

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper
3 Oct 1974
Coralville Res., Johnson Co., IA
N. S. Halmi
Halmi 1974

Record Number: 81-AS
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION

Halmi, N.S. [documentation contains original color drawing different from that that was later published; also accompanied by letter to Vernon Kleen]--added 1999, not part of review

REFERENCE

Halmi, N. S. 1974. Sight record of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper near Iowa City, IBL 44:106.

Halmi, N. S. 1989. Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. IBL 59:128 (drawing)

Field Reports: [not mentioned]

VOTE (1981): 6-III, 1-IV

III, excellent description, but rare and unconfirmed.

III, High difficulty factor, but well described by good observer.

III, Description convincing (matches imm sharp-tails in Chicago field museum). But only a single observer, no photograph. III, Fine description. Obs. well aware of rarity of bird.

IV, This is a single observer record made by an experienced field observer with some prior experience with this specie. The sharp-tailed sandpiper is a bird of the Pacific occurring at low density on the NW coast of the Lower 48 States with some regularity. The specie's incidence apparently decreases with decreasing latitude down the California Coast. Two inland records are known - one in Arizona (cited by the observer) and one in Illinois. Details of both are unknown to me, and they are of unknown quality. Field identification of this specie is adequately reviewed in the observer's report. An additional field mark, visible only at close range or with high magnification, is the "check-shaped" marks on the breast of the bird. A definitive mark, the length of the central primaries, is apparently difficult or even impossible to detect in the field. The sharp-tailed sandpiper is, in general, very similar to the pectoral sandpiper. The field identification of the former in the Pacific Northwest is greatly aided by the rarity (there) of the pectoral sandpiper. However, the site of this sharp-tailed sandpiper record in Eastern Iowa is in the midst of the pectoral sandpiper's migration path for both Spring and Fall. The field identification problem for the sharp-tailed sandpiper in Iowa would seem to lie not only in the need for positive establishment and confirmation of the distinguishing features of this extremely unlikely specie but also establishment and confirmation that the observed features are not those of an aberrant pectoral sandpiper. The report of the Iowa record argues for identification as sharp-tail largely on the basis of elimination - it doesn't look like a pectoral, what else can it be - stressing "reddishness" and striping pattern on the breast as key elements in assigning the individual to sharp-tail status. Observers familiar with variations in pectoral sandpiper plumage are aware of the occasional bird in "poor feather" which lacks a "harp line". The reddish coloration of the bird, even when seen in good light, is a subtle feature needing confirmation. In general it seems to me that some accidental species in Iowa can not be identified in the field under any circumstances in Iowa because of the overall difficulties characteristics perceivable in the field. The sharp-tailed sandpiper is one of these species. III, I consider this a 'watertight' sight record, based on knowledge of the observer & my own experience with this species in New Zealand. Can be very difficult to separate, but this bird appeared to be one of the more obvious ones.

REVOTE (at meeting, 1 May 1981): no change in vote.

Halmi, N. S. 1974. Sight record of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper near Iowa City.
IBL 44:106.

Sight record of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper near Iowa City - On October 3, 1974, after two record-breaking cold fronts had moved through Iowa, I was examining a flock of mixed shorebirds between 2:10 and 2:35 p.m., off county road 0 in Johnson County, with 7 x 35 Leitz Trinovid binoculars and a 20-45 x Bushnell zoom scope. It was a sunny day, and my position due west of the birds made for excellent lighting. The flock consisted of 9 Long-billed Dowitchers (identified by voice), 12 Snipe, 1 Dunlin, 1 Semipalmated Sandpiper, 2 Killdeers, and a typical Pectoral Sandpiper. Foraging in a leisurely manner along with the Pectoral was a very similar bird, some 1/4" longer, essentially identical in shape, movements, behavior, bill (black, about the length of the head) and legs (yellowish). This bird differed from the Pectoral by having a bright rufous crown with fine black longitudinal streaking, offset by a prominent white superciliary line becoming less distinct and fusing behind the crown, and by lacking an abruptly ending "bib" of dark markings on the chest, instead of having a buffy, in places almost orange, chest blending gradually with the white belly, with fine lateral streakings merging only in a narrow band just below the white throat. Other field marks noted were the scaly back and buffy edgings on the primaries and some of the median wing coverts. The bird did not call, nor could it be flushed to show the tail pattern. The tail extended slightly beyond the tip of the wing. The bird was observed at leisure while it moved from 25 to 60 ft. After consideration of species somewhat similar (Pectoral Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper), I had to conclude that the field marks fitted only one species, the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*). This Siberian breeder has been regularly observed on the West Coast, and as an accidental in other US coastal locations. The only inland observation was apparently in Arizona in October 1972 (*Am. Birds* 27:98, 1973). As pointed in *A Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand* by Falla et al. (p. 142), the breeding area of the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in Siberia is enclosed by that of the Pectoral, so their joint migration might not be unexpected. The bird observed matched the picture in Robbins et al., p. 123, so far as the head is concerned. The breast of the bird depicted there is, however, that of one in breeding plumage. The description in Falla et al. strengthened my faith in the identification. "Crown, chestnut streaked black," "superciliary stripe whitish", "breast gray or buffish with irregular streaks, fading to white on the abdomen, but with no harp line of demarcation" (emphasis theirs), "young birds - look tawny and have bright chestnut crowns". - N. S. Halmi, M.D., Box 182, R. No. 6, Iowa City.

