

**LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*)
NEAR PIKE'S BEACH, WESTHAMPTON DUNES,
SUFFOLK COUNTY, NEW YORK**

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ABSTRACT

Some natural history of the Little Stint is provided, along with statistics on the rarity of this species and of Red-necked Stint (*C. ruficollis*) in North America and on difficulties of differentiating it from other small *Calidris* sandpipers. Some tips are provided on differentiating between juvenal-plumaged Semipalmated Sandpipers (*C. pusilla*) and Little Stints, illustrated by a photo of the former that portrays a commonly observed differentiating feature. A description is provided of the observation and photo-documentation of the alternate-plumaged Little Stint near Pike's Beach, Westhampton Dunes, Suffolk Co., NY on 16 Jul 2000, followed by detailed analysis of the relevant features revealed in five photos reproduced here in black- and -white, but originally in color.

INTRODUCTION

Little Stint is a common, small, arctic tundra breeding *Calidris* sandpiper that nests from northernmost Norway eastward to the delta of the Yana River in northern Siberia (Hayman, Marchant, & Prater, 1986; Rosair & Cottridge, 1995). The breeding territory is all substantially north of the Arctic Circle including, in the west, southern Novaya Zemlya and, in the east, the New Siberian Islands, both remote arctic outposts. Its southward migration is on a path west of that typically taken during its spring migration. This is especially, but not exclusively, true of juveniles (Veit & Jonsson, 1987). Although adults start southward in July, the juveniles do not begin that journey until near the end of August. Fall migration typically is not fully over until late in October. Wintering occurs over a wide area, including various locations around the Mediterranean, as well as sub-Saharan, eastern, and southern Africa, the Middle East, and eastward around the coast of India. In some winters small numbers may be found in southern Britain. See Hayman, Marchant, & Prater, 1986, for additional details of migration, including Map 193, Plate 76, p. 188. Although Little

Stint is a medium-to-long-range migrant and widespread winter resident on the eastern side of the Atlantic, it is a vagrant to both coasts of North America.

The prevailing winds across the Atlantic Ocean are west-to-east, and Pacific Ocean winds have the same predominant direction. Consequently, it should be less common for a Little Stint, many of which migrate through western Europe in the fall, to appear on our shores than it is for a Red-necked Stint, which migrates through eastern Asia at that time. Although it is likely that a few Little Stints from the easternmost populations of northern Siberia get sidetracked to the eastern coast of Siberia and then to this country via the Pacific, arriving initially in Alaska, this appears to happen infrequently. West Coast Little Stints compose only 37.5% of the accepted state records for Little Stint, whereas East Coast Little Stints compose 58.3%, based on my computation from data in Mlodinow & O'Brien, 1996. Thus, wind and geographic factors make for a scarcity of Little Stints, even while the same factors should make the Red-necked Stint somewhat more common.

The ratio of records accepted by state committees, nationwide, for Red-necked Stint (36) to the same kind of accepted records for Little Stint (24) is 1.5-to-1 (Mlodinow & O'Brien, 1996, Burke, 1998) with a tabulation window through November 1994.

The rarity of Little Stint in New York State is reflected in there being only two NYSARC records (Bürke, 1998). One was a photographic record of an adult alternate-plumaged individual at East Pond, Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge (JBWR), 17-22 Jul 1983 (TH Davis); the other, which did not involve a photograph, was of a juvenile, also on East Pond, JBWR, 2 Sep 1987 (Downing and Howell). Additionally, there was a report by a highly credible observer (PA Buckley) of an adult at West Pond, JBWR, on 5 Jun 1984, that was not reviewed by NYSARC.

THE IDENTIFICATION CHALLENGE OF LITTLE STINTS

There may be something more than simple rarity that attracts avid shorebirders to the Little Stint or to stints in general. I suggest that persons who get deeply into shorebirding often are individuals who enjoy a good identification challenge. The similarities of the small *Calidris* sandpipers may play a role in creating this challenge, as may their distinctive seasonal changes in appearance. If the joy of a challenging identification problem is part of what drives ardent shorebirders, part of the attraction of the Little Stint may be the challenge of distinguishing it from Red-necked Stint, especially in juvenal and basic plumages, but, also in alternate plumage because of some differences across individuals within these species (see, e.g., Paulson, 1993) and because of changes related to molt and wear.

