

# **SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER (*Calidris acuminata*) IN MONROE CO., 10-13 OCTOBER, 2002 NEW YORK STATE'S SECOND RECORD**

**Dominic Sherony**

51 Lambeth Loop, Fairport, NY 14450  
dsherony@frontiernet.net

## **Abstract**

A first year Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was found on the mud flats at the south end of Irondequoit Bay in the town of Penfield, Monroe Co., NY feeding with a large group of Pectoral Sandpipers (*Calidris melanotos*) on Thursday, 10 Oct. The bird remained in this same location for four days (10 -13 Oct 2002) and was seen and studied by no less than 200 birders from across the state, Canada, and a few from the east and midwest. Several observers were able to get identifiable photographs.

## **Discovery and Observation**

The south end of Irondequoit Bay has long been a favorite fall birding spot in the Rochester area for shorebirds and gulls. In the fall, Lake Ontario naturally draws down in years with dry summer and fall conditions. In years past, the fluctuations in the lake level have been more pronounced and the south shore was a haven for migrating shorebirds. The control dam on the St. Lawrence River has reduced this effect. Still, some small shorebird habitats will arise on the lakeshore in dry years. This year was no exception and shorebirds have been present there for the past month. New York State and the town of Penfield acquired the land at the south end of the bay bordering Irondequoit Creek and established La Salle's Landing Park on the site in 2001. This has provided birders, as well as others, with easy access and convenient parking. Shorebird observation is best done by walking through the cattail marsh to the mud flat.

I arrived at 12:40 pm and began scanning the mud flat. It was a beautiful day, with 70 F temperatures, sunshine with a few broken clouds, and a very slight wind coming from the north. About fifty shorebirds were feeding at the extreme north end of the mud flat. The sun was to the south and I was scanning about 150 yards away with binoculars and located the shorebird group. I got my scope on this group, zoomed up to 40X, and started going through the flock. I began with Pectoral Sandpipers but the fourth bird I looked at was the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. My attention was immediately drawn to the bird by the very reddish cap, which showed up extremely well in the sunlight. I looked over this bird for key field marks and was confident about the identification. I looked up from the scope and did it a second time. After being certain, I walked back to

Pectoral on Left, Sharp-tailed on right.  
Apparent size difference as shown in  
this photo is strictly due to stance of the  
birds at the time of photographing.

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my car and started calling local birders. Within a half-hour, Gary Chapin, Bob Spahn, Jeanne Skelly, and Mike Tetlow had arrived and all confirmed the identification.

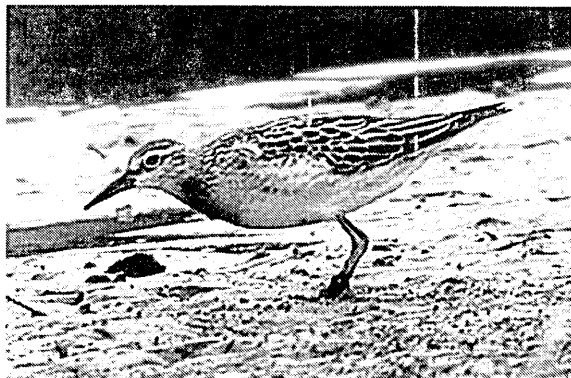
I was familiar with the basic field marks of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers. I first saw three adults on 14 Apr 1994 in Hong Kong at Mai Po but have never been able to find them in the US. It has long been a bird I have sought and have regularly scanned through the Pectoral Sandpipers at Montezuma NWR looking for this species. Although most eastern US sightings are from the coast, I didn't think there was any reason why an Asian stray could not be found upstate.

I remained at the south end of the bay for three hours watching the bird and calling people. It was last observed that day by Brett Ewald after 6:00 pm. At least 30 people saw the bird on Thursday. The next three days were overcast but generally warm. Word quickly spread on the Internet and many people continued to come daily. On Friday, 11 Oct 2002, I was watching the bird with Bob Spahn and Willie D'Anna when a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) came over the bay at 9:45 am. All the gulls took off and a mixed flock of shorebirds including the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper formed a tight group, flew upward gaining altitude until they were above the Peregrine Falcon and then flew south. We thought that they were gone for good but they were back on the mud flat an hour later and the bird was present for the remainder of that day.

