

ABOUT THE COVER: BAIRD'S SANDPIPER

For many New England birders, the highlight of the fall migration is the sighting of a Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*) at the impoundments and pools of Plum Island or Monomoy. This species also presents a challenging identification problem as well as a thrill for fall birders. Baird's Sandpipers are buffy-brown above with a streaked buffy breast, black legs and nearly straight, rather finely tipped black bill. Young birds (and most Baird's Sandpipers seen in the east are juveniles) have fairly uniform pale edges to their back feathers, giving them a scaly appearance. They have very long wings that protrude *beyond* the end of the tail when the bird is standing and give the bird a long, sleek appearance. They have relatively short legs. An intermediate sized "peep," larger than a Semipalmated or Least Sandpiper but smaller than a Dunlin, they are often seen foraging by themselves, making size comparisons problematic. Dark legs help separate them from Least and Pectoral sandpipers, and their dark rump separates them from White-rumped Sandpipers. The sexes are similar in appearance, but females average slightly larger. The species is monotypic with no subspecies recognized.

Baird's Sandpipers are high-arctic breeders and long-distance migrants. They breed from northeastern Siberia across arctic Alaska and Canada to Baffin Island and northwestern Greenland. They winter in the high Andes from Ecuador through Bolivia and in Argentina through Tierra del Fuego, largely in wetlands and grasslands.

Their spring migration, which may cover 9,000 miles, takes them through the interior of the United States, with few records from the east or west coasts. In the fall they stage in the prairies of the northern United States and southern Canada, then fly nonstop to northern South America, and from there continue on to their wintering grounds in southern South America. Adult Baird's Sandpipers migrate early — late July to mid-August — while juveniles follow but are more widespread, showing up on both coasts in small numbers. In Massachusetts adults are rare, and juveniles uncommon fall migrants, with a dozen or so reported annually. They are not gregarious and are often found foraging on beach wrack, or freshwater pools, meadows, and sewage beds.

Baird's Sandpipers breed largely in drier sections of tundra, including inland hills and mountains, but often locate their nests near wet tundra. The males perform hovering and circling display flights up to 60 feet above the ground. Their calls have been described as "frog-like," *kreep*, *preet*, or *cree*. Their flight is sometimes exaggerated — bouncing with wings held high. During the display season males sometimes form loose "lek-like" aggregations.

Their nest is a scrape or depression lined with lichen, grass, or leaves. The usual clutch is four brown-spotted buffy eggs. Incubation lasts for about three weeks, and both parents incubate and brood. The young are precocial and leave

their nest within a day. They are accompanied by the parent birds — especially the male — and feed themselves. They fledge in two to three weeks.

Baird's Sandpipers are largely insectivorous, running or walking quickly across mud and meadow, and sometimes through shallow water, gleaning grasshoppers, beetles, spiders, flies, and crane fly larvae. They rarely probe for food.

These lovely sandpipers were common prior to 1900 and probably suffered population declines along with other shorebird species due to heavy hunting by market and sport gunners. They are widespread and distant from man on the breeding grounds for the most part, but their wintering grounds include areas in which pesticide use is heavy enough to pose threats. They must endure among the longest of migrations, and habitat alteration is always a threat on their prairie and Latin American migration staging areas. Hopefully, they will continue to promote adrenaline surges in birdwatchers each fall as juvenile Baird's Sandpipers straggle to the East Coast and fatten up for their long flights to southern South America.

--W.E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Don Radovich is a Colorado wildlife artist who is retired from his teaching position (painting, art history) at Western State College. He has been interested in birds since childhood. He received a Master's degree in art from the University of New Mexico in 1959, with a thesis on birds and mammals. He has illustrated several books, including *Migratory Shore and Upland Game Bird Management in North America*, by Thomas Tacha and Clait Braun, and the recent *A Guide to the Birds of the West Indies*, by Herbert Raffaele et al., for which he did the warbler plates. Anyone interested in exploring the possibility of Don doing commission work can contact him at P.O. Box 313, Gunnison, CO 81230 or by telephone at (970) 641-0793.

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