# APPARENT BROAD-BILLED SANDPIPER IN NOVA SCOTIA

*by Ian A. McLaren and Blake Maybank*

SHORTLY AFTER 10:00 A.M. ON September 9, 1990, we began to scrutinize flocks of several hundred shorebirds at Hartlen Point, Halifax County, Nova Scotia. The birds were nervous and flighty, evidently because of periodic sweeps by a Merlin *(Falco columbarius)*; a Peregrine Falcon *(F. peregrinus)* and a Sharp-shinned Hawk *(Accipiter striatus)* were also seen nearby. Almost all the shorebirds were Semipalmated Sandpipers *(Calidris pusilla)*, among which we identified sprinklings of Semipalmated Plovers *(Charadrius semipalmatus)*, a few Red Knots *(Calidris canutus)*, Sanderlings *(C. alba)*, White-rumped Sandpipers *(C. fuscicollis)*, Least Sandpipers *(C. minutilla)*, a juvenile Western Sandpiper *(C. mauri)*, and a Baird's Sandpiper *(C. bairdii)*.

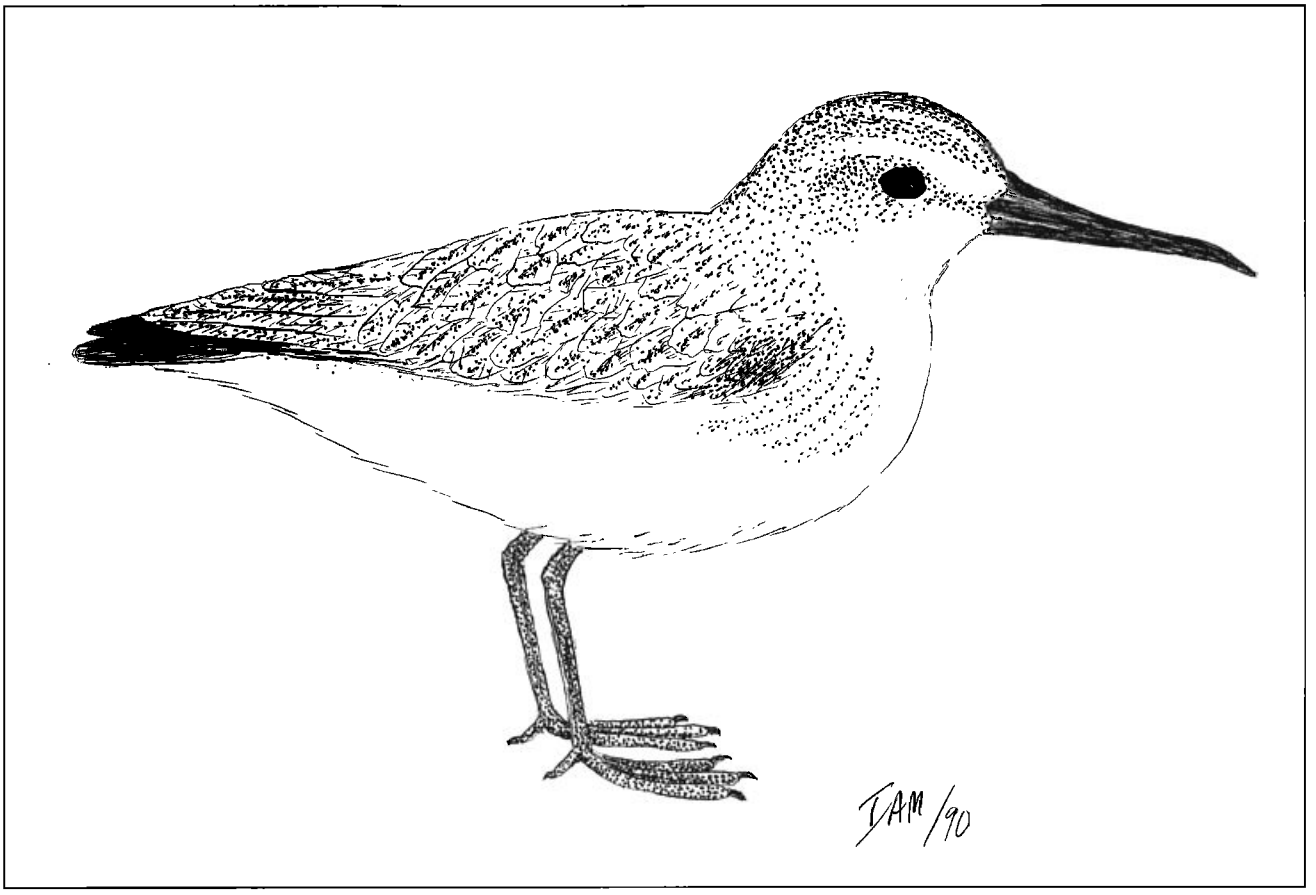
In a group of several score "peeps", one bird was readily picked out as bulkier and strikingly paler than the Semipalmated Sandpipers around it. Also mesmerizingly obvious, even without binoculars, was its long bill, in some ways like a cartoonist's exaggeration of a Western Sandpiper's. The tide was nearly high, and the birds were almost all feeding actively on wrack and among beach rocks. The strange bird was, by contrast, not feeding and stood quietly (no vocalizations were heard) on seaweed or rocks.

