

Nominate Rock Sandpiper at Ocean Shores, Washington

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Abstract

This paper documents the first record of a nominate Rock Sandpiper (*Calidris ptilocnemis ptilocnemis*, the "Pribilof" Rock Sandpiper) south of Alaska, a single bird at Ocean Shores, Washington, in November 2000 through February 2001. Results of a search of museums for similar southerly records, and a synopsis of recent discoveries regarding the typical wintering range of this form, are presented herein as well.

Description

The early morning of 15 November 2000 was sunny but brisk when I arrived at the Point Brown jetty at Ocean Shores, Washington. Northeasterly winds made it feel colder than the thermometer's 35° F, but the clear skies more than compensated for the cold. I noticed a good congregation of shorebirds near the base of the jetty's north side. There were 150 birds present, and with these numbers, I was hopeful that I might locate a few Rock Sandpipers (*Calidris ptilocnemis*). There were at least 10 among the flock, which consisted primarily of Surf-birds (*Aphriza virgata*), with some Black Turnstones (*Arenaria melanocephala*) also present. The record high count for Rock Sandpiper in Washington is only 50, found at the same location on 26 March 1977 (Paulson 1993), but numbers of these birds have been much lower in recent years. One of the birds was much paler than its surrounding conspecifics, and its distinctly different appearance caused me to study it closely.



Figure 1. Nominat Rock Sandpiper (*C. p. ptilocnemis*), foreground, with an individual of Washington's presumed wintering race (*C. p. tschuktschorum*). Note the difference in bulk and color. Ocean Shores, WA. 18 November 2000. Photograph by Ryan Shaw.



Figure 2. Nominat Rock Sandpiper (*C. p. ptilocnemis*). Note bronzy tones in scapulars. Ocean Shores, WA. 18 November 2000. Photograph by Ryan Shaw.

Rock Sandpiper in Washington



Figure 3. Nominate Rock Sandpiper (*C. p. ptilocnemis*) with Surf-bird (*Aphriza virgata*) in foreground. Ocean Shores, WA. 18 November 2000. Photograph by Ryan Shaw.



Figure 4. Nominate Rock Sandpiper (*C. p. ptilocnemis*) displaying extremely pale gray tones, particularly on the upper mantle. Breast streaks would appear much darker on *C. p. tschuktschorum*. Pale edging on median coverts is indicative of a first-year bird. Ocean Shores, WA. 18 November 2000. Photograph by Ryan Shaw.

Nominate birds are recognizable in winter plumage from the other three races of Rock Sandpiper by their larger size and paler gray plumage (Conover 1944, Paulson 1993). The Ocean Shores bird was clearly larger than the surrounding Rock Sandpipers, which were presumably of Washington's usual wintering race, *C. p. tschuktschorum*. The size difference was readily apparent when the birds were compared directly. The "Pribilof" bird was slightly greater in body length, but most obviously it was more bulky in appearance. It also had a slightly longer bill than the surrounding Rock Sandpipers, but this may have been due to individual variation. The bird's paleness was striking. The light pearly gray head and upper mantle (extending down to the area between the wings) stood out starkly in the field, and the rest of the upperparts were also pale. In his description of winter plumage for this race, Ridgway (1919) calls the color of the upper parts light gray, between "pale quaker drab" and "cinereous."

The Ocean Shores bird also showed a pronounced pale gray to whitish supercilium, which was slightly broken near the eye and extended to the forehead. Breast streaking was very sparse, only present on the upper breast and flanks and light gray, in sharp contrast to the heavy, dark streaking on the surrounding birds. The entirety of the underparts looked light relative to the other Rock Sandpipers. Characters such as supercilium definition and breast streaking are variable on nominate basic-plumaged birds according to Bob Gill (pers. comm.). The scapulars and interscapulars were pale in comparison to the other Rock Sandpipers present, but upon closer inspection revealed a warm brown tinge, especially in their centers. Gabrielson and Lincoln (1959) and Ridgway (1919) describe these feathers as having a very faint purplish or bronzy wash in certain lights. The legs appeared the same pale yellowish-green color as the other birds, but the base of the bill had more yellow, with a complete yellow "saddle," especially when viewed from above. At no time did I confuse the pale bird with the others, as it was so obviously different. The birds' confiding nature made it easy to study the flock over a two-hour period from as close as 5 m.

The bird remained in the area at least through February 2001. It was observed and photographed by Patrick Sullivan and Ryan Shaw (Fig. 1-4) on 18 November and seen by other birders after that. I returned and observed the bird on 6 December 2000 and 1 February 2001 and noted several additional marks that separated it from the *C. p. tschuktschorum*, including the prominent white edging on its outer retrices, a wider white wingstripe, and mostly (if not entirely) white underwings. The latter two marks are noted by Paulson (1993) and Hayman et al. (1986) as diagnostic characters for the nominate form.

Discussion

Shaw's photographs on the Internet allowed Paulson (pers. comm.) to express the opinion that the bird was likely *C. p. ptilocnemis*, and further correspondence with Alaskans who viewed the photos confirmed the initial diagnosis. Bob Gill (pers. comm.) felt that it was a first-year bird due to faint buff edging on the median coverts. Although it is unfortunate that the bird could not be trapped and measured for verification, the plumage characters and visible size difference in direct comparison are believed to be sufficient to confirm the subspecific identification.

This appears to be the first recorded occurrence of this subspecies anywhere south of Alaska. The nominate race breeds on the Bering Sea islands including the Pribilofs, St. Matthew, and Hall Islands (American Ornithologists' Union 1957). Historically, however, the winter range was poorly known, and nominate Rock Sandpipers were thought to be largely sedentary, with a few wandering south to Juneau (A.O.U. 1957, Hayman et al. 1986).

This view changed recently when Gill (1997) documented that close to 90 per cent of the nominate subspecies winters in Upper Cook Inlet, near the mouth of the Beluga River, where he counted 20,000 birds in late January 1997. More recently, records from south of Juneau by G. Van Vliet in December 1998 have been published in *North American Birds* (Tobish 1999). Michael Shepard, *North American Birds* Regional Editor for British Columbia, is not aware of records from the Pacific Northwest south of Alaska, and Paulson (pers. comm.) had checked several museums without locating any. A request posted to the AVECOL listserv for museum personnel failed to produce any valid nominate specimens that were collected south of Alaska (P. Sweet, pers. comm.).

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ing information on the subspecies, and Steve Mlodinow made many useful comments that improved an initial draft of this manuscript. Thanks also to Paul Sweet for posting my request to the AVECOL listserv, and to Paul, Nate Rice, and others for investigating specimens in their collections. Thanks also to Ryan Shaw and Ruth and Patrick Sullivan for photographing the bird and making their photos available to confirm the identification.

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