Correct identification of juvenal-plumaged Little Stint is difficult not only because of similarity to the juvenal-plumaged Red-necked Stint but because



Photo A. This fresh juvenal-plumaged Semipalmated Sandpiper exhibits scapulars and a mantle that appear very scaly, a good characteristic for ruling out Little Stint.



Photo 1(5). The lifted left foot of the Little Stint shows the absence of webs between the toes, and additional Little Stint characteristics are shown, specifically, a finely tipped and spike-like bill, a pure white chin and throat, and a split supercilium.



Photo 2(6). The Little Stint appears above a Least Sandpiper. This display of its strikingly long legs, including tibia, helps rule out the squat and more short-legged Red-necked Stint.



Photo 3(8). The alternate-plumaged Little Stint shows very solidly dark centers in the lower scapulars and in many of the wing coverts, including in the greater coverts, with essentially no contrast between the darkness of those scapulars and the wing coverts.



Photo 4(10). The Little Stint (left) shows the characteristic facial pattern of breeding plumage, and in color, the bright rufous fringes of the upper scapulars and tertials are evident. The running *Calidrid* on the right, apparently a Semipalmated Sandpiper, provides a useful size comparison.



Photo 5(13). This reveals very solidly dark centers in both the scapulars and many of the wing coverts, and fine, dark, stippling in the necklace, which is thoroughly suffused with an orange wash in color prints.

that some fresh, juvenal-plumaged Semipalmated Sandpipers have very rufous backs and well may pass as Little Stints in that plumage unless one is able to spot their webbed feet (see Figure 6, Veit & Jonsson 1987 photo by P. A. Buckley). I obtained a series of excellent photos of such a rich, rufous Semipalmated Sandpiper on 7 Aug 1994, one replete with creamy mantle lines and split supercilium. Fortunately, I and other observers clearly saw the tell-tale webbing between the toes. What most of those photos show very clearly, though, and which all observers in this part of the world should look for before judging a juvenile to be a Little Stint, is a very scaly appearance, especially in the mantle, but also in the scapulars. If those areas look very scaly, the bird almost certainly is not a juvenal-plumaged Little Stint and well may be a Semipalmated Sandpiper in that plumage. Very scaly-appearing scapulars and, especially, mantle, are hallmarks of the Semipalmated Sandpiper juvenile (Veit & Jonsson, 1987, Plate 1d). The bird I photographed showed these features dramatically. See Photo A, taken with a 300mm lens, which shows these "scales". Both Little and Red-necked stints, but, perhaps, especially, the Little Stint, should, in juvenal plumage, have a mantle that appears more streaked than scaly (see Veit & Jonsson, 1987, Figure 13). Careful observation is suggested, though, because these scales may be less evident when the bird is viewed from a considerable distance or from certain angles, as my own photos (not reproduced here) of the aforementioned Semipalmated Sandpiper suggest, or when the bird's plumage has become worn.

OBSERVATION AND PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE LITTLE STINT ON 16 JUL 2000

Westhampton Dunes is a recently naturally created, and now strongly developed, narrow barrier island on the South Shore of Long Island at the east end of Moriches Bay. The area of Westhampton Dunes where I photographed and at least nine others simultaneously witnessed the Little Stint on Sunday, 16 Jul 2000, between early afternoon and 4:00 PM, was a beach area east-southeast of Swan Island (DeLorme, 1998, p. 27), a short distance west of what locals call "Pike's Beach," a somewhat sickle-shaped sandbar on the north shore of the barrier beach.

What had drawn me to that area was the hope of finding Red-necked Stint, not Little Stint. Until I arrived on site on 16 July and talked with other birders, I was unaware that a few other birders had, since the day before, been reporting actual or possible Little Stint in the area (see ACKNOWLEDGMENTS). I had come there in the hope of seeing and photographing the brilliant alternate-plumaged Red-necked Stint that had been discovered around 10:00 AM, Wednesday, 12 Jul, by John Fritz, had been seen by others in the interim, and had been captured on video by Angus Wilson on a drizzly, rainy Saturday,

15 Jul. Because Wilson had put some of those Red-necked Stint video shots on his web site that very day and immediately had alerted the birding community, via the internet, of that fact, I accessed his enticing images late that same evening. My wife, Birgit, and I decided to go out the next morning to try to observe and photograph this rare and stunning bird. By early afternoon on 16 Jul, as low tide approached, we and at least eight others were on the bayside beach that lies perhaps a quarter of a mile west of Pike's Beach.

