



THE PRACTICED EYE

Kenn Kaufman
photographs from *VIREO*

Curlew Sandpiper and its I.D. Contenders

AFTER THE FOURTH OF JULY, AS BIRD-song in the woods declines, many birders head for the shore—or for the reservoirs or flooded fields or sewage ponds, or anywhere that migrant shorebirds might touch down. The southbound migration of the shorebirds is a prolonged event, lasting from late June to December, and it holds endless potential for excitement. Rare stray waders from anywhere in the northern hemisphere can (and do) drop in almost anywhere in North America.

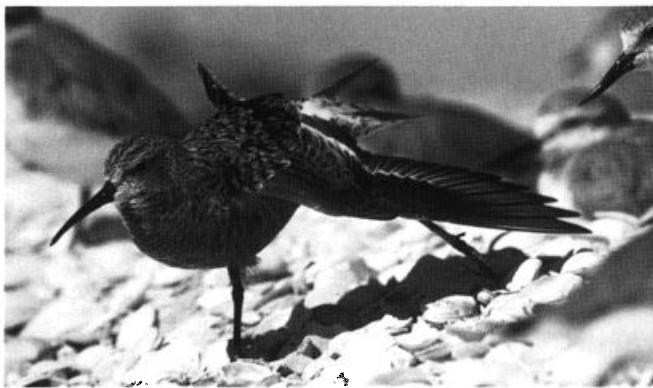
One of the most frequent and widespread of the strays is the Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*). It has nested (rarely) in arctic Alaska, and it

is almost annual in migration at several spots on our Atlantic Coast. Already it has been recorded in more than half of our states and provinces, and I predict that eventually it will visit all the rest. Still, it is never routine, and it causes excitement whenever it appears.

July to early August is the time when most southbound Curlew Sandpipers are found. But is that when most actually occur here? Not necessarily. Mid-summer is when the adults pass through, still wearing alternate (breeding) plumage, a rich chestnut that stands out like a beacon on a mudflat crowded with drabber peeps. These bright Curlews are hard to overlook. But as in most other shorebird species,

adults precede the juveniles on the trek south. In September and October, when the species would be represented by juveniles or by adults in winter plumage, the Curlew Sandpiper would be more difficult to detect. This *Practiced Eye* looks at these more subtle plumages of the Curlew.

The comparison most often made is to the Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*). Both the Dunlin and the Curlew Sandpiper (like a great many other shorebirds) are mostly grayish above and whitish below in non-breeding plumages. Both are among the larger species of *Calidris*, the genus of the “peeps” and “stints.” Both have bills that are more or less decurved. The potential for con-



The Curlew Sandpiper breeds mainly in the high Arctic of the Soviet Union, and performs extensive migrations. Photographed in late winter in New Zealand, this adult shows several of the field marks of the species to good advantage: the decurved bill, the white wing stripe, the white rump, and the length of the legs. This bird is molting into breeding plumage, developing the bright chestnut color that will make it so conspicuous in spring and summer. Photograph/Brian Chudleigh/VIREO (c20/1/135)



Juvenile Curlew Sandpiper in fairly fresh plumage (early September). The edgings on the scapulars are buffy-white, a slightly warmer buff on the upper scapulars, but with much less contrast than on a fresh juvenile Dunlin; notice the dark subterminal lines on the coverts and lower scapulars. By this season, the buff wash on the chest and face has already begun to fade. The pale supercilium is quite apparent on this bird. Photograph/R. J. Chandler/VIREO (c18/2/071)

fusion is automatically present.

Bill shape is routinely mentioned as a major field mark for separating these two. In general, the bill of Curlew Sandpiper is evenly decurved, while that of Dunlin tends to be straighter at the base and drooped at the tip. However, bill shape in both species varies enough that some individuals of either may look intermediate, at least superficially. Another well-known difference is that Curlew Sandpiper has a white rump while Dunlin does not. This is usually impossible to see except when the bird flies—and most birders would rather not flush a potential rarity, lest it might fly away for good!

