

Western Sandpiper
8 Oct 1988
Saylorville Res., Polk Co., IA
*S. Dinsmore
IBL 59:13, 77

Record Number: 88-18
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION

Steve Dinsmore

LETTERS

Bruce Peterjohn, 8 May 1989
Kim Eckert, not dated
Guy McCaskie to Records Committee, 26 Sep 1989

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 59:13
Records Committee: IBL 59:77

VOTE: 4-A-D, 2-NA, 1-abstain

A-D. Size, bill-shape, and faint brown upper breast streaks seem to eliminate Semipalmated Sandpiper even though a side by side comparison was not available. The closeness and length of time viewed added additional strength to this sighting.

NA. The identification is based on wading behavior and bill shape. Wading behavior is a "soft" criterion and bill shape may or may not be diagnostic. The bird should be in first basic plumage not adult basic. My inclination is to require a specimen or a netted, measured and photographed bird to make this very difficult identification. The ID seems OK as a field identification, but I'm not inclined to accept it as a precedent setting record.

NA. Based on the comments from the documentation and several subjective suggestions from the documentor on a species that is next to impossible to identify with a Semipalmated Sandpiper in full basic plumage, I am afraid I cannot conclusively say that this is a Western Sandpiper.

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NA. Outside review of this stalemate will be most interesting.

NA. I am still not convinced. Why can there be no overlap in bill size with semipalmated in the fall when Harrison and Cramp note that overlap does exist and I would think would exist during any time of year. To me the description, even with faint brown streaks on sides of neck, could be of either Western or Semipalmated. Some Semipalmateds do have shorter, thicker looking bills than other Semipalmateds with some variation in plumage. I have also seen a few semipalmateds go into the water and do some wading though not for a very extended period of time.

A-D. First NA: bill shape is diagnostic. The key is to see it.

This doc. describes bill shape such as to be diagnostic. This is not a "very difficult identification." Second NA: I detect an undercurrent of nastiness here. What about diagnostic bill shape? 2nd REVOTE: 1 A-S, 5 A-D. 1 abstain

A-D. The problem in the above documentation is not present here because the bill is described as being the same length as nearby Pectorals. Therefore we are not looking at a short billed Western that could be a Semi, but a bird that must be a Western. I am discounting White-rumped and Sanderling because I believe they are too much different to be confused with Western. I see Western as Peterjohn describes them, but have trouble with Eckert's casual occurrence status. I see Western as a rare but regular fall and spring migrant in Iowa, which occurs twice as often in fall as spring.

A-D. After rereading the documentation and considering the comments of outside reviewers I will change my vote to A-D.

A-S. My prior votes indicate my agreement with outside reviewers.

SENT TO: Steve Dinsmore, 4024 Arkansas Dr., Ames, IA 50010.

From Bruce Peterjohn 5-8-89

88-04
✓88-18
18-19

COMMENTS CONCERNING THE IDENTIFICATION OF JUVENAL/BASIC PLUMAGED WESTERN SANDPIPERS IN THE FIELD

JUVENAL PLUMAGE:

In fresh juvenal plumage, Western Sandpipers can be positively identified by the rusty edgings to the scapulars, contrasting with the remainder of the gray-brown upperparts. Semipalmateds will never exhibit this contrast; while a few Semipalmateds may appear rather rusty in the field, the rusty edgings are distributed throughout the upperparts and not restricted to the scapulars.

Unfortunately, the rusty scapulars are not particularly visible in the field, especially on distant birds or under poor lighting conditions. In addition, these edgings are fairly quickly lost through feather wear; by the last week of September, it is not unusual to observe juvenile Westerns with uniform upperparts. Hence, the presence of rusty-edged scapulars indicates the sandpiper is a Western; the absence of these edgings does not necessarily eliminate either species.

FEMALE WESTERN SANDPIPERS:

In juvenal and basic plumages, most (98+%) female Western Sandpipers can be safely identified by bill characteristics. These females have relatively long and noticeably tapered bills, slightly down-turned near the tip. These bills are as long as or slightly longer than the width of the head (in profile). This characteristic is surprisingly useful, even on distant birds in poor light. With practice, it can be safely used on solitary individuals.

General size characteristics are not useful in the identification of these individuals. There is considerable overlap in wing length, tarsus length and weight between Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers. While a few female Westerns may appear relatively large, approaching a male White-rumped Sandpiper in size, these birds also have relatively long bills and would be easily identified by that characteristic.

MALE WESTERN SANDPIPERS:

Western Sandpipers lacking rusty-edged scapulars and tapered down-turned bills are the most difficult to identify in the field. These birds are normally males, whose measurements overlap female Semipalmateds in bill length, wing length, tarsus length and weight.

