

Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*) in Delaware

“an unprecedented comparison of Little Stint and Semipalmated in spring plumage...”

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ON MAY 23, 1979, I studied and photographed a Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*) in almost full nuptial plumage on the western shore of the Delaware Bay, 2 miles east of Little Creek, Kent Co., Delaware. I observed the stint in the company of about 90,000 shorebirds (80,000 Semipalmated Sandpipers, *C. pusilla*) which packed the sandy beach and marsh/mud banks along a two mile stretch of shoreline between Pickering Beach and Port Mahon. This area is adjacent to the Little Creek Wildlife Management Area, and is a principal staging, feeding, and resting area for thousands of migrant shorebirds, especially *C. pusilla*.

In one area, the road on which I was driving passes the edge of the shore of the Delaware Bay, and it was from the car that I spotted and subsequently photographed the reddish, black-legged peep that essentially looked like *C. pusilla* except for color. I suspected Little Stint at the time, but had no field guides for reference, and could not recall the field marks; nor had I ever seen one before. A series of 13 35mm transparencies were secured on Kodachrome 64ASA, with an Olympus OM1 and Zuiko 400mm telephoto lens.

Upon examination of the processed slides, I became reasonably convinced that the bird in question was *C. minuta*. Study skins of Little Stints and other small *Calidris* waders were examined at the U.S. National Museum, at the Smithsonian, in Washington, D.C., and compared to the photographs.

Compared to the grayer, breeding-plumaged *C. pusilla*, the Little Stint appeared strikingly “bright foxy orange” in tone, a feature produced by the margins of the darker brown feathers on the mantle, head, face, and hindneck. Two distinctive gold buff lines forming a

“V” on the back were conspicuous and are characteristic of an unworn adult Little Stint. These are made up of the pale outer fringes of the outermost mantle feathers. The black bill was slightly shorter, straighter, and thinner at the base than that of most *C. pusilla*. The sides of the upper breast were finely speckled and streaked with buff brown and washed with brown and “foxy orange,” which faded near the center of the chest. The throat was whitish. In a typical juvenile Little Stint, the “V” on the back would appear whitish and the breast would be white with dark streaks at the breast-sides (lacking the orange wash).

THE ONE CHARACTERISTIC which I noted on study skins as apparently unique to *C. minuta* and very much in evidence on the Little Creek bird, were the rufous-orange margins on the tertials. The margins of the tertials are pale or grayish on all other potentially confusable small *Calidris* waders.

I sent the photographs to D.I.M. Wallace and P.J. Grant, past and present chairmen of the Rarities Committee of *British Birds*, for their comments and, I hoped, corroboration. Both responded with resounding enthusiasm positively endorsing the photos as those of a Little Stint. Wallace stated that the bird was “undoubtedly *C. minuta* in almost immaculate breeding plumage,” noting that the “foxy tone and pattern of the feather contours were together diagnostic.” Grant wholeheartedly supported Wallace’s confirmation and stated that the photographs “provided an unprecedented comparison of Little Stint and Semipalmated in spring plumage...”

Grant further stated that the Red-necked Sandpiper (*C. ruficollis*) could be ruled out by the fact that “Red-necked in summer plumage has (clear) brick-red or dark chestnut extending usually over the breast and ear coverts. Also, the prominence of the pale lines or “V” on the



1. Adult Little Stint (lower right) with Semipalmated Sandpipers.

back (*C. minuta*) would not be matched in Red-necked.”

Western Sandpiper (*C. mauri*) can be eliminated by its usually longer and drooping bill, extensive spotting on chest, flanks, and lateral tail coverts, and generally more reddish tone on scapulars, crown, and ear coverts than foxy orange of *C. minuta*. All other small *Calidris* waders tend toward brown or gray tones, and as mentioned previously, only *C. minuta* has rufous-orange margins on the tertials.

Besides the 80,000 Semipalmated Sandpipers present, the other 10,000 waders were comprised of 5000 Ruddy Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*), 3000 Red Knots (*C. canutus*), 1000 Dunlin (*C. alpina*), 850 White-rumped Sandpipers (*C. fuscicollis*), and 150 Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*). There were no Least (*C. minutilla*) or Western sandpipers (*C. mauri*) identified in spite of careful searching.

THE TIDE WAS LOW, beginning to rise during the observation period during the last three hours of the afternoon. Most of the shorebirds were at rest until just before sunset, when flock after flock of 50 to several hundred began departing northward along the shore and disappearing out over the Delaware Bay.

Observers on subsequent days found only a fraction of the shorebirds that I encountered on May 23, and the Little Stint was never reported again.



3. Little Stint (lower left) with Semipalmated Sandpipers and Dunlin (right). Photos by Richard A. Rowlett.

The Little Stint is a bird of the western Palearctic, breeding from northern Norway, eastward across northern Russia, to the northern Siberian tundra. It winters mostly in Africa and India, and migrates through most of western Europe. The May 23, Delaware record represents the third in the Nearctic, and first in continental North America south of Alaska. Single Little Stints were photographed in Bermuda June 8-11, 1975 (Pellow, 1976), and at Point Barrow, Alaska, June 28, 1976 (Myers and Greenberg, 1978).

References which I found most useful regarding field identification of small *Calidris* waders and especially helpful with this note were Wallace, 1974 and 1979, and Prater *et al.*, 1977.

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2. The gold-buff "V" on the back is characteristic of an unworn adult Little Stint. Note the broad rufous-orange margins on the tertials in both photos.

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