

ABOUT THE COVER

Least Sandpiper

The Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*) is the smallest sandpiper in the world, slightly smaller than the Semipalmated Sandpiper with which it frequently associates. It can be separated from the latter by its generally browner color, more slender bill, and by its yellowish or greenish legs. Juvenile birds in fresh plumage are more brightly colored than adults. Bright rufous edges to the crown feathers and upperparts create an orange-brown appearance, and they have a creamy white, incomplete V pattern on the sides of the back. This bright plumage rapidly wears and fades, so that by late October most Least Sandpipers are in drab winter plumage. Least Sandpipers are easily separated from other North American peeps, but closely resemble Temminck's and Long-toed stints, and provide a significant challenge to birders who think they may be viewing one of these, or other vagrant stint species.


Least Sandpipers show very little geographic variation and no subspecies are recognized. They are most closely related to the Long-toed Stint (*Calidris subminuta*), with which they constitute a superspecies. Their breeding range extends across subarctic North America from Alaska to Nova Scotia. The single lower forty-eight states' breeding record is from Monomoy in 1979. They winter from the southern United States to central South America, with some populations making transoceanic flights of more than 2000 miles. Birds using New England as a staging area probably winter mostly in the Lesser Antilles and northeastern South America. Least Sandpipers are considered locally abundant to very common coastal migrants in spring and fall, and common inland. In Massachusetts they are largely May spring migrants, arriving again in early July and leaving by the end of September, with highest counts in late July. In fall adults migrate earlier than juveniles.

Least Sandpipers are monogamous and produce a single brood. They nest in subarctic tundra and boreal forests, and exhibit breeding site fidelity. They prefer wet sedge and mossy, grassy bogs. Males establish a breeding territory that they advertise with shrill, repetitive *treees*, chatterings, and rich, complex song. In courtship these songs accompany hovering display flights or are given from a perch or from the ground. Males often chase each other and fight with feet extended toward each other in the air, or with one male landing on the back of another and attacking with its beak. Threat displays may include raised wings and tail. In nonbreeding season Least Sandpipers have a flight call described as *kreeep* or *threeep*, uttered singly or in a short series.

The male makes several nest scrapes and the female selects the final nest site. The nest is a simple scrape, lined with dead vegetation, in short marsh grass or in a damp area, usually near water. The clutch is typically four blotched buff-colored eggs. Both males and females develop brood patches and share incubation for the about three weeks to hatching. The young are precocial and downy, and have left the nest by the end of the first day. The chicks feed themselves and parental duties are limited to

brooding, leading chicks to good foraging habitat, and warning chicks of approaching predators. The male takes increasing responsibility for the young as nesting progresses. Adults and chicks eventually move to communal feeding grounds. Young birds can fly after about two weeks, but stay with their parents for a few additional days.

Least Sandpipers forage by probing, or more commonly pecking small food items from the substrate. Their major food consists of small invertebrates including gastropods, amphipods, isopods, and dipterans. In coastal areas they feed mostly on mudflats and in marsh vegetation. They tend to forage farther from the water than other peeps, often at the vegetation-mud flat interface.

The populations of Least Sandpipers appear to be fairly stable, although they are difficult to census due to their occurrence in mixed-species flocks, remote breeding habitat, and tendency to disperse on wintering grounds. They suffer extensive egg and young predation from foxes, gulls, corvids, and raptors, and extensive mortality from raptors during migration and on the wintering grounds. Large numbers were shot by market hunters in the early twentieth century, but populations recovered after the Migratory Bird Convention of 1916. The species appears secure on its remote and widespread breeding grounds, but habitat alteration on its stopover sites and wintering grounds may pose a long-term threat. They remain the tame little brown sandpipers that roam the *Spartina* edges of the shallow pannes at Plum Island and in similar habitats. 

William E. Davis, Jr.



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About the Cover Artist

David Sibley has written and illustrated articles on bird identification for *Birding* and *North American Birds* 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 wrote and illustrated the monumental *Sibley Guide to Birds*, a comprehensive guide to North American birds, which has been followed by a companion volume, *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior* (illustrated by David A. Sibley, edited by Chris Elphick, John B. Dunning, Jr., and David A. Sibley). You can see more of David's artwork at his website <<http://www.sibleyart.com>>. He lives in Concord, Massachusetts, with his wife and two sons. 