LETTERS

SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER

FROM NICHOLAS S. HALMI



So Iowa had to wait 14 years for its second *C. acuminata*. Now that there is so much fuss made (at long last) about the three plumages of shorebirds, Pete could have added to his article that this was a juvenile (as was mine). It also occurred to me that a watercolor I made the night of the sighting (with the kids' paints) might be of some interest to the repository of Iowa documentations, so here it is. Remember, in 1974 there was no color picture of a sharp-tail in juvenal plumage in any guide, and I was really struck by the amount of orange in the chest. Since then, this has become old hat.

200 Winston Dr., Cliffside Park, NJ 07010

[The articles referred to above are: Halmi, N. S. 1974. Sight record of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper near Iowa City, *Iowa Bird Life* 44:106 and Petersen, P. C. 1989. Sharp-tailed Sandpiper at Davenport. *Iowa Bird Life* 59:90.]



EDITORIAL

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Carl J. Bend
W. Ross Silc
Stephen J. I
James J. Dir.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

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INSTRUCTIONS

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STANDING

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black bill about
length of head,
no curvature

chestnut crown with black longit-
udinal stripes (contrasts with brown
grey crown of Pectoral nearby)

very distinct white
superciliary stripe, fusing as a
poorly demarcated line
behind the crown

white
throat

breast buffy
with slightly orange
tint; fine black mottling
along sides, confluent in narrow
band just below throat; no
sharp demarcation from belly

white
belly

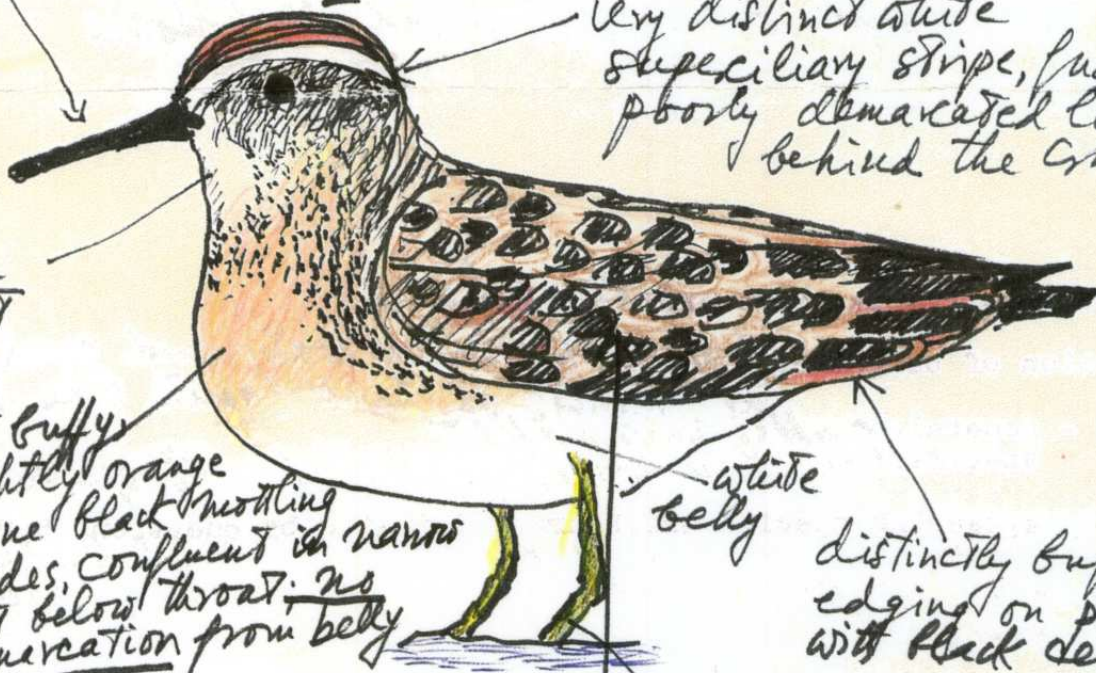
distinctly buffy
edging on primaries,
with black center

