

This month's photo quiz features an obvious shorebird as an identification puzzler. A quick assessment of the bird's uniformly slender, tapered, and fine-tipped bill by itself indicates that the shorebird is a sandpiper in the family Scolopacidae, rather than a plover in the family Charadriidae. Plover bills are stubby and blunt, often with a slight median constriction and a visibly bulbous tip.



*Photograph by W.H. Drury*

The mystery shorebird's bill also provides additional clues about its specific identity. Perhaps most important to notice about the pictured sandpiper's bill is the fact that it is almost perfectly straight, exhibiting little overall curvature and no droop at the tip. When viewed from the side (as in the photo), the length of the bill is barely equal to the depth of the sandpiper's head from front to back. This bill-to-head ratio eliminates as possibilities all of the longer-billed scolopacids, such as Whimbrel, the godwits, both yellowlegs, Willet, Stilt Sandpiper, the dowitchers, Common Snipe, and American Woodcock. The straight and finely tapered bill further removes Ruddy Turnstone (short, recurved bill), Red Knot and Spotted and Purple sandpipers (blunt-tipped bills, usually showing a yellow base in the case of the latter species), and Dunlin (decurved bill) as identification candidates. Although Red-necked and Wilson's phalaropes have straight, fine-tipped bills, they are also distinctively enough patterned that they should not be considered as possibilities.

With so many species potentially eliminated, what viable candidates remain? Well, there's Solitary Sandpiper, which has an eye-ring and spectacles

(and also nests in trees!); Upland Sandpiper, which is finely streaked and has a longish neck and a light-colored bill; and Buff-breasted Sandpiper, which has a round-headed look and no streaks on its upper breast. And so we find our choices narrowed down to Sanderling, Pectoral Sandpiper, and the "peeps" (e.g., Semipalmated, Western, Least, White-rumped, and Baird's sandpipers).

Because it appears that the pictured sandpiper is on a nest, we can reasonably assume that the bird is in alternate (i.e., breeding) plumage. Considering plumage allows us to remove any remaining doubts about Spotted Sandpiper and Red Knot, since both species have unmistakable underparts in alternate plumage. Moreover, Sanderling would not be a good choice, since a nesting Sanderling would normally show a decidedly dark, hooded aspect resulting from its rusty-headed alternate plumage; also, Sanderlings have stout, blunt-tipped bills, not fine and attenuated like the mystery sandpiper's. While the bill on a Pectoral Sandpiper would normally be somewhat heavier than that of the mystery bird, this species varies somewhat in size and structure; fortunately, Pectorals always show a heavily and extensively streaked breast, with the dark breast sharply delineated from the white belly — quite unlike the pattern created by the fine streaking on the mystery bird, which is limited in extent.

This leaves only the five peep species as candidates. It is well known that Western Sandpipers possess broad-based, droopy-tipped bills, and when in alternate plumage, have extensive and well-defined arrow-shaped markings along their lower breast, sides, and flanks. White-rumped Sandpipers, which have a distinct curvature to their bill, also have a heavy necklace of breast streaks in breeding plumage, as well as prominent streaking running down the sides toward the flanks. The pictured bird's breast streaks appear to be fine and give little indication of extending onto the sides.

The possibilities are now reduced to Semipalmated, Least, and Baird's sandpiper. Although the bill on the pictured sandpiper is fine enough to belong to a Least Sandpiper, it is too long and uniformly straight and not dropped at the tip. Furthermore, Least Sandpipers in alternate plumage are particularly heavily streaked on the breast, which often gives them a rather uniform, dusky appearance across the upper breast. Distinguishing between the remaining possibilities is now quite straightforward.

Semipalmated Sandpipers typically have decidedly stout, tubular bills, often with at least a slight downward curvature, and always with a blunt tip — features not shown by the bird in the photograph. In addition to having the bill characteristics shown by the mystery sandpiper, Baird's Sandpipers are rather finely streaked across the breast, with the streaks hardly extending onto the sides at all. A final reality check is to look carefully at the pictured bird's folded wings. The very long primaries so typical of a Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*) can be seen crisscrossed over the incubating bird's tail.

The adult Baird's Sandpiper in the picture was photographed at its nest on Bylot Island, Northwest Territories, Canada, by Dr. William H. Drury.

Juveniles are the age class of Baird's Sandpipers noted most frequently in Massachusetts, where this species is an uncommon and local late summer and early fall migrant along the coast, and inland along lake shores wherever suitable habitat conditions exist. The species is practically unknown as a spring migrant along the Atlantic Coast.



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