

AT A GLANCE

October 2004



DAVID LARSON

This month readers are once again faced with only a partial view of a mystery bird, a situation not unfamiliar to field birders who routinely get to see only bits and pieces of birds under certain field conditions. Because this phenomenon has from time to time been previously addressed in this column, rather than reviewing old ground, let us simply begin to analyze the mystery photograph for what it is — a partial view of the front end of a shorebird.

Arguably the first point to consider when viewing the picture is to determine whether or not the bird is fully-grown or a chick. Since the bird appears to have quite a short bill and a rather “gentle” appearance, the notion that it could be a chick seems logical. Reasonable though the assumption may be, however, the answer is simple — it is not a chick. Shorebird chicks, for those readers who may have never been fortunate enough to actually see one, have a downy plumage, much like a duckling or an “Easter chick.” It is obvious that the pictured bird possesses real feathers as opposed to a covering of down; hence it is not a shorebird chick.

In identifying shorebirds one ideally likes to use a combination of characters, including size, shape, behavior, leg color, bill shape, coloration and pattern of the underparts, pattern of the wings, rump and tail, and in some cases vocalizations and habitat preference. Needless to say, most of these characteristics are not available for

scrutiny or evaluation in the picture provided. So what can we see and what sense can we make of it? Most obvious is the fact that the bird has a very straight and very short, uniformly dark bill. Furthermore the shorebird gives the appearance of having a small, round-headed, short-necked appearance with a finely streaked crown and a plain, unstreaked face. In spite of the fact that the upper breast feathers are slightly fluffed up, there seems to be little vertical streaking on the feathers, except possibly a tiny dark speckle on the shaft of a few of the feathers at the sides of the upper breast. This combination of features gives the bird a rather clear-breasted appearance. The scapulars and feathers of the middle of the back are clearly dark-centered with broad, pale (white?) fringes or spots on most of them.

Keeping these features in mind, a number of shorebird possibilities can at once be eliminated. The short, straight bill is key. Although plovers have relatively short bills, their bills are thick and blunt-tipped, often exhibiting a slightly bulbous appearance at the distal end. Since the pictured bird is obviously not a plover or a member of either of the highly distinctive families Haematopodidae (oystercatchers) or Recurvirostridae (avocets and stilts), it belongs to the family Scolopacidae (sandpipers and allies). This large shorebird family exhibits great diversity in bill shape and form, ranging from species with long bills that are variously straight (e.g., dowitchers), recurved (e.g., godwits), or decurved (e.g., curlews), to extremely fine, slender bills (e.g., most phalaropes), or bills that are short and sharp-pointed (e.g., turnstones). Having thus reduced the possibilities, the most likely remaining options are that the mystery sandpiper is either a “peep” (e.g., Semipalmated Sandpiper) of some sort, or else one of several species not in the genus *Calidris*.

The only “peep” possessing a bill as short and fine as the pictured species is Least Sandpiper; however, the bill of this species is decidedly more curved with a more noticeable droop to the fine-pointed tip. Also, the face of a Least Sandpiper would not appear as plain and unmarked, and there would be more evidence of a pale stripe (i.e., supercilium) over the eye. Given the round-headed appearance and short, straight bill of the featured species, another possibility would be Upland Sandpiper. Although Upland Sandpipers have relatively short straight bills and rounded heads, their eyes are noticeably larger in proportion to their head, and their bills have a yellow lower mandible that gives the bill a notably bicolored appearance. Indeed, only one species possesses the combination of a small, rounded head; short, straight bill; plain, unmarked face; and relatively unstreaked upper breast shown by the mystery shorebird — Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*). The fact that the scapulars and mantle feathers appear to have prominent pale fringes suggests that the pictured bird is in juvenal plumage, a feature that is consistent with the great majority of Buff-breasted Sandpipers seen on the Atlantic Coast of North America.

Buff-breasted Sandpipers are very uncommon to rare late summer and early autumn migrants in Massachusetts, where most birds are found in short grassy areas near the coast, or more rarely in pastures and fields in the interior. They are often seen in the company of American Golden-Plovers or Baird’s Sandpipers. David Larson captured the image of this juvenile Buff-breasted Sandpiper at South Beach. 📷

Wayne R. Petersen

AT A GLANCE



DAVID LARSON

Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.



Birding and Natural History Tours

**Africa ~ Central America ~ Asia ~
South America ~ National Parks ~
Europe ~ Antarctica and more!**

**For more information,
Call 781-259-2165 or 800-289-9504
E-mail: nhtravel@massaudubon.org
Website: www.massaudubon.org/travel**

Natural History Travel



Norman Carr Safaris



Simon Perkins