In shape, Curlew Sandpiper looks a bit more slim and elongated than the Dunlin, with a longer neck when standing erect. But this distinction disappears when the Curlew hunches down—and fluffing out its body feathers can even obscure the fact that its legs are longer. Thus silhouette alone would be a very tricky field mark.

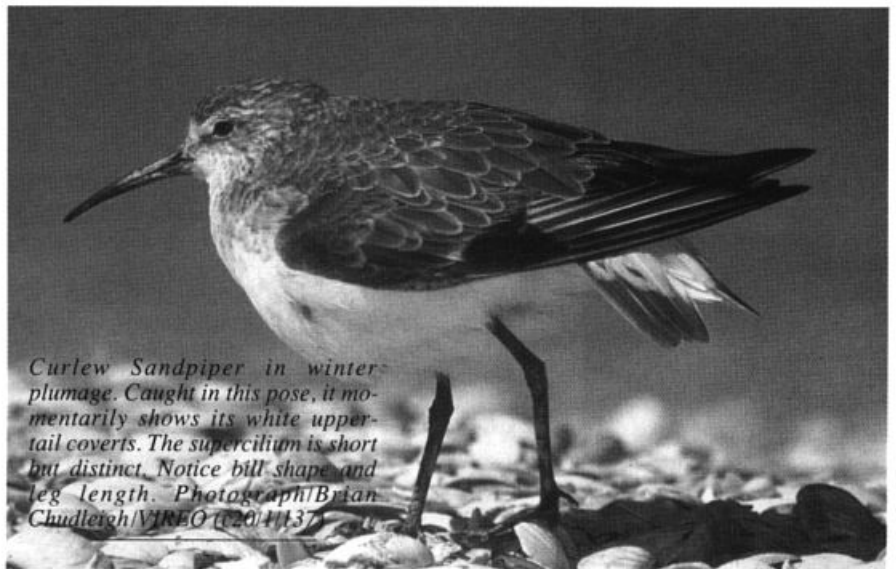
Dunlins in full juvenal plumage are very distinctive, but the average North American birder seldom sees such birds. Most young Dunlins have already begun to molt by the time they show up at migration stopovers. This in itself is a good distinction from young Curlew Sandpipers, which are generally still in complete juvenal plumage by mid-autumn. (Curlew Sandpipers may put off the molt until later because they have farther to go in migration: most of them winter near or south of the Equator, while most Dunlins winter well north of it.) See the accompanying photos and captions for comparisons of young Curlews and Dunlins.

Curlew Sandpiper in full winter (basic) plumage is much less likely to be seen on this continent, and it would have to be identified with care. Compared to winter Dunlin, it would show a more distinct pale supercilium, a generally whiter chest, and slightly paler upperparts. Bill shape, rump pattern, and leg length would all have to be noted carefully.

Under some circumstances, the juvenile Stilt Sandpiper (*Calidris himantopus*) has also been misidentified as a Curlew Sandpiper. Although the Stilt's legs are distinctly longer (and usually yellow), this may not be apparent when the bird is wading (as it often is). The adult Stilt Sandpiper has



Juvenile Curlew Sandpiper in late September. Although the plumage has begun to fade and wear slightly, molt is not yet under way, so the upperparts still have a neatly scaled look. The upperparts are all brown and buffy-white, showing far less contrast than would be apparent on juvenile Dunlin or Stilt Sandpiper. Notice that the supercilium is much stronger than on Dunlin. Photograph/R. J. Chandler/VIREO (c18/1/033)

