



*Sharp-tailed Sandpiper—Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Queens Co.
18 July, 1981* *Robert Lewis*

PHOTOGRAPHS OF NEW YORK STATE RARITIES

41. SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER

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The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*) nests on the eastern Siberian tundra and winters from southern China to Australia, and in migration has been recorded in western North America and England as a straggler (Dement'ev *et al.* 1969, p. 172-175). It is "one of the commonest most widespread wader migrants to coastal and inland Australia and Tasmania" (Pizzey, 1980, p. 129). Bent (1927, p. 167) states that "on the fall migration it visits the coast of northwestern Alaska frequently, perhaps regularly, and often commonly. It occurs regularly, sometimes abundantly on the Pribilof Islands in the fall. In southern Alaska and farther south, it occurs only as a rare straggler . . . it is so much like our Pectoral Sandpiper in appearance, behavior, and haunts, that it has probably often been overlooked; it may therefore occur on our northwest coast much oftener than we suspect."

Bent's surmise has proven true; with increased observer recognition, the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper is now known to be a rare but regular fall migrant along the Pacific coast south of Alaska, and a steadily increasing number of birds has been reported scattered about the rest of North America. Excluding the Pacific states and British Columbia, *American Birds* (1968-1980, volumes 22-34) cites 15 North American records of the species. Deleting several dubious reports, their occurrence may be summarized as follows: Spring—one definite record, a bird photographed 23 May 1978 in Alberta, Canada; Fall—an adult collected 30 June 1970 in Massachusetts, specimen in MCZ, and eight juvenals of age not stated, 28 September-5 December.

On 18 July 1981 the author discovered a breeding-plumaged adult Sharp-tailed Sandpiper at the East Pond at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Queens County. The bird remained until 24 July, during which time it was observed by 150 to 200 birders from eight states and recognizable photographs were obtained by Robert Lewis of New York (see accompanying photographs) and Erik Breden of New Jersey. This report constitutes the first record for New York State.

The following description of behavior and plumage is taken from my field notes of 18 July. I observed the bird for about two and one half hours from as close as 20m. with a Questar 80 and a 30x tele-

scope and other optics. I was joined at this time by Thomas W. Burke, Stephen B. Dempsey, and Robert Lewis, and sought their agreement on all characters noted.

SIZE: a *Calidris* sandpiper about the size and shape of a small Pectoral Sandpiper (*C. melanotos*) but with a shorter, slightly arched bill.

PLUMAGE: the bird was in breeding plumage with no molting feathers but showed wear on the edges of the mantle and wing covert feathers. Crown chestnut with thin black streaks (about like that of a bright juvenal Pectoral), eyeline dull grayish white, did not contrast sharply with crown. Mantle feathers blackish with narrow rusty edges. Rump white divided by a black central line. Tail appeared wedge-shaped when it was spread to land. Wings with an indistinct white stripe in flight. Throat and breast buff coarsely streaked with dark brown, on the lower chest the streaking splayed outward and turned to bold chevrons which continued along the flanks (visible below the folded wing at rest), and the undertail coverts were white with conspicuous dark streaks that came together in the form of a V (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Pattern of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper's underparts (redrafted from a crude field sketch.)

SOFT PARTS: bill slightly arched, black with flesh pink at the base of the lower mandible. Legs greenish yellow, appeared dark at a distance.

BEHAVIOR AND HABITAT: kept much to itself but observed with Killdeer, Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers, once in flight

alongside two Pectoral Sandpipers when the streaked undertail coverts immediately distinguished it. Favored short grass and mud border along the pond away from the shoreline, usually close to phragmites. Fed deliberately like a Pectoral Sandpiper, walking about picking at the ground. Flight call a reedy *reet-reet*.

COMMENT

Much of the information on the identification of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers in the standard field guides is either too simplistic or erroneous, and does not properly make comparison to similar species including Pectoral Sandpiper and juvenal Ruff. These shortcomings and the field guides' lack of juvenal shorebird plumages often lead observers astray—a juvenal Sharp-tailed Sandpiper reported several years ago in Connecticut was later revealed to be a juvenal Dunlin!! Britton (1980) published the most comprehensive paper on Sharp-tailed Sandpiper identification in all plumages, profusely illustrated with black-and-white photographs and line drawings. Interested persons will also wish to consult Webb and Conry (1979), detailing Colorado's first record of a juvenal bird and including excellent color and black-and-white photographs.

LITERATURE CITED

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