

A SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER IN COLORADO, WITH NOTES ON PLUMAGE AND BEHAVIOR

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On 26 October 1975 we discovered an immature Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*) at Hiram Prince Lake II, a small pond 1 mile north of Lafayette, Boulder County, Colorado. It was observed foraging in a loose association with four Pectoral Sandpipers (*C. melanotos*). Nearby were eight Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) and four Long-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*). On 31 October we trapped and banded the Sharp-tailed and took a series of photographs, measurements and feather samples. Slide duplicates are on file at the Denver Museum of Natural History. Later that day we released it at the same pond, where it remained until 6 November 1975. During this 12-day period many other observers saw the bird. This is the only recorded occurrence of this species in Colorado.

The plumage description detailed below is taken from notes made on 31 October while the bird was in hand. Table 1 summarizes useful field characteristics of Sharp-tailed and Pectoral sandpipers.

UPPERPARTS: Crown feathers dark with rusty feather edging, giving the appearance of a rusty cap with narrow dark streaking. Well-defined white superciliary stripe finely streaked with dusky. Thin white eyering. Auriculars buffy, faintly streaked with brown, darkest below and posterior to eye, giving the appearance of a dark patch. Grey-buff in lores extending to upper mandible base. Nape cinnamon streaked with brown. Feather centers of scapulars and lower back blackish-brown, scapulars edged with buff, rust or white (creating two pale lines on each side of the upper back). Upper tail coverts blackish-brown with thin pale-cinnamon edging (Figure 1).

UNDERPARTS: Chin and throat unstreaked white, blending into a warm ochraceous-buff breast "bib". Ventral streaking confined to a faint "necklace" across the upper chest region and extending down the sides of the breast only, leaving the central lower breast region unstreaked (Figure 2, left). Belly dull white, upper flanks with heavy dusky shaft-streaking. In the field, the flank streaking was usually hidden by the wing. Under tail coverts with narrow dusky shaft-streaks.

TAIL: All rectrices acuminate and dark with central pair longest, others progressively shorter to the outermost (Figure 2, right). Central rectrices edged with cinnamon-rust, remaining rectrices edged with buff to white (outermost).

WING: Vanes of all remiges uniformly dusky. Shaft of outermost primary mottled with dusky basally, becoming pale distally. Secondaries narrowly edged with white. Greater secondary coverts moderately tipped with white, providing a thin wingstripe (Figure 3). Tertials elongate with rusty edges. In the field, tertials drooped over the folded remiges. Underwing coverts and axillars extensively white-tipped.

SOFT PARTS: Irises dark brown. Bill dark with indistinct pale base, slightly curved throughout. Legs drab greenish-yellow.

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Table 1. Comparative field characteristics of immature Sharp-tailed and Pectoral sandpipers. These characteristics are based primarily upon prolonged observation of the Boulder County Sharp-tailed and accompanying Pectoral sandpipers, and to a lesser extent upon subsequent observations of Pectoral Sandpipers and upon examination of specimens of both species. Italics indicate most reliable field marks.

CHARACTERISTIC	SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER <i>Calidris acuminata</i>	PECTORAL SANDPIPER <i>Calidris melanotos</i>
Body: size	More robust than Pectorals, giving a "hunched-back" appearance.	Trim, less stocky, giving appearance of a longer neck.
posture	While walking, top of head often held lower than back.	Head held more upright.
Facial appearance:	Sharp contrast between rusty crown above white supercilium and dusky auricular patch below. Noticeable from considerable distances.	Crown usually brown (occasionally with some rusty edging). Pale supercilium / crown area not sharply defined.
Underparts: throat and chest	Narrow streaking restricted to lower throat ("necklace"), sides of neck and sides only of "bib." <i>Mid and lower "bib" unstreaked, warm cinnamon-buff. Lower border not sharply defined at a distance. Belly dull white.</i>	<i>Entire chest (from lower throat to upper breast, i.e. "bib" area) usually strongly marked with dark shaft streaks. Lower edge of "bib" usually dark and well-defined. Belly dull white.</i>
Undertail coverts:	Dull white with distinct narrow dusky shaft streaking. This feature usually not noticeable except when seen from behind when bird is in feeding tilt.	Dull white. Presence of streaking variable between individuals, most lack streaking, some streaked as in Sharp-tailed.
Tail:	Dark, central rectrix pointed, <i>acuminate tips of outer rectrices</i> sometimes visible when the bird is preening its tail. Distal outline of tail not noticeably wedge-shaped in flight.	Dark, central rectrix pointed, outer rectrices not acuminate. Distal outline of tail not noticeably biconcave in flight.
Wing: length	In flight, when seen together, wingspread noticeably greater than Pectoral.	---
tertials	Broadly edged with cinnamon-buff.	Usually edged with gray-buff, but occasionally like Sharp-tailed.

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Table 1 (Cont.)

