

Purple Sandpiper  
30 Apr 1979  
Laurens, Pocahontas Co., IA  
\*Bierman, \*Cummins  
IBL 49:59

Record Number: 81-AR  
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATIONS

Raymond L. Cummins  
Dick Bierman

LETTER

Claudia Wilds to Mike Newlon, 6 Sep 1981.

REFERENCE

Field Reports: IBL 49:59

VOTE (1981): 1-II, 5-III, 1-IV

III, good description x 2.

III, Good observations, species is quite distinct.

III, details convincing but only two observers.

III, Obs. don't agree exactly on every point - bill blackbill dark; not not black, but this seems logical as D.B. obs. late in the day.

III, 2 observers - detailed descriptions by both - 3 observations. Descriptions of bird in near alternate plumage. Flight pattern rules out surfbird (which has white rump). Convincing observation.

VI, I have problems here also. Main objection is that the descriptions do not eliminate Ruff. Amount of white in wing differs in 2 descriptions. Purple Sdp has slightly decurved bill, with yellow base. Habitat more like Ruff.

REVOTE (1981): I-III, 1-IV, 4-VI, 1-?

III, I'll go for the Reeve.

VI, more likely Ruff, but doesn't fit anything to be diagnostic.

VI, body size wrong? CW suggests reeve.

IV, Open to too many questions -- re Wilds letter.

?, The letter from Wilds merely documents that the bird is unidentifiable.

VI, As I have previously stated, and I am happy to see Wilds' corroboration, this bird is a Ruff and should be submitted to the Records Committee as such.

Mike

8/AR

Dear Mike,

Thanks for the interesting problem. It set me to poring over all the photographs and descriptions in my library and to thinking about all the Purple Sandpipers we take so much for granted on the coastal rocks.

The most troublesome features for a Purple call are the bill, the legs, the company, and the habitat. There are plumage problems too, but the discrepancies between the two sets of field notes make the plumage somewhat difficult to visualize.

**Bill:** The uniform darkness is unique in my experience but could be explained by a coating of black mud—though it ought to look a little rough-surfaced. The straightness is unacceptable; all Purple bills appear to droop at the tip or be slightly decurved through the whole length.

**Legs:** Purple legs are shorter than those of Pectorals (22-23 mm vs 27-29 mm) and are never bright yellow. Palmer (Shorebirds of North America) describes them as "muted yellowish"; Witherby (Handbook of British Birds) says they are "greenish-yellow, brownish-yellow, or pale dusky brown".

The descriptions fit my own experience and slides. The bright orange legs in the photos in the Audubon Guide, Eastern Region are much duller in the flipped, higher-quality reproduction in the Audubon Encyclopedia.

**Company:** The natural companions of a Purple Sandpiper areuddy Turnstones, an occasional Red Knot, and, rarely, Sanderlings. I've never heard of one associating with Pectorals or Yellowlegs because they share neither diet nor terrain. Of course, a Purple in Iowa can't be choosy.

**Habitat:** Unless it were totally exhausted, I can't imagine a Purple Sandpiper in a muddy field. Even in Iowa, I would expect it to aim for rocks in a river or some weedy dock.

**Plumage:** Neither in basic nor in alternate plumage does a Purple have upperparts with the clean, bright-edged look of a Pectoral. Many mantle feathers are solidly black or gray (apparently there is not a complete spring body molt) and the back, rump, and scapulars look blotchy. Some feathers have grayish edges, but the buffy fringes and white tips of a Pectoral aren't there.

The underparts don't really sound right for a Purple either. Undertail <sup>the</sup>coverts in basic plumage are streaked dusky, in alternate plumage "white with irregular median marks and shadings of sooty brown." The upper breast should not be barred black; it should either be solid gray, <sup>or</sup> in fresh plumage, marked by fine white scalloping or bars. The lower breast should be white heavily streaked (basic) or spotted (alternate) with dark grayish brown.



I can't help thinking the bird was a Reeve. In these parts Ruffs and Reeves are virtually always seen with Pectorals and/or Yellowlegs, usually in muddy fields, fresh or blackish mudflats or impoundments or marsh pannes.

Bill is either straight or decurved, just slightly, and can be all black. It is stouter and much shorter than a Lesser Yellowlegs' bill.

Ruffs are the only species with legs that can be a brighter yellow than a yellowlegs (and I've usually found them a little thicker).

Leg length doesn't fit the bird in the notes - on a Reeve the legs are about half way between those of a Pectoral and those of a Lesser Yellowlegs (but then the notes don't fit a Purple's legs either).

The plumage seems perfect for a Reeve in basic plumage, except for a Reeve's brownish-gray tone (a Purple is no closer to unco-gray). Though the field guides don't show the underparts correctly, the underparts of a Reeve are contrasting, with a "mouse-gray" breast, spots or streaks on the flanks, and a white belly and under-tail coverts.

There's a reasonably good photo of a Reeve on the nest in the Audubon Encyclopedia.

If it's a not a Reeve, I'm stumped. There is no Calidrid larger than a Pectoral (Purples are not), with a straight bill and short, bright yellow legs. A Reeve does have the body size of a Lesser Yellowlegs and looks short-necked and short-legged next to one.