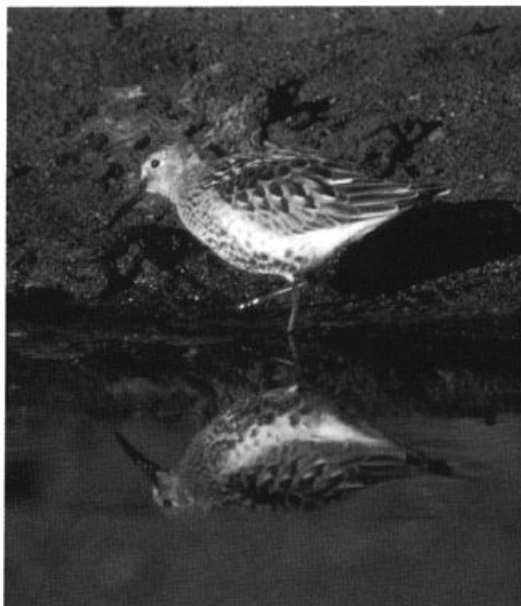


Curlew Sandpiper in winter plumage. Caught in this pose, it momentarily shows its white upper-tail coverts. The supercilium is short but distinct. Notice bill shape and leg length. Photograph/Brian Chudleigh/VIREO (c20/1/137)



Curlew Sandpiper in winter, feeding. In this hunched-over posture the bird suggests the chunkier shape of a Dunlin, and it is turned so that the pale supercilium and chest are not obvious. However, the dark terminal crescents still visible on some of the coverts and scapulars indicate that the bird is not a Dunlin, and suggest that it is a first-winter Curlew (showing the worn remains of juvenal plumage). Photograph/Brian Chudleigh/VIREO (c20/1/136)

Dunlin in fresh juvenal plumage, with lots of contrast on the scapulars, with rich buff on the face and neck, and with smeary black spots extending down the breast and sides and onto the flanks. North American populations of Dunlins are generally not early migrants, and young Dunlins are hard to find at lower latitudes before September; this juvenile was located in late summer in northern Alaska. Photograph/J. P. Myers/VIREO (m0116/020)



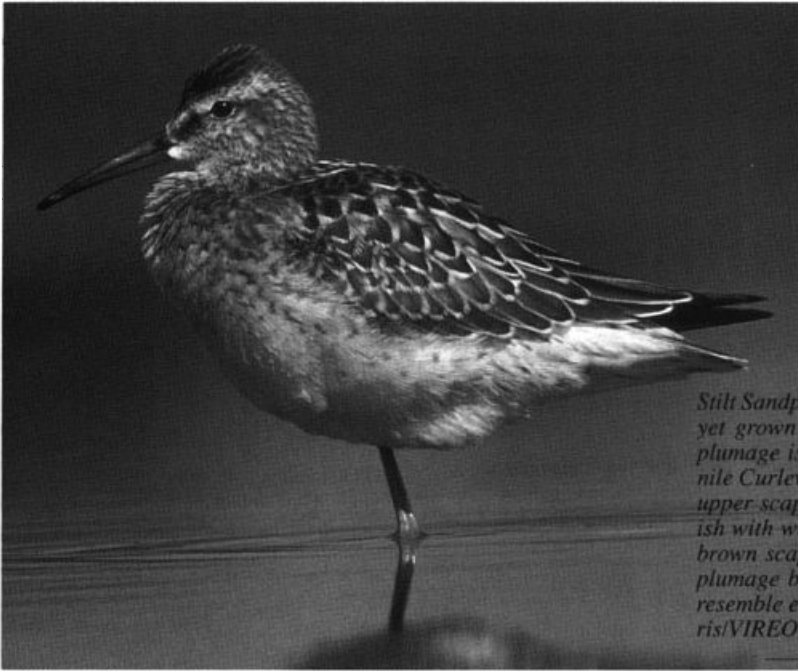
a long, droop-tipped bill, but on a young bird in its first southward migration this may not be fully developed yet: its bill may look almost evenly decurved. Since this species also has a white rump and a distinct supercilium, it can mislead some observers—especially those who are looking a little too hard for Curlew Sandpipers. The best defense against this error is to slow down and look carefully at leg color and length, head shape, neck length, and the exact pattern of the scapulars. For practiced eyes, the shape of the bird will automatically provide a clue that something is amiss...allowing the observer to appreciate the subtlety of the Stilt Sandpiper and then move on, knowing that the real Curlew Sandpiper may be not far away. ■



