

ABOUT THE COVER

Solitary Sandpiper

The Latin name of the Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*) means “solitary waterbird” and is most appropriate since, unlike most shorebirds, it does not form large flocks during migration and is usually found either alone or in small groups. This is an elegant, slender, relatively small, dark sandpiper with a gray-brown head, neck, and breast, a dark brown back, and wings liberally sprinkled with white spots. It is white below with greenish legs and has a prominent white eye-ring. It is about the size of a Lesser Yellowlegs but has proportionately shorter legs and neck. The sexes are similar in plumage, but females are slightly larger than males. Juveniles are buffier than adults and are more uniformly spotted on the back and wings. The Solitary Sandpiper is a sister species to the Eurasian Green Sandpiper, with which it shares the habit of nesting in trees. There are two subspecies generally recognized.

The breeding range is a broad band of boreal forest from Alaska across Canada to Labrador. They winter from Texas and the West Indies south through Central America and most of South America. They migrate by both day and night and primarily occupy freshwater habitats, frequenting muddy edges of ponds and sewer and stream beds. In Massachusetts they are considered a fairly common migrant, particularly in the fall. They arrive during the first two weeks of May and move south from mid-July to early October.

The breeding habitat of the Solitary Sandpiper consists of muskeg bogs, taiga, and spruce forests dotted with lakes and ponds. Because this habitat is extremely remote, its breeding biology is poorly known. First described in 1813 by Alexander Wilson, the “Father of North American Ornithology,” a nest was not discovered until 1903. It is a highly territorial species; males defend their territory using a variety of aggressive displays involving raising their wings and lowering the head. Fights involve attempts to peck the adversary. They also perform flutter-flights with wings held nearly horizontal. They also may be territorial when feeding. In courtship the male displays by fluttering a few feet into the air with wings quivering, tail spread and uttering a twittering whistle. Both sexes sing, and two song types and five call types have been described, involving chattering and whistled notes. Song is associated with pair formation, territorial advertisement, and maintenance of pair bonds. In migration and when flushed, the usual vocalization is a *wheet-wheet-wheet*.

Solitary Sandpipers are nearly unique among sandpipers in that they utilize tree nests abandoned by songbirds, including those of American Robins, Rusty Blackbirds, Gray Jays, Eastern Kingbirds, and Cedar Waxwings. The nest is selected by the male, and the female has merely to rearrange the nest lining. The usual clutch is four pale green eggs, blotched red-brown or purple. Both parents have brood patches and share incubation, although the literature is contradictory on these points. The incubation period is unknown, as is the length of time that parents attend the young — the breeding biology of this species is indeed poorly understood. The young are precocial, covered with down, their eyes are open, and they are capable of leaving the nest and

foraging soon after hatching. Adults will feign injury if a predator approaches the young.

Solitary Sandpipers are largely visual foragers, walking about and gleaning or pecking prey; rarely do they probe water or mud surfaces. They consume terrestrial and aquatic insects, spiders, small crustaceans, mollusks, mosquito larvae, and frogs.

Little is known about population stability of Solitary Sandpipers because of their inaccessible breeding grounds and solitary habits. However, population fluctuations have been recorded, including increases in British Columbia and declines in Labrador. The remoteness of their breeding grounds does tend to protect them from anthropogenic effects such as habitat alteration, although the cutting of boreal forests may influence them in the future. Little has been reported about them on their South American wintering grounds. For the time being it appears that these enigmatic and poorly known sandpipers are secure; however, data from the United States Shorebird Conservation Plan suggest that a decline in population is suspected. 🐦

William E. Davis, Jr.



SHORT-EARED OWL BY SANDY SELENSKY

About the Cover Artist

Paul Donahue is a bird artist, bird recordist, environmental activist, and tree climber who divides his time between Maine, California, and South America. His fine work is familiar to our readers, since he has contributed many covers to *Bird Observer*. While he occasionally works in pen and ink, most of his work is done in acrylics and watercolor. His favorite subjects are shorebirds, raptors, and tropical birds. 🐦