

OBSERVATION OF A LITTLE STINT
(Calidris minuta) IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Blair Nikula, Chatham

On June 19, 1980, while birding the shorebird flats on Monomoy Island in Chatham, Massachusetts, I noticed a rather distinctly colored small Calidris sandpiper associating with a flock of 15-20 Semipalmated Sandpipers (C. pusilla). I soon realized that it was a species or, at least, plumage with which I was totally unfamiliar despite considerable experience with east coast shorebirds. The initial impression was of a bird that was somewhat smaller than a Semipalmated Sandpiper, with a very small bill, black legs, and, most notably, a rather bright orange-buff coloration on the head, neck, upper back, and sides of the breast. I began to suspect that it might be a Little Stint (C. minuta) or possibly a Rufous-necked Sandpiper (C. ruficollis). I decided to photograph the bird and managed to make three exposures from a distance of 50-60 feet with a 300 mm. lens. A review of the meager references available to me and a phone conversation with Dick Forster that night strengthened my suspicions that the bird might be a Little Stint.

The weather prevented another trip to Monomoy until late in the day on June 22 when I returned with Rick Heil. We had no difficulty in relocating the bird and were able to study it in detail through a 20X scope. After viewing the bird in flight and at rest for some time, there seemed to be little doubt that it was indeed a Little Stint. The following day it was seen by Dick Forster, Wayne Petersen, Peter Trull, Wallace Bailey and Carl Goodrich, all of whom concurred with the original identification. Additional observations were made on June 24 by several birders (at which time a Rufous-necked Sandpiper was also discovered!) and on June 25. No substantiated sightings were made after June 25. Additional photographs were obtained on June 23-25 with a variety of lenses and cameras.

Description. The bird was a small calidrid, intermediate in size between a Least Sandpiper (C. minutilla) and a Semipalmated Sandpiper. The head was a rather bright orange-buff, becoming slightly darker on the crown. The eye line was very indistinct and washed with buff. The lores were black. The orange-buff coloration extended down onto the neck and sides of the upper breast. The feathers of the upper back were black-centered with broad buff fringes, resulting in a scaly appearance. A distinct white line ran down each side of the upper back, forming a V. The lower back and wings were considerably darker, creating a pronounced two-toned effect from behind. In flight, the wing stripe was more prominent than that of the other calidrids present. At rest, the wings extended slightly beyond the tail. The chin, throat, and remainder of the underparts were whitish, the white throat being particularly conspicuous. Some light streaking was present on the sides of the upper breast, extending very faintly across the center of the breast (visible only at very close range). The legs and bill were black. The bill was short, thin and straight, with a slight, barely perceptible droop at the tip. No vocalizations could be discerned with any certainty.

Comparative identification. A unique opportunity for comparative study

was provided by the presence at one time or another during the Little Stint's seven day stay of five other species of Calidris sandpipers: Least, Semipalmated, Western (C. mauri), Rufous-necked, and White-rumped (C. fuscicollis). Indeed, it seems likely that never before, anywhere, have these six species been observed together as they were on June 24 and 25. The Little Stint's distinct coloration, size and bill structure distinguished it from all of the above species. In comparison to the Semipalmated and Western sandpipers, it was smaller, with orange-buff coloration, white streaks on the back, and a distinctly shorter and thinner bill. In comparison to the Rufous-necked Sandpiper, it was distinguished by a white throat, white streaks on the back, lack of a distinct eye line, and a thinner bill. In comparison to the Least Sandpiper, it was slightly larger, with orange-buff coloration, black legs, longer wings, and a rather prominent wing stripe.

North American records. This sighting apparently constitutes the sixth record of Little Stint in North America and the second record in the contiguous United States. Previous records are for the following dates and locations: 6/28/76, Alaska; 6/10/75, Bermuda; 5/28/79, Delaware; 7/10/19, Hudson's Bay, Canada; and 9/?/79, Alaska.



Little Stint on Monomoy, June 24, 1980
Photographed by Robert H. Stymeist, Brookline



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