Early in our vigil a basic-plumaged Wilson's Phalarope appeared, an auspicious start, if not exactly what we were seeking. Shortly thereafter, someone noticed an odd, small, brightly colored, *Calidris* sandpiper, one whose energetic exploration for food made it a challenge to relocate if one lost sight of it momentarily among the other shorebirds. There ensued good group cooperation to enable everyone to see and stay on this very active, almost frenetically moving, bird. It helped that this *Calidrid*, which turned out to be the Little Stint, had the exceptionally long legs characteristic of the species, giving it, at times, a "walking-on-stilts" appearance that made it stand out a bit among the other small peeps (see Photo 6). In the location where the puzzling *Calidrid* was first seen, the Wilson's Phalarope, standing exceptionally tall and pale, sometimes served as a useful reference point for those trying to relocate it. A very good bird on most days around here, the phalarope had suddenly become a mere sign post. Such can be the fate of an upstaged bird.

It was immediately obvious that this puzzling, rufous-topped, peep was not the Red-necked Stint found earlier in the week by John Fritz. This mystery bird, although having extensive rufous color on its face, head, nape, mantle, scapulars, and tertials, lacked even a trace of that color on either the chin or the throat, whereas in the Red-necked Stint, the throat and even the chin (excepting a very narrow, lighter area at the bill base) were rich with brilliant rufous. Persons quickly started noting the absence of webs as this strange, long-legged *Calidrid* strode rapidly about the drier portions of the sandy beach, energetically pecking and probing for food. Sanderling was conclusively ruled out by this bird's small size, barely larger than a Least Sandpiper, and by the presence of a hind toe, among other discordant features. Clearly, due to the absence of webs, combined with other details, the mystery *Calidrid* was a stint! But which?

There were a number of other shorebird species in the general area, and they increased in numbers of individuals and species as low tide (1:32 PM at Moriches Inlet) approached. The most abundant in the area near the stint undoubtedly were Least and Semipalmated sandpipers, and they had the most frequent interactions with the stint because they tended to feed in the same seaweed and horseshoe crab shell littered areas as the stint, the Least more frequently than the Semipalmated. The stint threatened, chased, and even flew at these species if they came close to its feeding area. It proved, all afternoon, that it was a bold and feisty bird, one neither intimidated by other peeps nor by the sometimes low overflights of airplanes and a helicopter. Once, the stint remained

steadfast to its feeding area even when a close overflight by an aircraft had put up most of the other shorebirds.

Additional *Calidris* species seen that afternoon by me or by others were Red Knot, Sanderling, Western Sandpiper, and Pectoral Sandpiper with the Sanderlings tending to show retained breeding plumage. The incoming of one of the latter occasionally would, at very first glimpse, arouse a false hope that the Red-necked Stint had reappeared, but no one was fooled for longer than about the time it takes a Sanderling to run its own length. The Red-necked Stint was not seen by our group prior to my leaving near 4:00PM, but it was reported, by at least one individual, to have appeared there later in the day.

The burning issue before us on that afternoon was, though, not so much "Where is the brilliant breeding-plumaged Red-necked Stint?" as "Is this a Red-necked Stint or a Little Stint?" Identifying a problematic shorebird species usually should begin with a decision on its plumage stage or age, given that the appearance of a particular species can vary remarkably, depending on its plumage stage and degree of wear and molt within a given stage. It seemed obvious that this was an alternate-plumaged adult stint because it had, on the head and breast, the brilliant, rich, rufous coloration of stint breeding plumage. A juvenile of either the Red-necked or the Little Stint species would not have had this brilliant coloration on the head, and, if a juvenile were possible this far south at this extremely early date, it would have had the most pristine of crisp edges or borders on the scapulars and coverts and no signs of molt. This bird had good, clear, very rufous fringes on the very dark-centered scapulars and clear, light-colored (sometimes rufous) fringes on very dark-centered wing coverts, but some of the wing coverts showed signs of wear and/or molt. Other features of the bird will be discussed under "What the Photos Showed," but, clearly, this was a contest between alternate-plumaged Red-necked and alternate-plumaged Little Stint. Its colorful tertial fringes favored the latter.

