

Status of the Semipalmated Sandpiper in Washington and Northern Idaho

JOHN W. WEBER

The A.O.U. check-list (1957) describes the range of the Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*) as follows: breeding in North America's arctic and subarctic; wintering from the Gulf Coast and South Carolina south through eastern Mexico¹ and the West Indies to southern Brazil; migrating in spring through the interior of the United States and Canada to the Atlantic Coast, rarely to the intermountain West; migrating in fall over the spring route but spreading to intermountain British Columbia. In Washington, *pusilla* has heretofore been considered a rare migrant. This paper cites comments of recent authors on the occurrence of this species within the state, summarizes published records of specimens taken in Washington, and presents data that indicate the Semipalmated Sandpiper is a fairly common fall migrant in eastern Washington (east of the Cascades) and a scarce but regular fall migrant along the state's coast; the paucity of records in spring, however, demonstrates that *pusilla* is a rare migrant at this time of the year anywhere in Washington. The seasonal distributional pattern of *pusilla* in northern Idaho is similar to that for eastern Washington. Recent records from Oregon and California indicate that *pusilla* is a more frequent transient through these west coastal states than previously known (Roberson 1980, Garrett and Dunn 1981). In addition, comments on the spring and fall migrational routes of Alaskan breeding populations are included herein.

Jewett et al. (1953) consider *pusilla* rare in Washington and list two specimen records: one taken (disposition of specimen unknown) by Lyall at Fidalgo Island in 1858 (Miller et al. 1935) and one collected by Warburton at Mount Rainier, Pierce County, on 9 September 1919. The latter is specimen No. 5 at Washington State University's Conner Museum (WSUCM). Jewett et al. (1953) also say this species has

¹Contrary to A.O.U., Phillips (1975) indicates that *pusilla* does not winter regularly in the U.S. (except for possibly the southern tip of Florida) or Mexico. His study, based largely on museum specimens, turned up no specimens taken in winter from this region. One was finally collected expressly for Phillips' study by Ogden at the southern tip of Florida on 11 January 1974.

probably "been often overlooked among the migrating hosts of shore birds in Washington." Hudson and Yocom (1954) make no interpretive comments on the status of this species in southeastern Washington, the region treated in their paper, but list several specimens: one taken by Jollie near Ewan, Whitman County, on 28 August 1949; one (WSUCM No. 51-272) collected by Hudson on 16 August 1951 at O'Sullivan Dam, Grant County; two (WSUCM No.'s 51-274 and 51-275) taken by Hudson at Twelve-Mile Slough, Adams County, on 3 September 1951. The above-mentioned specimen taken by Jollie is No. 872 in the University of Idaho's bird and mammal museum (UIM). Hall and LaFave (1958) list one "definite record" they had for eastern Washington: a specimen (WSUCM No. 57-379) taken by LaFave at Reardan, Lincoln County, on 29 August 1957. The following year LaFave (1959) collected two more specimens in eastern Washington: one (WSUCM No. 58-281) at Cow Lake, Adams County, on 10 May 1958 and one (disposition of specimen unknown) at Reardan, Lincoln County, on 12 September 1958. Larrison and Sonnenberg (1968) describe this species as a "rare spring and fall migrant" in Washington but list no records. Johnson and Murray (1976) say that published records for southeastern Washington are "few and scattered" and list a previously unpublished record of LaFave: one (WSUCM No. 60-225) from Reardan Slough, Lincoln County, on 1 July 1960. Weber and Larrison (1977) classify *pusilla* as a rare spring and fall migrant in southeastern Washington, refer to specimen records mentioned by Hudson and Yocom (1954), and speculate on the rarity of this species in this region: "Field identification problems might explain the paucity of records for this species; possibly occurs more frequently than available records indicate." In the latest distributional account of Washington birds (Alcorn 1978), the Semipalmated Sandpiper is listed as casual (i.e., of irregular and scattered occurrence) in both eastern Washington (east of the Cascades) and in the Cascades.