Two characteristics may be used to identify these individuals. The only characteristic that is diagnostic is their flight calls, which can be easily distinguished with practice (describing these calls on paper can be rather difficult, however). For silent birds, many (approximately 80-90%) can be identified by bill shape. Male Westerns have thinner and more tapered bills, while Semipalmateds have relatively thick bills with a rather bulbous tip. When both species are together for comparison, the difference in bill shape can be fairly obvious at close range. However, not every Western has a thin tapered bill

and some Semipalmateds lack the thicker tip; hence, this characteristic is not necessarily diagnostic by itself and should always be confirmed by flight calls, especially for exceptionally early/late individuals.

TIMING OF MIGRATION

The literature is full of erroneous arrival/departure dates for these species, especially Semipalmateds. In Ohio for example, there are a number of sightings of Semipalmateds as early as the last week of March and as late as early November. Yet, the few exceptionally early/late individuals that have been collected have all been Westerns. I suspect that a critical examination of specimens in other states would uncover similar results.

Careful study of migrant Western/Semipalmated Sandpipers in Ohio during the last decade has produced some interesting results. In autumn, Western Sandpipers are actually locally uncommon to fairly common migrants, occasionally gathering in flocks of 50-75+ individuals. Their migration normally peaks between September 15-October 10, and they are likely to outnumber Semipalmateds during late September and early October. The latest confirmed Ohio record of Semipalmated Sandpiper is only October 11, and there are very few acceptable sightings after October 1.

Concerning the three Iowa records, my votes would be as follows if I were on your records committee:

88-19 9 Oct. 1988 at Big Creek W.M.A.: **Accept**; the rusty scapulars and decurved bill are diagnostic for a Western Sandpiper.

88-18 8 Oct. 1988 at Saylorville Reservoir: **Accept**; the thin decurved bill would eliminate Semipalmated Sandpiper. Note: the absence of rusty scapulars does not necessarily indicate the bird was an adult; it could easily be a juvenile with worn scapulars. In the midwest, adult Westerns normally depart by August 15 and an October record would be exceptional.

88-04 27 March 1988 at Riverton W.M.A.: **Reject**; Described bill shape is not necessarily diagnostic by itself, and other characteristics (particularly call notes) were not noted. I am troubled by the description of this bird as "much chunkier" than a Least Sandpiper, which sounds more like a large female Western to me. Unusually early records such as this should be based on a description of all field marks, not relying on only one subjective characteristic (bill shape).

Records Committee, Iowa Ornithologists' Union

Printed: 04/23/89

Western Sandpiper
08 Oct 1988
Saviorville Res., Polk Co., IA
45. Dinsmore

Record Number: 88-18
Classification:

VOTE: 4-A-D, 2-NA, 1-abstain

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SENT TO: Steve Dinsmore, 4024 Arkansas Dr., Ames, IA 50010.

If the bird was truly in basic plumage (though the description is too brief to know this for sure), then Semi is eliminated. However, why couldn't it have been a Sanderling or a White-rumped? I can't find anything in the documentation to eliminate these. The early October date doesn't bother me, but I feel that the Western is only rare in the Midwest (it may only be casual) and I'm certain other species are routinely misidentified as Westerns, especially by those who have not studied Shorebirds by Hayman et al. or the Am. Birds article by Veit and Jonsson. In Minnesota from now on, no Westerns at any time of year will be accepted without complete documentation since the ID is so difficult and since so far we have no specimen or photo records!

Kim Echert

88-04
~~88-18~~
88-19

Guy McCaskie
954 Grove Street
Imperial Beach
CALIFORNIA 92032

September 26, 1989

I.O.U. Records Committee
Thomas H. Kent, Secretary
211 Richards Street
Iowa City
Iowa 52246

Dear Tom,

I have been sitting on this material for far too long and must apologize. I have been buried with other matters including an increased load at work.

I have expressed my opinion as to the identity of the gull, agreeing with the majority of your committee members that it is indeed a Slaty-backed Gull, and outlining the reasons I feel it could not be a Western Gull.

I find myself reluctant to make a positive identification of any the three shorebird records, though I feel all three were most likely Western Sandpipers (Calidris mauri). I know nothing about the abilities of the observers reporting the three birds, nor their familiarity with shorebirds, and would consider this an important factor in evaluating the records. All three shorebirds appear to have been in winter plumage or juveniles molting into winter plumage, and none of the three sightings is accompanied by the type of details that would enable an outsider like myself to properly evaluate the record. However, from what I know about the status and distribution of Semipalmated Sandpipers (Calidris pusilla) and Western Sandpipers in North America, both do occur in Iowa, this being confirmed by the information presented in IOWA BIRDS. As such the records are only being considered because of the dates upon which they were reported, and not because they are casual to accidental in the State. I do not feel there is reason to consider any of the three birds as anything other than Semipalmated or Western sandpipers, and do not understand why some committee members are even considering such species as Little Stint (Calidris minuta) and Rufous-necked Stint (Calidris ruficollis).