The absence of even a visible trace of rufous on the throat might have been seen as a clear indication of Little Stint, but there was need for caution. Molt can, especially in a late-summer bird, make the throat of a Red-necked Stint look white (usually, though, with just a hint of rufous). This bird seemed too early for this kind of appearance, if it were a Red-necked Stint. However it was possible that movement in this energetically feeding bird had made it difficult to glimpse remnant traces of rufous. In such a case, photos of the throat area, which could be carefully examined at leisure, would be useful.

A clear, white throat might have been a factor in some birders' erroneously identifying a Red-necked Stint, present at Cedar Beach, Suffolk Co., New York, in August, 1992, as a Little Stint, the error later being demonstrated through analyses of photos. Also, my own photos of that same Cedar Beach, 1992 individual showed a facial pattern somewhat resembling the present bird, whereas other features clearly showed that bird to be a Red-necked Stint. The

resemblance of both the facial pattern and the throat pattern of the present bird to that late August Red-necked Stint were sources of reservation, from my perspective, about calling this a Little Stint. This, of course, was mid-July, but occasionally a bird will molt a bit early.

It was evident in the field that the scapulars, including the lower scapulars, and many of the wing coverts, especially the greater coverts, were very solidly dark centered, and these factors favored Little Stint. Nonetheless, some of the coverts just appeared a warm, grayish brown, especially along the front, lower margin of the folded wing. From my perspective in the field, this was not reassuring for a quick call of this as Little Stint. On the other hand, this grayness in some of the small coverts might have been the effect of wear on what originally were lighter fringes or might have been due to molt (or, conceivably, simply retained coverts from the preceding winter). Some alternate-plumaged Red-necked Stints do have a few dark-centered coverts, but they typically are (Veit & Jonsson, 1987, p. 231) otherwise unmistakable. The bird was constantly on the move, and this made difficult any detailed inspection of the patterns within individual small coverts. Photos would be useful for inspecting the details of both scapulars and coverts. I, therefore, tried, with considerable success, to get some pictures that would focus clearly on these features. Later inspection of these photos showed that even some of the smaller coverts had dark centers. I had found those markings difficult to discern, with certainty, in the field.

It also was evident in the field that although this bird had rich rufous on the fringes of its dark-centered scapulars, its wing-covert fringes, although sometimes showing rufous, did not seem as brightly colored as I had expected in Little Stint. I had previously observed only one Little Stint (Cape May, NJ, 13 Jul 1999) , but had done so for over an hour. My recollection of its wing covert fringes —backed up, in some degree, by my very distant photos— is that they were somewhat brighter than those on this bird, so this was another source of some personal reluctance to immediately label this as "Little Stint", despite some clearly concordant features. I subsequently have learned that there are substantial individual differences among Little Stints, even in breeding plumage, in the brightness of their covert fringes and, in particular, that females tend to be less bright, generally, than males (Mullarney, Svensson, Zetterström, and Grant, 1999).

As hours passed, the group that had gathered there began slowly to dwindle in size, but those of us who remained continued to preoccupy ourselves with trying to definitively identify this bird and with making field notes. Having assigned myself the task of trying to get photos that would disclose the identity of this stint, I focused on getting pictures of critical details that were proving difficult to pin down by visual observation. Birds may be the "stars" of our photo albums when we are able to image a rare one, but they neither know nor care anything about this notoriety. The very moment we think we have the scope focused

on a critical, identification relevant detail, the bird too often manages to make it disappear before it can be given adequate visual analysis. If, on the other hand, a photo can be taken in the interim, such details later can be examined at leisure.

The following was an example of this: An important feature that differentiates the Red-necked and the Little Stint is that the latter, but not the former, shows an upper breast finely stippled with dark brownish spots that tend to organize themselves, to our visual sense, as being fine streaks. Very importantly, this stippling is thoroughly suffused on the Little Stint, with a pale rufous or orange wash. This is not observed in the Red-necked Stint, whose more intensely reddish throat color at most barely crosses or touches the boundary of the relatively coarse, dark brown, rather arrowhead-shaped markings at the sides of the breast (and that sometimes continue, thinly, across the upper breast). Despite many tries, it proved very difficult to see precisely how the wash of color on the necklace of this stint lay in relation to the dark-brown stippling, which clearly extended, as a nearly parallel-edged band, across its breast.