**We began to think that the bird was in some way abnormal. It was not until during the last minute or so of observation that the candidacy of Broad-billed Sandpiper became forcibly obvious.**

Our observations were interrupted several times by panic flights of the flock caused by the falcons. Twice the bird of interest stayed behind, crouching in the seaweed. On two occasions when it did fly, it was immediately rediscovered when the flock landed nearby. Altogether, we had about three cumulative minutes of study of the bird, at ranges as close as a 6-7 meters, with 10 x 40 and 8 x 40 binoculars, and with a 25 x 60 spotting scope. Finally, in a massive panic flight involving all the birds along the beach, flocks departed in various directions, and we were unable to find the bird during an hour's further searching. Although we had a camera we were not prepared for the bird's precipitous departure, and no photographs were taken. It was not found by other searchers through the afternoon or next day.

Our first thoughts were of Western Sandpiper in advanced, basic plumage. However, McLaren had spent much time in the previous few weeks studying this species on the west coast, and we next began to think that the bird was in some way abnormal. It was not until during the last minute or so of observation that the candidacy of Broad-billed Sandpiper *(Limicola falcinellus)* became forcibly obvious. We then began a serious discussion on its characteristics. The following account is based on notes made within minutes of observation before reference to published descriptions and illustrations.

The shape of the bird was very distinctive, much more plump-breasted than the surrounding Semipalmated Sandpipers. It did not crouch, except when alarmed, but was relatively short-legged. Thus, although bulkier, it did not stand above neighboring Semipalmated Sandpipers. It was not, however, as large as nearby White-rumped Sandpipers or Semipalmated Plovers. At rest, the dark primary tips extended slightly beyond the ter-




tials exactly to the tip of the tail.

The underparts were white, with fine, grayish streaks only on the outer parts of the upper breast, which was otherwise gleaming white to the throat in contrast to any of the "peeps" present (mostly juvenile and molting adult Semipalmateds). The back was pale gray, with narrow, darker gray feather centers, and without conspicuously paler or darker feather margins. The back appeared uniform in tone, like that of some near-basic White-rumped Sandpipers present, but considerably paler. The wing partly contrasted with the pale back; Maybank likened this to the darker wingbends (lesser coverts) of a Sanderling.

The head pattern was not so striking as to command attention, evidently because of its subdued, fully basic feathering. Overall, the head was much paler than those of any of the surrounding "peeps." There was a darker gray crown stripe running from the base of the bill, a white supercilium, and a dusky eyeline expanded behind the eye as a not-strongly-contrasting ear patch. Observing it from the front, Maybank remarked that the supercilium seemed to expand posteriorly. Viewing it from the side, McLaren thought that the posterior end of the crown stripe was bordered by a paler, ruffled stripe. It was not until after the bird had gone (but before examining any illustrations) that we both realized that we had been looking at a "split" supercilium.

**The bird stood at one point on a bare rock, giving a good view of its short legs. No toe webbing was visible, and the legs and feet were notably stout, quite unlike the spindly members of nearby Semipalmated Sandpipers.**

The blackish bill was the bird's most striking feature. It seemed as long as or longer than that of a long-billed Western Sandpiper, but of quite different shape. It was thickened at the base and tapered to a distinctively kinked downward tip. From the front and above, it only narrowed slightly before the terminal tapering of the tip. It was obviously different from the decurved bills of the usual peeps, including the Western Sandpiper, but we did not at the time fully articulate its uniqueness.

The bird stood at one point on a bare rock, giving a good view of its short legs. No toe webbing was visible, and the legs and feet were notably

stout, quite unlike the spindly members of nearby Semipalmated Sandpipers. The legs were definitely grayish-green, not merely with the tinge of olive sometimes seen on the black legs of Semipalmated Sandpipers. The feet appeared even more greenish, perhaps because they were wet.
On one of its flights Maybank saw a dark gray strip extending from the paler back through the white-sided rump, and a narrow wing stripe, no more prominent than that of the Semipalmated Sandpipers.

