

BROAD-BILLED SANDPIPER — FIRST RECORD FOR LOWER 48 STATES

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ABSTRACT — A Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*) was seen at the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge in Queens County, NY, from 27 August through 4 September 1998. The sighting of this species is not only a first for New York State, but a first for the Lower 48 States.

INTRODUCTION

The Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*) is listed in 7th Edition (1998) of the A.O.U. Check-list followed by the letter (A) which indicates "Accidental/Casual" occurrence. The species has only previously been reliably reported from the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, with a sight record in Nova Scotia. Therefore, the sighting of this species at the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge in Queens County, NY, is not only a first for New York State, but a first for the Lower 48.

There are two subspecies, the nominate *falcinellus*, which breeds in Scandinavia, and *sibirica* which breeds in Siberia. There is no way to determine which form this individual was, nor by which route it reached there.

OBSERVATIONS

I first saw the bird at the northeast end of the East Pond at approximately 11:15 AM 27 August. I observed it for several minutes, probably about 5 minutes total, starting at about 100 yards distance and closing down finally to about 30 feet, using Minolta 10 x 50 binoculars. The sky was overcast but the light conditions were good to excellent.

It was feeding in the mud as well as along the edge of the water, picking at or just below surface. It kept to itself despite numerous other peep in the vicinity, and it did not feed or associate with them, though it did flush when they flushed. All shorebirds in this area were "flighty", flushing and resettling several times. It flushed once and returned to the same spot; flushed again and settled at the mouth of the outlet stream several hundred yards away, flushed again and was lost. It did not wheel and circle synchronously with the other peep it flew with, at least not consistently.

Following are my initial field notes as written (written immediately after initial sighting, before looking at any field guides, etc.):

"Sl. larger than semipalmated (size of White-rumped? but not as long-winged). Immediate impression is contrast – very white upper-part feather

edgings, very dark centers. Underparts white, breast area at bend of wing, esp., sl. buffy. Prominent buffy-white eyebrow with second thinner eyebrow line above! (Head almost looks longitudinally streaked, except no central crown stripe.) Legs slightly pale but not yellow, also not black. Bill long, longer than Western even, black, straight, with sharp droop at very tip."

IDENTIFICATION

After quickly writing these field notes, I looked in my copy of *Shorebirds: An identification guide to the waders of the world*, by Peter Hayman, John Marchant, and Tony Prater, which I had with me at the time. I knew immediately, when I looked at the plate of Broad-billed Sandpiper, that this was what I had seen. I also knew that it was incredibly rare. I had looked up and down the pond, in vain, for other birders to share this with while the bird was still in view. But I was alone, and so my elation was tempered with some anxiety that the bird would not be relocated. However, I reported it immediately to the refuge staff and to the New York Rare Bird Alert, and soon had several excellent local birders helping me to search for the bird again.

Despite extensive searching that day and the next morning, the bird was not relocated until that next afternoon, August 28. A refuge volunteer named Don Davis spotted the sandpiper along the south shore of the freshwater West Pond about 2 PM and recorded it in the log book. Several of us searched the area later in the afternoon, and about 4:30 PM, I found the bird again in the southwest corner of the West Pond. I alerted Christopher Olijnyk and Lenny Lampel of the refuge staff, and also several nearby birders (Paul Castle of Wiltshire, UK, Kevin Jones of Mineola, NY, and several others whose names I never learned). For about an hour, we all watched the bird feed along the south shore of the West Pond. It tended to feed at water's edge, neither in the water (e.g., as a Western Sandpiper might) nor up on the dryer land (e.g., like Baird's Sandpiper). The sky was mostly cloudy, and we observed the bird from an (estimated) distance of 30 to 100 yards. I had prolonged looks at the bird through my binoculars as well as through three different telescopes. At about 5:30 PM, the bird flushed one final time from the shoreline and flew out to the southwest with a mixed flock of shorebirds.

The extended observations by myself and others during this second sighting confirmed what I had already known from the day before — the bird was, indeed, a Broad-billed Sandpiper. The British birder, Paul Castle, had actually seen the species twice before in Great Britain, and agreed immediately with the identification. But truly, in my opinion, the bird was unmistakable. When seen this well, it would be difficult to identify it as anything other than a Broad-billed Sandpiper. Indeed, the only question remaining was the bird's age. It exhibited virtually none of the rufous feather edgings that are supposed to be typical of

juvenal plumage, being instead a blackish-and-white bird with a small amount of buff on the breast. However, because of the crisp feather edges and the lack of dark streaking on the breast and flanks, it was eventually decided that the bird was indeed a juvenile.

CONCLUSIONS

As incredible as this sighting was, even more incredible was the bird's "cooperation". It was relocated on the morning of the August 29 on the shoreline of the northwest corner of the West Pond, and it remained there for the next six days! It was observed by hundreds of birders from throughout North America. The bird was written up in the *New York Times* and *USA Today*. The Birdchat discussion group on the Internet featured daily updates on the sandpiper. It became, for that week, a celebrity. Finally, and most importantly to me, it helped to focus attention on Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, a wonderful birding location which deserves its recognition as a globally important refuge for migratory shorebirds.



Figure 1. Broad-billed Sandpiper. (Arthur Morris / Birds as Art.)

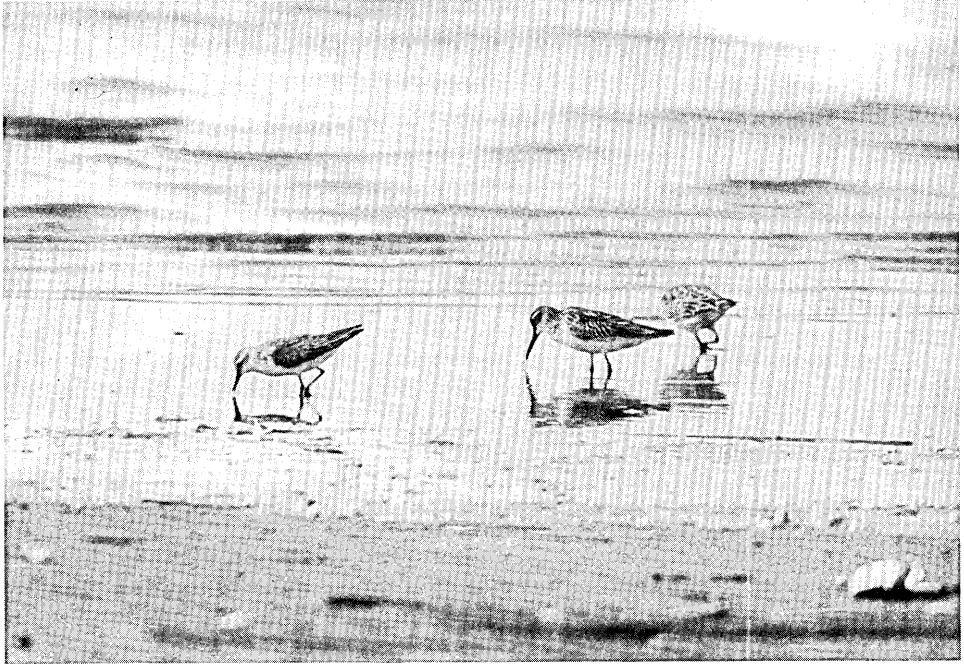


Figure 2. Broad-billed Sandpiper, with Semipalmated Sandpiper on the left.
(Arthur Morris / Birds as Art.)

LITERATURE CITED

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