

ABOUT THE COVER

Ruddy Turnstone


One of the most colorful and striking of our shorebirds, the Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) is also behaviorally interesting. Its habit of flipping over pebbles, shells, and seaweed with its short black bill to get at the invertebrates beneath earns it its common name. This dumpy, medium-sized shorebird in breeding plumage is unmistakable with its motif of black and white on head, neck and breast, gleaming white below, and rufous and black back and wings, all highlighted by bright orange legs and feet. The sexes are similar in plumage, although the male has a whiter head. In flight they are spectacular with wings flashing black, white, and rufous, a white lower back, and black and white banded tail. Although conspicuous on open beaches, the Ruddy Turnstone virtually disappears against a backdrop of lichen-covered breakwater boulders, or on a tundra nest among the wildflowers. In winter plumage the rufous nearly disappears, and the black is muted. Juveniles resemble winter adults.

The Ruddy Turnstone is polytypic with two subspecies, a Eurasian race that breeds as far east as northwestern Alaska, and the predominantly North American *A. i. morinella* that nests from eastern Alaska across North America in the high arctic. The breeding range is circumpolar. The evolutionary relationships are obscure, since the turnstones have characteristics shared with both sandpipers and plovers. These high arctic breeders migrate as far as southern South America to winter, with the Eurasian subspecies migrating to Asia as far south as Australia. They winter as far north as Oregon and Massachusetts, with a wintering range that is almost exclusively coastal. In Massachusetts they migrate through in May in numbers that have reached several thousand. They are especially common on Monomoy, and are rare inland. They pass through again in the fall, with maximum numbers in early August in Scituate reaching 1000. They are gregarious in winter, with flocks of sixty to eighty on the jetties of Nantucket harbor.

Ruddy Turnstones are seasonally monogamous and sometimes mate with the same partner in succeeding years. Year-old birds usually remain on the wintering grounds and do not migrate and breed until age two. They prefer dry coastal tundra for nesting, usually near fresh water. They often nest near gull or tern colonies. Males are highly territorial and aggressive on the breeding grounds, in contrast to their gregarious feeding and roosting behavior along rocky coasts in winter. Males give territorial displays, often from rocks or other perches, crouching, tails vibrating, and uttering clicking notes. They perform aerial displays, flying with slow exaggerated wingbeats, and pugnaciously give a tail-down hunch display as they patrol territorial boundaries, feathers fluffed, wings and tail drooping, and head down and pointed at adversaries. Their calls and song have been variously described as *tjy-tjy-tjy*, *quitta-quitta-quitta*, *quit-it-it*, low-pitched rattles, slurred low whistles, and a short *kee-oo*, *chick-ik*, *kititit*, *kik-yu*, or *chirup*, a mixture of contact calls, aggressive and nuptial vocalizations.

By early June they are on the high arctic tundra making scrapes that they line with mosses, grass, or seaweed. The clutch is four drab olive eggs marked with brown or black, invisible in their tundra nest. Both parents have brood patches and share incubation of twenty-two to twenty-four days, and brooding responsibilities. The chicks are precocial and attended by adults for the three weeks until fledging. The female leaves the nesting area before the male. Adults will give wing-dragging distraction displays if approached and are aggressive in defending the young, often driving away birds many times their size. They are often seen chasing jaegers. The young feed heavily on dipterans, especially adult and larval midges.

Ruddy Turnstones forage alone or in small flocks. They not only flip seaweed and pebbles, but also will push larger object with their breasts, sometimes with several birds pushing cooperatively to overturn a large object such as a dead fish. They are picking, probing, prying foragers, that eat worms, small molluscs, crustaceans – just about any aquatic invertebrate. They also prey on tern eggs, puncturing them with their short, stubby bills. They are aggressive and will attack eggs while the adult tern is incubating them. They will also eat carrion and human garbage. They are true omnivores, eating plant material on the breeding grounds before insects become abundant.

On the breeding grounds they are subject to predation by foxes and avian nest predators, but their high arctic location largely frees them from human disturbance. Their extensive, circumpolar breeding range and enormous coastal wintering range favors their survival, and we can look forward to enjoying these beautiful shorebirds indefinitely into the future. 

William E. Davis, Jr.



About the Cover Artist

David Sibley, son of the well-known ornithologist Fred Sibley, began seriously watching and drawing birds in 1969, at age seven. He has written and illustrated articles on bird identification for *Birding* and *American Birds* (now *Field Notes*) as well as regional publications and books including *Hawks in Flight* and *The Birds of Cape May*. Since 1980 David has traveled the continent watching birds on his own and as a tour leader for WINGS, Inc. He has spent most of the last six years at a drawing table writing and illustrating the new *Sibley Guide to Birds*, a comprehensive field guide to North American birds due to be published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. in October 2000. Visit David's website, www.sibleyart.com, to see more of his artwork. He lives in Concord, MA, with his wife and two sons. 