During the fall migration of 1978, the writer observed seven *pusilla* in eastern Washington and collected two to confirm identification: an immature female (WSUCM No. 78-400) taken at Albion, Whitman County, on 31 July 1978; two seen at a scabland pond several km. northwest of Lamont, Whitman County, on 9 August 1978; four observed, one of which was collected (immature female, WSUCM No. 78-401), on the north bank of the Snake River, Whitman County, about 7 km. west of Clarkston, Asotin County, on 30 August 1978. In addition, the writer has two 1978 sight records from Manns Lake, Nez Perce County, in adjacent northern Idaho: two on 31 August 1978 and two on 14 September 1978. A casual check by the writer during the following fall along the north bank of the Snake River in Whitman County, about 7 km. west of Clarkston, Asotin County, yielded two records: two seen, one of which was collected (adult female; WSUCM No. 79-582), on 9 August 1979; one adult (undetermined sex; WSUCM No. 79-583) on 29 August 1979. For the 1980 fall migration, the writer adds the following records for southeastern Washington: four (one collected; immature male; UIM No. 2305) on 13 August 1980; three (one collected; adult female; UIM No. 2306) on 20 August 1980 and three on 29 August 1980, both records from the Snake River, Whitman County; three on 24 August 1980 and two on 29 August 1980, both sightings at the scabland pond in Whitman County several km. northwest of Lamont. During the same migrational period, the writer has several sight records for the adjacent region of northern Idaho: three at Moscow, Latah County, on 20 August 1980; two at Manns Lake, Nez Perce County, on 20 August 1980 and on 29 August 1980.

Not included in the aforementioned records of this species are two previously unpublished records from eastern Washington: WSUCM Numbers 56-331 and 56-479, both immature females and both collected by Verner at Stubblefield Lake, Spokane County, on 1 August 1956.

On the basis of one sight record in spring (29 May 1953) at Moscow, Latah County, and 29 specimens taken in fall in Latah and Nez Perce counties from 1950 to 1958, Burleigh (1972) lists *pusilla* as a "rare spring transient, and a fairly common fall transient" in northern Idaho. Since northern Idaho and eastern Washington constitute a geographic entity, the occurrence of the Semipalmated Sandpiper as a fairly common fall migrant in eastern Washington should not be surprising.

In addition to the previously mentioned specimen of *pusilla* from Fidalgo Island, the writer knows of only two other specimens from western Washington (both collected by Mattocks at Seattle, King County, on 2 July 1975): No. 28595, adult female; No. 28596, adult male (Burke Museum, University of Washington). Mattocks provided information on the following sight records by him and others of *pusilla* from western Washington: 11 in fall from 1 July (1975) to 28 September (1978) for the period 1974-79; five in spring from 10 May (1975) to 27 May (1973) for the years 1973-78. These records indicate that this species occurs as a scarce but regular migrant along coastal Washington.

A recent study by Harrington and Morrison (1979) shows that the Semipalmated Sandpiper generally uses different spring and fall migrational routes in North America. Their data also indicate that eastern breeding populations use eastern migrational routes and that Alaskan breeding populations migrate through the Great Plains regions of the United States and Canada. While other breeding populations tend to use different northward and southward migrational routes, Harrington and Morrison found that most Alaskan *pusilla* retrace the North American portion of their spring route during autumnal migration. Bill measurements of adult Semipalmated Sandpipers by Harrington and Morrison show that females have longer bills (exposed culmen) than males and that bill lengths for both sexes are smaller for Alaskan breeding populations than those from the eastern arctic. They found average bill lengths to be 17.27 mm and 18.92 mm for males and females, respectively, from Alaska, whereas corresponding measurements of birds from eastern Hudson Bay were 19.99 mm and 21.54 mm. Although Conner Museum specimens of *pusilla* from Washington are mostly of immature birds, the bill lengths (17.0 mm each for two females; 18.0 mm for one male; 17.0 mm for one of unknown sex) of four adults indicate, as one would surmise, that these birds probably originated in Alaska. Including both immature and adult Conner Museum specimens from Washington, bill lengths vary from 16.0 to 18.0 mm (ave. 17.2 mm) for five males and from 17.0 to 19.0 mm (ave. 17.9 mm) for six females.