There is nothing in the account on the March 27th "Semipalmated Sandpiper" that indicated the observer even considered Western Sandpiper, and the only information in the account that one can use to evaluate the record is the description of the bill - "the bill was straight, dark, and much thicker at the base and the tip than the bill of a Baird's or Least sandpiper". This could indicate the bird was a Semipalmated Sandpiper, but the

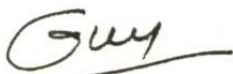
fact that the bill appeared "much thicker at the base ..." also suggests the bird could be a Western Sandpiper. Western Sandpipers regularly winter in the United States, and here in California are migrating northward by late March. On the other hand Semipalmated Sandpipers winter south of the United States, and do not normally arrive in the United States until April. As such I would expect an early "peep" in Iowa to be a Western Sandpiper rather than a Semipalmated Sandpiper. I suggest you consider the ability of the observer and his familiarity with shorebirds when evaluating this record. I personally feel it is exceptionally early for a Semipalmated Sandpiper anywhere in North America, but within reason for a Western Sandpiper.

There is nothing in the information presented about the October 8th bird that would lead me to believe the bird was anything other than a Western Sandpiper. In this case the observer had a Semipalmated Sandpiper nearby for size comparison. The bill on this bird was surely outside the range seen on Semipalmated Sandpipers, and probably on the long side for a Western Sandpiper if indeed it was "as long as the bill of a Pectoral". Since Western Sandpipers winter farther north than do Semipalmated Sandpipers I would expect late "peeps" to be Western Sandpipers rather than Semipalmated Sandpipers. Again I would suggest you consider the ability of the observer and his familiarity with shorebirds when evaluating this record.

There is nothing in the information presented about the October 9th bird that would lead me to believe the bird was anything other than a Western Sandpiper. Again the observer had Semipalmated Sandpipers present for direct comparison, and clearly compared the bill of the suspected Western Sandpiper with the bills on the known Semipalmated Sandpipers, and concluded it was "longer and had an obvious droop", certainly supporting the identification of the bird as a Western Sandpiper. Most juvenile Western Sandpipers here in the San Diego area as of this past weekend [September 24th] still show some rust on the scapulars, though advancing into winter plumage. As such I would consider it likely that a juvenile would still show some rust as late as October 9th while in general appearing quite pale. I feel the bird was probably a juvenile Western Sandpiper, but suggest you consider the ability of the observer and her familiarity with shorebirds when evaluating the record.

I trust some of this will be helpful to you in arriving at a conclusion on these records. Again, sorry to have sat on the records for so long.

Sincerely



Guy McCaskie

DOCUMENTATION FORM

Species?Western Sandpiper

How Many?1 winter adult

Location?Saylorville Reservoir, Polk Co.-north end of reservoir

Habitat?feeding in shallow water adjacent to mudflat with other shorebirds

Date?8 Oct 1988

Time?3:30-4:45 p.m.

Observers Name and address:Steve Dinsmore 4024 Arkansas Dr. Ames, IA 50010

Others who saw bird:Andy Fix

Description of bird:We were scanning over about 400-500 shorebirds, mostly Pectoral Sandpipers, when we noticed a smaller shorebird wading with several dowitchers. It was soon apparent that the bird was a peep, and from the wading behavior and bill shape we concluded that the bird must be a Western Sandpiper.

The bird was roughly 25% smaller than a Pectoral Sandpiper. The legs were short and dark. The bill was as long as the bill of a Pectoral, was dark colored, and was tapered evenly to the tip. The bill drooped slightly near the tip. Otherwise, the bird was mostly gray above and white below. The wingtips were darker ~~darker~~ than the rest of the wings. The underparts were entirely white, except for some very faint brown streaks on the sides of the neck. The bird did not have rusty scapulars, nor were there any inverted "V" markings on the flanks or neck. Although we flushed the bird several times, it would not call. We aged the bird as a basic-plumaged adult on the basis of the plumage. Note that we saw a single Semipalmated Sandpiper in the same flock of shorebirds. The Semipalmated Sandpiper had a shorter, thicker bill, more of a brown wash on the breast, and frequented the edge of the mudflat rather than wading in the water.

Similar species and how eliminated:see above

Viewing conditions and equipment:Viewing conditions were excellent with the sun behind us. Estimated viewing distance was as close as 40 feet. I used a Bushnell 20-45x spotting scope.

Previous experience with species:I have seen numerous Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers in Iowa, and I am familiar other peeps as well.

References consulted:NGS Field Guide to the Birds of North America

How long before field notes were made?noen made

How long before this form was completed?5 hours