Finally, near the end of my period of observation and photography, the stint obligingly put its head down, with its body angled toward a 10:00 AM position, turned its head toward its right, and began to probe into the sand with its bill. In so doing, it squarely exposed to my view, through my scope, the underside of its upper breast, clearly displaying the dark-brown, stippled streaks thoroughly and completely suffused with the rufous wash! The bird allowed two photos in this general attitude before it extracted its bill from the sand.

THE PHOTOS AND WHAT THEY SHOW

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The five photos of the Little Stint -Photos 1(5), 2(6), 3(8) 4(10) and 5(13), of necessity are depicted in black-and -white in this journal. Readers with access to the internet may wish to see these photos in color and enlarged with the corresponding numbers in parentheses being those at:

<http://www.best.com/~petrel/NYLSST.html>

Readers also may wish to compare and contrast this on-line alternate-plumaged Little Stint with the alternate-plumaged Red-necked Stint photographed by Angus Wilson the previous day (15 Jul 2000) in the same general area. The latter may be viewed at:

<http://www.best.com/~petrel/RNS.NY.html>

These sets of photos are cross-linked at Angus Wilson's web site, "Ocean Wanderers,".

Photos 1(5) and 5(13) were taken through a Nikon Fieldscope ED78 with a 30x eyepiece, and Photos 2(6), 3(8), and 4(10), through a 45° offset (angled) Swarovski spotting scope with 80mm objective lens and a 20-60x zoom

eyepiece. To photograph through these scopes, a hand-held 35mm SLR camera (Canon EOS Elan II E with attached Canon Lens EF, 50mm, 1:1.8 II lens set at infinity) was used with automatic exposure and some center-field weighting. The latter works well for centered targets with a high-luminosity background, as was typical here.

Photo 1(5) shows: (a) no webbing on the Little Stint's raised left foot, which, considered along with other characteristics, makes this either a Little Stint or a Red-necked Stint; (b) a typical Little Stint spike-like, finely tipped and finely based, bill; (c) a clean, pure white chin and throat, which are characteristic of Little Stint, but not Red-necked Stint in alternate plumage; (d) a broad "necklace" in which the fine, dark-brown stippling is coextensive with a rufous or orange wash (although the color cannot be seen in this photo); this is compatible with Little Stint, but not Red-necked Stint; and (e) a split supercilium, which may be compatible with either Red-necked or Little Stint; and (f) no real lightness-darkness contrast between the scapulars and wing coverts, which is strongly suggestive of Little Stint.

Photo2(6) shows: the Little Stint immediately above a Least Sandpiper whose alternate plumage is considerably worn and, perhaps, reveals some molt. In black -and-white, this photo mainly illustrates the remarkably long legs of the Little Stint, the tibia (upper legs) being especially long, a characteristic of Little Stint and not compatible with Red-necked Stint, which is relatively squat and has short legs. This photo also shows the split supercilium and the spike-like bill. In color it shows rich rufous on the darker areas of the head, the rufous being particularly bright over the ear coverts (auriculars) and on the scapulars near the front of the bird's folded wing. In color it also shows bright rufous fringing the tertials, a characteristic very unlikely to occur in this degree in the Red-necked Stint. In color it also can be seen that the back of the neck is an orange wash, a color that extends onto the sides of the neck.

Photo 3(8) shows: (a) the dark centers of many of the wing coverts, as well as of the scapulars, whose fringes are still clear and appear relatively unworn; (b) related to this, a lack of real contrast in the darkness of the scapulars and the coverts; (c) a necklace effect on the breast that is made up of fine brownish stippling, and, very importantly, that is thoroughly suffused with an orange wash (when seen in color); (d) the pure white color of both the chin and throat, without the slightest trace of reddish color, despite the rich color on the head (and elsewhere); (e) the relatively narrow character of the bill, although the tip is here, again, inserted into the substrate; (f) the primaries as extending slightly past the tail tip, despite the posture of the bird, which tends to pull the wings forward; and (g) the stint's legs as extremely dark (black in the color prints). Items (a) - (d), especially in combination, speak clearly for the identity being Little Stint, not Red-necked Stint.