After notes and a sketch were made, references were widely consulted. Among paintings of the basic plumage of the bird, that in Harris *et al.* 1989 (p. 79) closely matches our bird. Other paintings (*e.g.* in Cramp *et al.* 1983, Hayman *et al.* 1986) show more prominent streaking on the breast and broader dark centers on back and wing feathers. The winter plumage of the bird in Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.* 1975, was evidently based on a photograph of a misidentified Dunlin *(Calidris alpina)* (see Barthel 1989). The photograph in Chandler (1989) is of a bird with some alternate back plumage remaining, unlike ours, and appears darker. Although said to be of the "paler and greyer" race *sibirica*, the photograph appears partially backlit and may have been underexposed. A bird in "winter plumage" in Hong Kong in April (Barthel 1989, Fig. 5) is very similar to ours, although with some broader, darker feather centers. Another "winter plumage" bird in New Zealand (plate 52b accompanying Nisbet 1961) is almost identical in back tone to ours.

Most paintings do not do justice to the bill shape that we observed, perhaps because they are guided by distorted and shrunken museum specimens (an exception among field guides is Scott 1987, and among monographs, is Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.* 1975). In addition to the obvious thickness of the bill, photographs (*e.g* in Chandler 1989, Prater *et al* 1977) show the *straight lower edge of the mandible and slightly concave culmen, behind the terminal kink,* quite unlike the continuously decurved culmens of other small calidrids with which it might be compared. This character, which is not mentioned explicitly in any field guides known to us, was unconsciously exaggerated on a field sketch made by McLaren immediately after our observations, and is shown more-or-less correctly on the accompanying figure.

We believe that the field marks recorded immediately after our regrettably brief observations preclude any other species. Our initial inability to identify the bird was because we both carried mental images of this species in its alternate, snipe-like plumage. That this bird was in full "winter" plumage is not surprising; they are said to acquire this during September (*e.g.* Chandler 1989, Cramp *et al.* 1983, Prater *et al.* 1977). In fact, J. B. Cox (Editor, *The South Australian Ornithologist,* Adelaide; *in litt.,* Nov. 22, 1990) writes: "I have never seen an alternate-plumage or juvenile *sibirica* in Australia even in September. Even the earliest arrivals seem to be in full basic plumage." Neither of us had any prior expectations about this plumage (including the darker forewing) and our belated identification of the bird in the field was based on its extraordinary bill shape, quite unlike anything that we had ever seen.

We can speculate on the origin of this bird. Prater *et al.* 1977 and Chandler 1989 mention that the basic plumage of the race nesting in Europe, *Limicola f. falcinellus,* is darker than that of birds nesting in eastern Siberia, *L.f. sibirica.* The very pale back of our bird might suggest that it came from the far Northwest.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We thank John B. Cox, Kenn Kaufman, and Anthony McGeehan for comments on the record and manuscript.

**Literature Cited**

BARTHEL, P.H. 1989. Korrekturen zum Schlichtkleid von Weißbürzel-Strandläufer *Calidris fusicollis* und Sumpfläufer *Limicola falcinellus. Limicola* 3:300–306.

CHANDLER, R.J. 1989. The Macmillan field guide to North Atlantic shorebirds. Macmillan Press Ltd., London.

CRAMP, S., *et al.* 1983. The birds of the western Palearctic. Vol. III Waders to gulls. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

GLUTZ VON BLOTZHEIM, U. N., K.M. BAUER, AND E. BEZZEL 1975. Handburch der Vogël Mitteleuropas 6. Charadriiformes (1). Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, Wiesbaden.

HARRIS, A., L. TUCKER, AND K. VINICOMBE. 1989. The Macmillan field guide to bird identification. Macmillan Press Ltd., London.

HAYMAN, P., J. MARCHANT, AND T. PRATER. 1986. Shorebirds, an identification guide to the waders of the world. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.

NISBET, I.C.T. 1961. Studies of less familiar birds 113. Broad-billed Sandpiper. *British Birds* 54: 320–323.

PRATER, A.J., J.H. MARCHANT, AND J. VUORINEN. 1977. Guide to the identification and ageing of holarctic waders. British Trust for Ornithology, Tring, Herts.

SCOTT, S.L. (ED.). 1987. Field guide to the birds of North America. Second edition. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.

*—Biology Department, Dalhousie University Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 4J1 (McLaren), Site 14 A, Box 43, R.R #4, Armdale, Nova ScotiaB3L 4J4 (Maybank)*