dirty yellowish-green
legs

About $\frac{1}{4}$ " longer than
Pectoral Scaup with
which associated
(much larger than Baird's,
tail extending
slightly beyond wings)

Stilt: smaller, longer bill
decurved at end, longer
greenish legs, underside
barred when crown chestnut
(seen last two years); entirely
different shape (less
chunky)

scapulars and back "scaly";
black feathers edged with
light brown (some buffy tinge
near wing bend)



OK
Middlewestern Prairie Region
(Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio)

81-AS

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD

- Species: Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (?) 2. Number: 1
- Location: County Road 0, about 15 miles NW of Iowa City, Iowa
- Date: October 3, 1974 5. Time Bird seen: 2:10 to 2:30 PM
- Description of size, shape and color-pattern (describe in great detail all parts of the plumage, and beak and feet coloration, in addition, to the diagnostic characteristics, but include only what actually was seen in the field):
see drawing in back, with labels of field marks and comments on differential diagnosis
- Description of voice, if heard: not heard
- Description of behavior: feeding in shallow water and mud, with irregular thrusts of beak (quite like Pectoral)
- Habitat - general: public in mudflat
specific: shallow water and mud, with sparse clumps of grass
- Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8:
Explain: Pectoral Sandpiper. good juxtaposition. Diff.: chestnut crown, breast spotting much finer, mostly on sides only, no sharp line of demarcation downwards
- Distance (how measured?) 30 - 60 ft. (est.) 12. Optical equipment: 7x35 Trinoid well zoom scope
- Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): sunny, excellent light, see diagram
- Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: none with sharp-tailed; Pectoral Sandpipers very common here, next to bird
- Other observers: none over for others Osun in question
- Did the others agree with your identification? -
- Other observers who independently identified this bird:
- Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description: Peterson West, Robbins, Reilly, Bent, Falla et al.'s Birds of New Zealand. Descriptions of juvenal Sharp-tailed s.p. agree with observations. All these consulted after the sighting. Singer's picture of adult in winter plumage helpful only for rusty cap.

Signature: Nicholas Halvni Address: Box 122, R#6

Date: Oct. 3 1974 City, State: Iowa City, Iowa 52240
Nicholas Halvni

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length of head,
no curvature

chestnut crown with black longit-
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grey crown of Pectoral nearby)

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belly

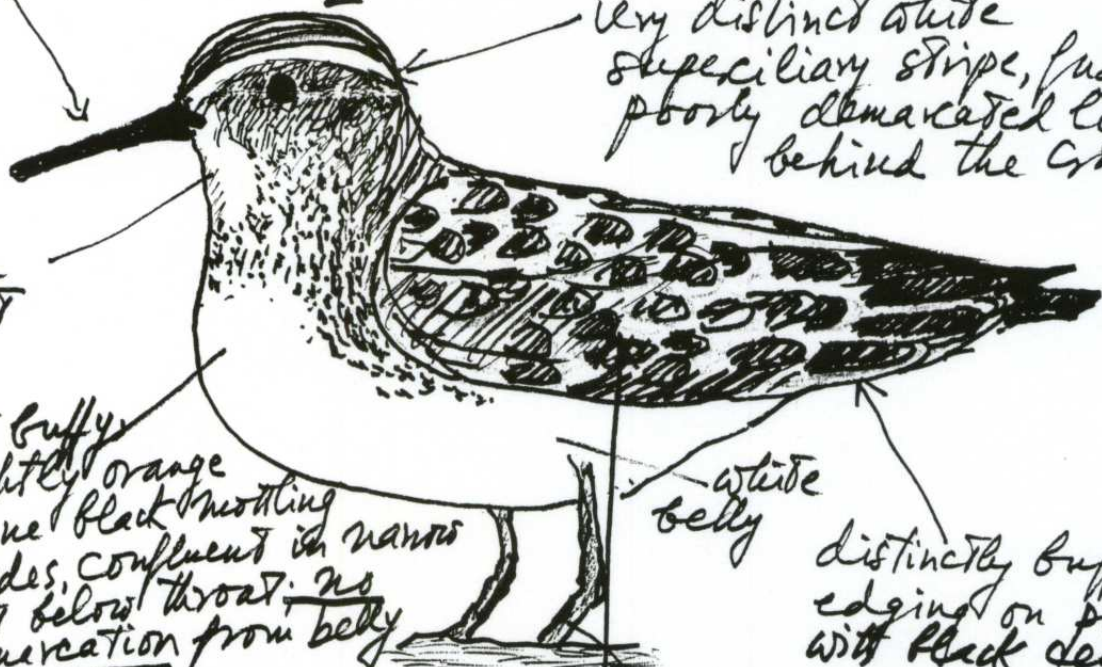
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edging on primaries,
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dirty yellowish-green
legs