CHARACTERISTIC	SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER <i>Calidris acuminata</i>	PECTORAL SANDPIPER <i>Calidris melanotos</i>
Bill: length	Slightly shorter than head length, as estimated from base of bill to nape, through the eye.	Slightly longer than (or equal to) head length.
shape	Slight decurvature throughout, finer tipped than Pectorals.	Slight decurvature throughout.
color	All dark, with faint pale area at base of mandible only.	Variable, some as in Sharp-tailed, most with more extensive basal pale area in mandible.
Legs: length	Not noticeably longer than Pectoral, although stocky body gives a shorter appearance.	---
color	<i>Greenish-yellow</i> , more drab than Pectoral.	<i>Pale yellow</i> .
Call:	Mellow, <i>paired notes</i> given in flight ("tchew-wt, tchew-wt").	Dry, usually <i>single notes</i> given in flight ("Kreeh," or sometimes "Kreek-eh").

BEHAVIORAL COMPARISON

Several behavioral differences that separated the Colorado Sharp-tailed from the accompanying Pectorals are listed below. These observations are pointed out in the hopes that other observers will test the reliability of the differences in subsequent sightings of Sharp-tailed and Pectoral sandpipers.

POSTURE: When walking, the Sharp-tailed held its head at or below the level of its back, maintaining a forward-tilted appearance. Lowering its head seemed to be counterbalanced by depressing its tail to such an extent that a noticeable gap (approximately 1.0-1.5 cm) existed between the tail tip below and the wing tips above. This combination of body tilt and relatively large gap repeatedly enabled us to distinguish this bird from the Pectorals by silhouette. Pectorals maintained a more erect posture, usually holding the tail in line with the wingtips.

VOICE: When flushed, the Sharp-tailed gave a quick mellow couplet, "tchew-wt, tchew-wt" vaguely reminiscent of muted Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) call notes.

AGGRESSION: On two occasions a Pectoral closely approached the foraging Sharp-tailed and was chased away by the latter. In each incident, the Sharp-tailed lowered its head and made a quick dash with its lowered bill aimed at the approaching Pectoral. There was no physical contact, and after each interaction the Sharp-tailed immediately resumed foraging without further pursuit.

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Figure 1. Immature Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*), Hiram Prince Lake II, 1 mile north of Lafayette, Boulder Co., Colorado, 26 October-6 November 1975. Note color of scapulars, face, crown and breast.



Figure 2. Immature Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*), Hiram Prince Lake II, 1 mile north of Lafayette, Boulder Co., Colorado, 26 October-6 November 1975. Left photo shows well-defined white supercilious and characteristic breast markings. Right photo shows acuminate tips of outer rectrices, streaked undertail coverts and wedge-shaped outline of tail.

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Figure 3. Immature Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*), Hiram Prince Lake II, 1 mile north of Lafayette, Boulder Co., Colorado, 26 October-6 November 1975. Note wingbar and primary shaft color and extent of white along rump.

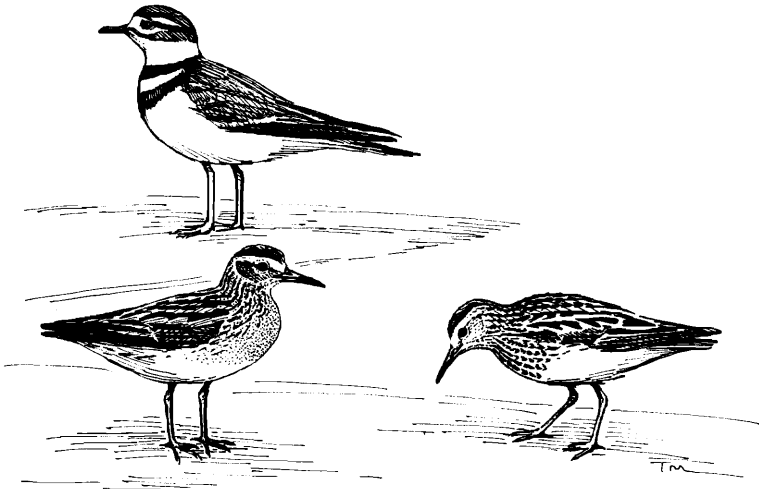
Photos by Bruce E. Webb

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FLOCK ASSOCIATES: Once when the four shorebird species at Hiram Prince Lake II were flushed simultaneously, the Sharp-tailed immediately joined and circled overhead in close association with the Pectorals. The dowitchers departed and the Killdeer settled on the opposite shoreline. On another occasion we relocated the Sharp-tailed, still associated with four Pectorals, on another small pond 2.5 miles northeast of Hiram Prince Lake II.

FEEDING ZONE: The Sharp-tailed remained along the water's edge or the immediately adjacent mudflat, often wandering considerable distances from the flock of Pectorals. The Pectorals remained relatively close together, occasionally feeding at the water's edge. More often they foraged and rested in the zone of short vegetation farther from the water than the Sharp-tailed.

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Sketch by Tim Manolis