The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was present throughout Saturday and Sunday. I saw the bird both days and many came to see it on the weekend. On Sunday, it began to drizzle in the late morning and got progressively cooler. The last sighting of the bird was 4:30 pm when a Peregrine arrived again. It was not found after that and was not present on



Sharp-tailed Sandpiper  
Irondequoit Bay  
12 Oct 2002  
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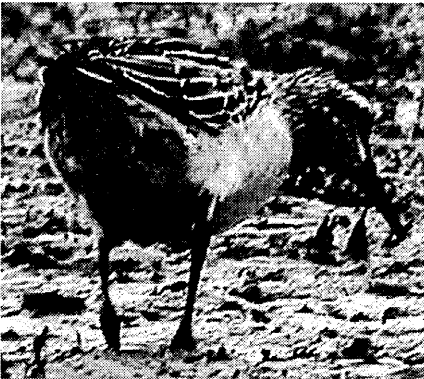
Monday morning nor found on subsequent days. On Sunday, a cold front went through. Temperatures dropped, the winds became stronger and shifted to the northwest, and the shorebirds changed rapidly at the south end of the bay. A flock of Long-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) and Stilt Sandpipers (*Calidris himantopus*) came in the late afternoon and these birds were gone on Monday morning.

The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was studied by many and was photographed by at least five people. Willie D'Anna, Matt Victoria, and Kevin and Jay McGowan all posted excellent photographs on the Internet. The bird varied in observed distance from about 120 feet to about a maximum of 450 feet. Light conditions varied over the four day period but the bird was identifiable even on the cloudy days just after sunrise (about 7:20 am).

## Identification

On those four days, there were between 25 to 50 first year Pectoral Sandpipers on the mud flats as well as other shorebirds. The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper always associated with a group of Pectoral Sandpipers and was generally easily observed. It was the same size as the largest Pectorals, some of which were noticeably smaller, and it was a much brighter bird than the first year Pectorals. The Sharp-tailed was aged by the condition of the plumage and field marks. In behavior, it acted no differently than any Pectoral Sandpiper.

The accompanying photos show many of the field marks described. All the Pectorals and this bird were identified as first year by their fresh unworn plumage. The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was identified by the appearance of its cap, throat, breast, mantle and undertail coverts. The cap was bright reddish, a color between rufous and red, with dark or black relatively fine thin streaks. In sunlight,



Note streaking on undertail coverts of the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Pectorals do not show this streaking.  
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the cap was very conspicuous. The cap of Pectoral Sandpiper was more brownish with wider dark streaks. The bright white supercilium was wider above and just behind the eye as compared with that of a Pectoral Sandpiper. The throat was white, unlike that of a Pectoral. There were fine streaks around the neck, and they were short, ending at the upper breast. The breast was richly buff and the buff color faded out at the belly. The breast was distinctly different from that of the Pectoral Sandpiper which was heavily streaked and the streaks showed a sharp demarcation at the belly. The undertail coverts of the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper had fine streaks and the Pectoral coverts were simply white.

The mantle of the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was very bright; all mantle feathers with dark centers and fringed. Scapulars were fringed in rufous, unlike Pectorals, which are more buff with some short white edges. Tertiaries were fringed in rufous-yellow, more colorful than those of Pectorals. Upper wing coverts were fringed in buff with slight rufous tones.



Note sharp contrast between white supercilium and dark (red) cap of this Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. This contrast is not present in the Pectorals.

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### Other Records

Paulson (1993) and Rogers (2002) indicate that Sharp-tailed Sandpiper is much more common as a vagrant on the west coast than in the east. Sibley (2000) shows sightings in the midwest and in some southern states but east coast records are more numerous than inland sightings. There are two past sightings in New Jersey but no accepted records (Larson pers. comm.). There are two records for Connecticut, the last occurred on 11 Aug 1999; and there have been five sight records for the New England Region (Ellison and Martin 1999). Levine (1998) summarizes the only NY accepted record, that of Tom Davis from Long Island at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge of 18-24 Jul 1981 and another sighting in 1982 but not accepted by NYSARC.

There have been several east coast reports of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper this year. One adult appeared at Bear Swamp at Bombay Hook NWR on 5-6 Aug 2002. A second was a juvenile seen sporadically between 30 Sep - 10 Oct 2002 also at Bombay Hook NWR (Rohrbacher pers.comm.). A single bird appeared at Cape May, NJ on 8 Oct 2002 and was present for one hour (Boyle pers.comm.).

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