about $\frac{1}{4}$ " longer than
Pectoral Sandpiper with
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scapulars and back "scaly";
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near wing bend)



Scar Vern:

81-AS

For once I wish I hadn't seen a bird, since the only interpretation I could give it sounds so outlandish, but I did, so report I must, giving the experts (who may not be from our area) a chance to evaluate the sighting. Unfortunately, I was alone, without a camera, and by the time Fred Kent, a professional photographer as well as our senior birder, arrived on the scene, there was nothing to record. I also wished that the great hunter who two weeks ago provided me with a specimen of a Sanderling while shooting at what he called snipe had been there - I would have forgiven him some of his past and future trespasses had he secured a specimen of the bird described and (as best I could with my limited talent and my four pencils) depicted on the enclosed sheet.

The nights of Oct. 1-2 and 2-3 were record-breakers throughout most of Iowa. The cold brought in a wave of shorebirds which were foraging off a rather heavily traveled County road on the afternoon of the 3rd, when I sneaked away from work to see what had dropped in. It was a nice mixed flock, with some 12 snipe probing the mud as close as 10 feet from the car, 9 Long-billed (by sound mostly) Dowitchers a little farther in, a mottling Dunlin among them, and a Semipalmated Sanderling a bit farther away. While trying to identify the Dowitchers as to species, I saw a typical Pectoral Sanderling and, right next to it "the bird", to repeat some of the description: a little larger than the Pec but similar in behavior, bill length, color of legs; most obviously different by having a distinctly rufous crown (almost like a Clipping Sparrow) finely streaked longitudinally with black, set off rather sharply by an almost white, pronounced superciliary line becoming less distinct and fusing behind the crown, and by lacking

the downwards sharply demarcated (I call it chain mail) breast pattern of the Pec, instead showing only streaking only on the side and confluent (very fine streaking at that) just under the chin — the overall color of the breast, merging gradually with the sides of the belly, was buff with an almost peach-colored (i.e., slightly orange) tint. Minor differences noted were the distinctly buffy edgings on the primaries and some of the scaly-appearing feathers near the shoulder. Otherwise, the bird would have passed for a Pec, and I would have undoubtedly overlooked him had he been farther away and part of a flock (who spends 10 min looking at every Pec in a flock?). I made my drawing while the memory of the fieldmarks was still fresh (4-4:30). My description of the bird next day to an experienced young birder, Samell Peterson, whom I wanted to verify the sighting, if possible, immediately eloked the response "Sharp-tailed Sandpiper"; and this is the only diagnosis all my reading supported. I am painfully aware of the only other inland specimen photographed in Arizona in 1973 and seen by m.o.b., but it is a question of believing my eyes or the odds. We have had a good shorebird migration this fall, and I have seen Baird's Sandpipers on 5 occasions: much smaller, no rufous crown, wings extending beyond tail (very clear); also Stilt Sandpipers, rusty crown and eye patch (this one had brownish around the eyes, like a Pec), much longer ^{green} legs, slimmer body, longer (in relation to head) bill distinctly decurved at the end, barred undersides.

Well, this is all I can do. I'll be interested in your reaction. It would be most encouraging if this hadn't been an isolated observation for the entire region!

Sincerely
Nick Halen