Photo 4(10) shows: as a color print, that the bird on the left (Little

Stint) has tertials with brilliant rufous fringes, a characteristic not at all typical of breeding-plumaged Red-necked Stint but very typical of alternate-plumaged Little Stint. In black-and-white, this photo is mainly useful for a size comparison between the Little Stint and what appears to be a Semipalmated Sandpiper, at right, running from right to left.

Photo 5(13) shows: (a) when viewed in color, that the orange wash actually is within the necklace (on the breast), the necklace itself being composed of fine brownish stippling that gives the appearance of light streaks (L. Jonsson, 1993, p. 223, summer Little Stint in July; contrast with the same area on Red-necked Stint, p. 225); (b) a clean, pure white throat, not just chin, albeit in shadow, in this case; and (c) a general lack of contrast of the scapulars and the coverts, due to very dark centers in the lower scapulars and most of the coverts, including greater coverts; (d) reasonably dark centers in the tertials; and (e) when seen in color, rufous in some covert fringes. Combined, items (a) - (e), as well as items mentioned relative to other photos, speak conclusively in favor of Little Stint.

CONCLUSIONS

The stint shown in the pictures in this paper is an adult Little Stint in alternate (breeding) plumage. The photos, especially as viewed in color, amply demonstrate that identity. They show, once again, that photography can be invaluable in resolving ambiguities about identity and in unequivocally documenting the occurrence of a particular species.

Having a camera to photograph believed rarities should never be deemed to obviate the need for careful, dedicated, field study, the more so in the case of peeps and other difficult categories of birds. This caveat should be unnecessary for observers who enjoy spending many hours in the field observing and studying form, features, and behavior, including changes in appearance and, even, behavior with the passage of time. Although these dedicated, thoughtful observers may never twitch—or even wish to twitch—their way to the very highest list numbers in the nation, they likely will contribute especially reliably and usefully to knowledge of the avian world, precisely because they are making the effort really to see and to know what they encounter.

Being thoroughly conversant with common species, these individuals will recognize a rarity with relative ease, even when this distinction is difficult, and they will know which of its features differentiate it from those species. Consequently, if they are able to photograph such a rarity, they will know which of its features are the most important to capture in the interest of documentation. Dedicated field work and photo-documentation work well together, for reasons that extend beyond an increased likelihood of encountering rarities in the field.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very grateful to Andrew Baldelli and to a donor who prefers anonymity, for the loan of their spotting scopes for photographing the Little Stint. I thank my wife, Birgit, for proofing and making copy-editing suggestions on more than one draft of this paper. I thank Angus Wilson for getting very qualified outside reviewers to examine, via the internet, a selection of my photos to be sure that Little Stint was the species photographed and, also, for his scanning and cropping of my photos and making them available on his web site . I join numerous other birders grateful to him for getting pictures, despite adverse weather conditions, of the alternate-plumaged, Pike's Beach Red-necked Stint, and for putting them on his web site and notifying the birding community of that fact, via the internet, the very same day. I am grateful also to Tony Lauro whose kind offer to ferry birders from Cupsogue County Park to the stint area near Pike's Beach strongly enhanced my readiness to go there on 16 Jul given that I otherwise dreaded the fatigue of an extended walk carrying heavy equipment the day prior to a long trip for which I barely had begun preparations. That the local constabulary decided, unexpectedly, to permit parking in the stint area on 16 Jul is beside the point. Neither I nor anyone else knew about that on 15 Jul when Lauro made birders the welcome offer that helped me make my decision to go the next day in search of the Red-necked Stint. Last, but not least, I join numerous birders grateful to John Fritz for finding the Red-necked Stint on Wednesday, 12 July 2000, and for ensuring, with the help of Tony Lauro, that a substantial number of birders knew of that find that very day. This began the flow of stint seekers to the Pike's Beach area, which resulted in additional birders seeing the Red-necked Stint, the Little Stint, or, in some cases, both. Appropriately, Fritz was among the few privileged to observe both stints. Evidently, Eric Salzman was the first person to state without equivocation that he had found a Little Stint in the Pike's Beach area, on 15 Jul.

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