On the basis of the records presented herein, the Semipalmated Sandpiper can be considered a fairly common fall migrant and a rare spring migrant in eastern Washington, and a scarce but regular migrant (apparently less numerous in spring) in western Washington. In spring, as was noted, *pusilla* has been recorded only once both from eastern Washington (10 May 1958) and northern Idaho (29 May 1953). The rarity of this species as a spring migrant in all regions west of the Rocky Mountains in the United States suggests that Alaskan breeding populations of *pusilla* also use different northward and southward migrational routes through the United States: primarily east of the Rockies in spring but extending westward to at least northern

Idaho and eastern Washington in fall. The scarcity of suitable habitat in spring in northern Idaho and eastern Washington might account for the Semipalmated Sandpiper's rarity in this region at this time of the year. Melting snow at higher elevations with consequent higher water levels on lakes and rivers possibly forces *pusilla* to largely bypass the intermountain West during spring migration. (Several other species of transient shorebirds are also more common in fall than in spring for this region; see Weber and Larrison 1977).

Additional field work, particularly selective collecting, in other western states will shed more light on the migration of this species through western North America.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer is grateful to P.W. Mattocks, Jr., for furnishing information on records of *pusilla* from western Washington. The writer thanks R.E. Johnson and E.J. Larrison, curators of the bird and mammal museums at Washington State University and the University of Idaho, respectively, for access to specimens in their care. K. Kaufman critically reviewed the manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

- ALCORN, G.D. 1978. *Northwest Birds: Distribution and Eggs*. Western Media Printing and Publications, Tacoma, Wash.
- AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1957. *The A.O.U. Check-list of Northern American Birds*. 5th ed. Baltimore, Md.
- BURLEIGH, T.D. 1972. *Birds of Idaho*. Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho.
- GARRETT, K., AND J. DUNN. 1981. *Birds of Southern California: Status and Distribution*. Los Angeles Audubon Society, Los Angeles, Calif.
- HALL, W.A., AND L. D. LAFAVE. 1958. Recent migration and collection records of shore birds in eastern Washington. *Murrelet* 39:21-22.
- HARRINGTON, B.A., AND R.I.G. MORRISON. 1979. Semipalmated Sandpiper migration in North America. *Studies in Avian Biology* No. 2:83-100.
- HUDSON, G.E., AND C.F. YOCOM. 1954. A distributional check-list of the birds of southeastern Washington. *Res. Stud. Wash. State Univ.* Vol. 22, No. 1.
- JEWETT, S.G., W.P. TAYLOR, W.T. SHAW, AND J.W. ALDRICH. 1953. *Birds of Washington State*. Univ. of Wash. Press, Seattle.
- JOHNSON, R.E., AND G.A. MURRAY. 1976. New bird records for southeastern Washington. *Murrelet* 57:54-57.
- LAFAVE, L.D. 1959. Additional migration and collection records of shore birds in eastern Washington. *Murrelet* 40:33.
- LARRISON, E.J., AND K.G. SONNENBERG. 1968. *Washington Birds*. The Seattle Audubon Soc.
- MILLER, R.C., E.D. LUMLEY, AND F.S. HALL. 1935. Birds of the San Juan Islands, Washington. *Murrelet* 16:51-65.
- PHILLIPS, A.R. 1975. Semipalmated Sandpiper: identification, migrations, summer and winter ranges. *American Birds* 29:799-806.
- ROBERSON, D. 1980. *Rare Birds of the West Coast*. Woodcock Publications, Pacific Grove, Calif.
- WEBER, J.W., AND E.J. LARRISON. 1977. *Birds of Southeastern Washington*. Univ. Press of Idaho, Moscow.

Author's address: Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington 99164.