

Paul Martsching

Western Sandpiper in Fall 1984 (last year).

This was a strange appearing 'peep' and I thot it might be a Western, but I'd gotten the impression that one had to get a very close look and that the bird had to be a female to have a bill long enuf to be shur. I'd seen one for shur several years ago in South Dakota and it had a really obviously long bill drooped at the tip.

When John Robinson gave his talk on identifying shore birds at Marshalltown this spring, I asked him about this bird - describing it to him. I also told him about my doubts because it was so late. He told me that my description was of a Western Sandpiper, and that it wasn't so terribly difficult to identify them, and that I shouldn't just 'let this one go'. He also mentioned an article in American Birds that I should look at.

The bird:

On 10 October 1984 at Hendricksons Marsh in S E Story Co., about mid-afternoon, I saw a peep at a moderate distance. The sun was to the W and the bird was sometimes to the S & sometimes to the N as I faced E. There were some Pectoral Sandpipers with it. I'd seen a semipalmated Sandpiper on the E end of the marsh a little while before.

The bird was almost pure white below, and lite gray above;- including wings & tail. The "shoulders" were rust and so was the crown in striking contrast to the general paleness of the rest of the bird. The legs appeared black - but this can be tricky - the bird was not real close - I was using 20 x 80 binoculars - & the bird was generally in shallow water. The bill appeared to be longer than least or semipalmated and more pointed than semipalmated, but the length was not a great deal more than what one wd expect of a semipalm or least (it certainly was not as long as the one Western I'd seen before). The bill had a very slight droop at the tip.

I observed the bird for about 15 minutes with 20 x 80 binoculars & it usually stayed far enuf away or was seen against a cluttered enuf background to make determining the bill length & curvature or lack thereof a chore.

After perusing the article "Field Identification of Smaller Sandpipers within the Genus Calidris" by R. Veit & Lars Johsson in the Sep-Oct 1984 issue of American Birds, I conclude that this bird was a Western Sandpiper for the following reasons:

It was not a Semipalmated because the bill was too pointed; The rust was too patchy in distribution (generally being more evenly ditributed on a Semi-Palm in summer); the rust was too deep in color; & as this bird was going into winter plumage it was much too pale gray. The Semipalmated's head is not as pale as this bird - which was very white around base of bill.

It was not a Least because its bill was too long, & Least in summer is quite dark brown with much dark on upper breast & birds that have rusty on them have it more diffuse & not so patchy & intense as a Western; & in winter plumage still are brownish gray on upper parts & have a complete dusky pectoral band. Juvenal Least have darkish rust on upper parts and complete speckled pectoral bands.

The bird I saw had hardly any trace of a pectoral band.

PWM