It was a pleasure to have notes as careful as Ray Cummins' to study.

We've had no rarities here this summer, but I'm going to Chincoteague every week and having fun studying adult molt and changing ratios of adults + juveniles. Adult dowitchers have been baffling all through August (lots of hendersoni are all-red below, and the spots do wear off except on the sides of the breast). Yellowleg adults continue to give me trouble when seen singly, and I'm yearning for a photographable juvenile Greater and a L. Scolopaceus ditto.

Have fun in California. You should see enough shorebirds to make up for the dearth in Iowa.

Best to you both

Claudia

(Claudia Wilds)



BIRDS: Verifying Documentation  
of an Extraordinary SIGHT RECORD

1. Species: Purple Sandpiper 2. ONE
3. 7 MILES SOUTH OF LAURENS, IOWA
4. Date - 4-30-79 5. 9:00 AM. to 7:00 PM 9:00AM, 1:00PM, AND 6:15 PM
6. SIZE - SHORT NECK. - BODY SIZE - LARGER THAN PECTORAL S., ABOUT THE SAME BODY SIZE AS THE LESSER YELLOW LEGS, AND SLIGHT SMALLER THAN THE SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER. Shape of peeps but larger. bill - was about ONE INCH long and all black. THE BILL WAS STOUTER THAN EITHER Pectorals OR Lesser Yellow legs. THE bill WAS STRAIGHT. Head pattern - Forehead, crown, CHEEK were grayish-brown. EYE LINE WAS THIN AND BLACK. EYEBROW-LINE WAS ONLY SLIGHTLY LIGHTER THAN REST OF HEAD. BACK, RUMP, WINGS, AND TAIL WERE very similar in coloration to the pectorals. THE BREAST WAS grayish color of a junco with black barring. The side were STREAKED WITH BLACK WHICH ENDED WHERE legs connect to body. Belly and under tail coverts were pure white. also was a very thin white eye ring. However the most outstanding characteristic was the bright yellow legs yellower than the lesser yellow legs. Legs were short when compared to the yellow legs and about the same length as the pectorals. Flight pattern was observed 4 times. The bird had bright white stripes the length of the secondaries only. The tail dark with white patches on the sides of the rump. Under side of wings not observed. Plus no yellows could be detected on the bill, possibly because of the mud probing.
7. NOT HEARD
8. Always was with a flock of about 15-20 pectorals. always was in the water usually further out than most of Pectorals (over)

- Always flushed with the pectorals.
9. Large faeces mud puddle with corn stubble.
  10. Short bright yellow legs eliminates all similar species, except the wander Tattler which has a barred belly.
  11. 10-15 yards
  12. 20x spotting scope
  13. good P.C. in back of bird and observer.
  14. none, however had observed all other species present several or many times.
  15. Dick Bierman
  16. Yes
  17. none
  18. Birds of North America, Audubon Water bird Guide, and a field guide to the bird of Eastern U.S. I consulted each book during the observation, but recorded only what was actually seen.
  19. Took field notes during each sighting and wrote documentation same night.

Raymond L. Lemmins 204 NW. 12th Street  
4-30-79 Pocahontas, Iowa 50574



BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF  
AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD

81-AR

1. Species: PURPLE SANDPIPER 2. Number: 1
  3. Location: 1 mile north of Iowa Highway #3 on the black top To LAURENS  
POCAHONTAS COUNTY
  4. Date: APRIL 30, 1979 5. Time seen: 6:15 P.M. to 7:15 P.M.
  6. Description of size, shape, and color: SLIGHTLY LARGER THAN  
A PECTORAL SANDPIPER WHICH IT WAS WITH WHITE UNDERNEATH,  
BRIGHT YELLOW LEGS. MOTTLE PURPLE GRAY BREAST, DARK BILL (NOT BLACK)  
GRAYISH BACK WITH VERY VERY LITTLE BROWN. A LITTLE WHITE ON WING WHEN FLUSHED
  7. Voice, if heard: NONE
  8. Behavior: wading and probing for worms
  9. Habitat: IN A PLOWED FIELD THAT WAS FLOODED.
  10. Similar species: Greater or Lesser yellow legs, Pectoral, Dunlin, spotted sandpiper  
This bird was with pectoral sandpipers and yellow legs and  
-A dunlin. IT was obviously none of these.
  11. Distance viewed at: 25 TO 30 yards Optical equipment: 15-60 power spotting scope  
13. Light: OVERCAST BUT GOOD.
  14. Previous experience with this species and similar species:  
None with this species. Much with ALL THE OTHERS.
  15. Other observers: Ray Cummins Pocahontas, Ia. He called me to try and verify his  
Find
  16. Did others agree: YES 17. Other independent observers:  
NONE
  18. Books and advice consulted: Peterson's Guide, Birds of North America, and Audubon field guide.
  19. How long after seeing this bird did I write this description:  
1 hour.
- Signature: Rich Berman Address 901 Harris  
Date 4-30-79 City, State Cherokee Iowa 51012