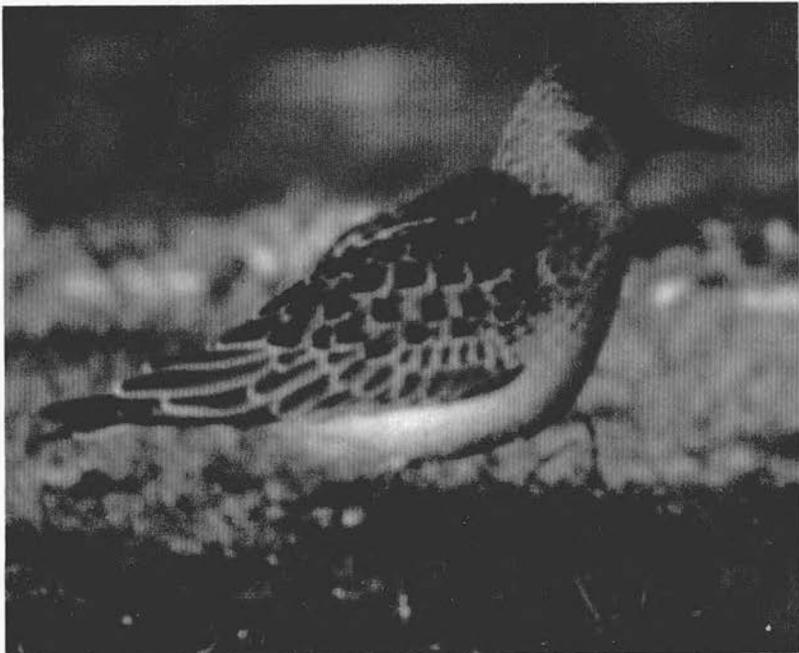
Many identification possibilities can be eliminated at once on the basis of structural characteristics. The slim, slightly tapered bill, rounded head, and long-winged appearance remove all of the plovers as options. Bill shape and the shortness of the bird's legs eliminate yellowlegs and their allies, curlews and godwits, and species such as Ruddy Turnstone, Dunlin, Stilt Sandpiper, and the dowitchers.

So what choices remain? Spotted Sandpiper, Upland Sandpiper, Red Knot, Sanderling, all the peep, and Pectoral, Purple, and Buff-breasted sandpipers should come to mind. Spotted Sandpiper is out because of its uniform back pattern, and Red Knot never displays the boldly fringed, dark-centered tertials of the mystery sandpiper. This tertial pattern, along with the long-winged aspect of the bird, also eliminate Sanderling. Both Pectoral and Purple sandpipers have notably longer, more decurved bills. In addition, a Purple Sandpiper would appear darker and more uniform on the back and chest. A Pectoral Sandpiper would display more prominent streaks on its breast and back. Upland Sandpiper can be ruled out by its longer neck, streaking on the sides and flanks, and long

tail that actually protrudes beyond the folded wing tips.

This leaves only the five peep (i.e., Baird's, White-rumped, Western, Semipalmated, and Least sandpipers) and the Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Returning to the mystery bird's long-winged appearance, it appears that the folded and crossed primary tips actually extend noticeably beyond the tail. On this character alone we can virtually eliminate all but Baird's and White-rumped sandpipers. Assuming that the mystery shorebird is a juvenile on the basis of the scaly look to its back, scapulars, and wing coverts, as well as the previously noted pale fringes on the tertials, we would expect a young White-rumped Sandpiper to possess a distinct supercilium, have pale back streaks, and show at least a few streaks on the sides and flanks.

Failing to see these telltale field marks of a juvenile White-rumped Sandpiper, we are further led to the possibility that the sandpiper could be a juvenile Baird's Sandpiper. But what about Buff-breasted Sandpiper? The two species are very similar in coloration and pattern, and even habitat preference and seasonality in Massachusetts. Although Buff-breasted Sandpipers typically assume a more upright posture than Baird's, possess an eye ring and a different breast pattern, and have mustard-yellow legs instead of black, these last features are impossible to discern accurately from the exposure of the photo. Although the absence of side streaks and the length of the folded wings point to Baird's, Buff-breasted Sandpiper cannot be conclusively eliminated from the view and exposure in this photograph. Consequently, the identity of this mystery photograph is most appropriately left as indeterminate.



## AT A GLANCE

Photo by Emily Goode Courtesy of MAS



Can you identify this bird?

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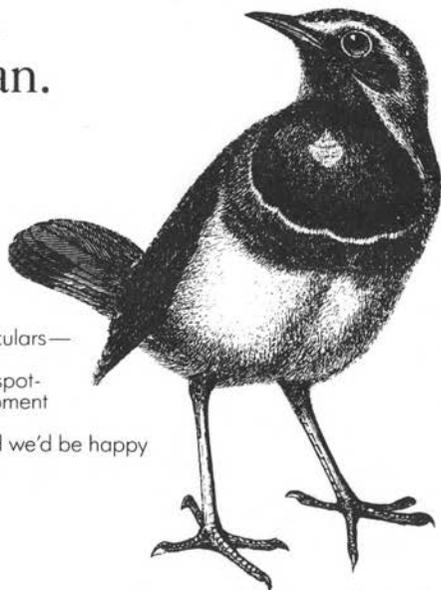
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