No longer in full juvenal plumage, this young Dunlin (photographed in early September in New York) has already begun molting in gray feathers on the scapulars and back, and it is losing the black mottling on the sides and flanks. Most young Dunlins already look like this by the time they appear south of the Arctic. Photograph/Thomas H. Davis, Jr./VIREO (d0313/025)

Portrait of a winter Dunlin. The head is mostly gray, with no obvious supercilium, and there is a gray wash across the chest. In some populations (including some that occur in western North America) the fine streaking on the sides and flanks is either fainter or lacking. Photograph/Robert Villani/VIREO (v0512/080)



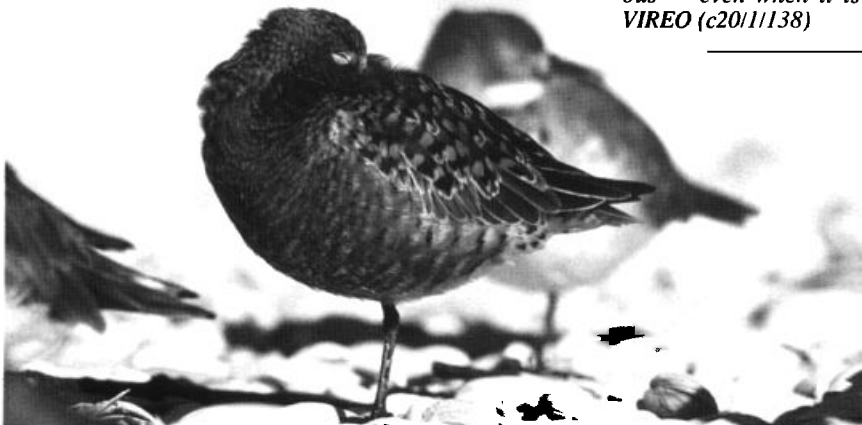


Stilt Sandpiper in very fresh juvenal plumage. The bill is not yet grown to its full adult shape. At this point, while the plumage is still very fresh, the bird is separated from juvenile Curlew Sandpiper by the colorful scapulars — with the upper scapulars edged rich chestnut, the lower ones blackish with white edges. Juvenile Curlew Sandpiper has gray-brown scapulars with buff edges when it is fresh. After the plumage begins to become worn, however, the two species resemble each other more closely. Photograph/Arthur Morris/VIREO (m17/13/147)

Young Stilt Sandpiper in mid-autumn, having molted the colorful upper scapulars. It still has blackish coverts with obvious white edges, showing a little more contrast than a Curlew Sandpiper would at that season. The bill, probably not quite full-grown yet, could be misinterpreted as showing the same curved shape as that of Curlew Sandpiper. However, other aspects of shape are wrong for that species: the neck is too long, the body looks a little too elongated, and the forehead looks too sloping (not steep enough) for Curlew Sandpiper. Photograph/Serge Lafrance/VIREO (106/4/102)



On further reflection, if you don't want to work on discerning these birds in subtle plumages, get out in mid-summer and look for adult Curlew Sandpipers before they molt out of their bright breeding garb. This individual was actually photographed in early spring, still showing white edgings on the feathers of the underparts, which will disappear with wear. The pattern on the upperparts will also be less striking on summer birds. But the overall chestnut color will make a mid-summer Curlew Sandpiper very conspicuous — even when it is asleep. Photograph/Brian Chudleigh/VIREO (c20/11/138)



VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology), at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, is the world's first and foremost scientific collection of bird photographs. Established in 1979, the collection now holds well over 100,000 images, representing about half of the world's bird species. For more background, see the feature on VIREO by J. P. Myers *et al.* in *American Birds* Volume 38, Number 3, May–June 1984.