



This resting shorebird, with its leg length and bill shape both obscured, was the puzzler on the back cover of the preceding issue. Can you identify it before reading the solution below?

## Answer to Snap Judgment 10

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How many readers thought to guess the name of the photographer? If you said that this looked like a Tom Davis photo, you get full marks. Thomas H. Davis, Jr., the Sage of Jamaica Bay, has earned a reputation for producing clear, razor-sharp portraits of shorebirds and other species. Anyone can appreciate photographs of this quality, but it is the students of field identification that love them best for the wealth of detail that they present.

To continue our backwards analysis, what is the *age* of the bird in the photograph? Serious shorebirders, even those (if any?) who are unfamiliar with this particular species, should be able to guess that the pictured bird is a juvenile in fresh plumage. The bright pattern of the upperparts is the key. In both of our major shorebird families, the plovers (Charadriidae) and the sandpipers and their allies (Scolopacidae), young birds of most species get a good start in life by acquiring a juvenal plumage that features beautiful contrasting patterns on the scapulars, wing-coverts, tertials, and often the upper back and the crown. Typically these feathers have either pale spots arranged neatly along their edges, or even-edged pale borders, often set off by subterminal dark bars or lines. The pictured bird is a classic example of the latter type of pattern.

Accepting that the bird is a juvenile, can we tell whether it is a sandpiper or a plover without seeing the bill shape? Look at the scapulars, coverts and tertials: each feather has a neat white fringe set off by a narrow black subterminal line. Some of our smaller plovers show a pattern similar to this in juvenal plumage (although not as strongly contrasted), but none of them has the extensive streaking and spotting on the underparts that are apparent on the pictured bird. The larger Black-bellied Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* and Lesser Golden-Plover *P. dominica* do have heavily marked underparts in juvenal plumage — but their scapulars, coverts and tertials are edged with bold spots rather than even-edged borders. So by the process of elimination, the bird in the photograph must belong to the sandpiper family.

We can tell that this is a relatively short-legged sandpiper, even though it is nearly “knee-deep” in water, because the intertarsal joint on the leg is visible above the waterline and a very short distance below the body (in longer-legged shorebirds such as curlews, godwits, yellowlegs, etc., the tibia — the section of the leg above the intertarsal joint — is proportionately longer). And we could rule out a lot of species by noting that most juvenile sandpipers do not show such extensive markings on the sides and flanks. But none of this analysis is necessary, actually, because the pattern of the upperparts referred to earlier is diagnostic. The bold white fringes and narrow black subterminal lines, combined with the unmarked gray feather centers, repeated on every one of the coverts, tertials and scapulars, can indicate only one species: the Red Knot *Calidris canutus* in juvenal plumage.



And here, if you like, is proof.

This plumage, incidentally, is labelled “winter” in some bird guides; but winter adults are actually much plainer gray above.