Records Committee, Iowa Ornithologists' Union Printed: 08/04/93

Western Sandpiper Record Number: 88-19
9 Oct 1988 Classification: A-D
Big Creek L., Polk Co., IA
*Johnson
IBL 59:13, 77

DOCUMENTATION
Ann Johnson
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. Direct comparison with nearby Semipalmated Sandpipers was made.
A-D. Although the description is very brief, the rusty scapulars and long, drooping bill eliminate other peeps, especially Semipalmated. Description is good enough to establish a record late date for this species in Iowa.
NA. The identification is based almost entirely on bill shape. I'm not sure how to interpret "hint of some rust on the scapulars." I would like to have seen this bird collected, or netted, measured and photographed. It is probably OK as a field ID of a juvenile/basic Western Sandpiper, but I'm not willing to accept it as a precedent setting record.
NA. I am not convinced that this was not a juvenile plumaged semipalmated. Bill length is such an inconsistent variable in some identification problems that a combination of other id areas has to be called upon to prove what has been seen. I wish it was easier, but it isn't.
A-D. Again, bill description seems adequate to eliminate other possibilities.
REVOTE: 4-A-D, 3-NA
NA. Perhaps we need some help with these. Suggest send to Jon Dunn and Bruce Peterjohn.
A-D. Bill size compared directly to Semipalmated Sandpipers. However, body size comparison should also have been mentioned. Westerns are bigger.
A-D. Two key features, the bill shape and rusty scapulars, are diagnostic for Western. The brief description mentioned both of these field marks. Direct comparison with Semipalmated Sandpipers further supports identification. Bill size overlap for Semi and Western not likely in Iowa as pointed out by Silcock. Only other comment against acceptance was fear of a "precedent setting record." That comment illustrates the "if I don't see it, I don't believe it" attitude that should be left out of our evaluation of records.
NA. Await outside review.
NA. I agree that a hint of some rust on the scapulars could just as easily be a description of the feather edging of a

Semipalmated: this is hard to interpret. I again contend that the fact that the bill on this bird was larger than other Semipalmateds nearby does not automatically exclude this being another Semipalmated because of bill size variation in this species. Also a larger bill could look drooped at the tip if compared to other shorter straighter bills in the vacinicty.

A-D. The two NAs have followed the same pattern as I commented upon fro 88-18. I strongly object to the tack taken by these authors, especially the second NA.

2nd REVOTE: 1 A-S, 6 A-D

A-D. I will agree that birders attempting to identify Westerns should try to quantify the bill length in relation to the head profile. The documentor described the bill "as enough longer and had an obvious droop" in comparing it to closeby Semi's. This is sufficient. Again Sandrling does not need to be considered.

A-D. All of the field marks noted are consistent with Western and rule out Semipalmated. I also beg to differ with Eckert, who seems to doubt the existence of Westerns in the Midwest. Western Sandpipers are regular in at least central Iowa, and are not hard to identify given a decent look.

A-D. I have reconsidered my vote after reading the outside reviewers comments and now vote A-D.

A-S. See comment 88-18.

SENT TO: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk, IA 50211

From Bruce Peterjohn 5-8-89

88-04
88-18
88-19

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

88-19

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.

8 Oct. 1988 at Saylorville Reservoir: **Accept**; the thin decurved bill would eliminate Semipalmated Sandpiper. Note: the absence of
88-18 rusty scapulars <u>does not</u> 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.

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
88-04 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).

88-19

Records Committee, Iowa Ornithologists' Union Printed: 04/23/89

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09 Oct 1988 Classification:
Big Creek L., Polk Co., IA
*Johnson

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SENT TO: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk, IA 50211

See comments on Saylorville Reservoir record - Although White-rumped is eliminated by wing length, why wasn't it a Sanderling or Semi: both can have rusty edges on scapular feathers and the description is too vague on this feature to be sure what was seen. Also vague is the overall size in comparison with Semis, and the bill shape description is equally vague. As with the other record, I feel Westerns are rare/casual and should only be accepted with complete documentation and research by the observer.

Kim Eckert

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

88-04
88-18
88-19

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

Guy McCaskie

88-19

DOCUMENTATION FORM
Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

Species: Western Sandpiper

Location: Big Creek Wildlife Area, Polk Co., IA

Habitat: Mudflats from low water on freshwater lake

Date(s): 10/9/88 Time: 3:00 pm to 3:10 pm (est)

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk, Iowa 50211

Other observers: none at time but observed earlier in day by Mike Thomas

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under-tail, legs, feet). Also mention behavior and voice.
This small shorebird was immediately identifiable as a "peep" because of its small size and plumpish body. The bird was very pale but showed just a hint of some rust on the scapulars. It had black legs and bill. The wings did not extend beyond the tail. The bill was longer than the nearby semipalmateds and had a slight droop at the tip. The bird was possibly sick as it did not feed actively and stayed somewhat apart from the leasts and semipalmateds which were feeding closeby. When the other peeps would flush for any reason, they would circle over the lake before returning. This bird would flush only a couple of feet before settling in again. Unfortunately, the bird uttered no sound while I was present.
Similar species and how eliminated:
Although I understand the difficulty in identification of fall western sandpipers, the Baird's and white-rumped were eliminated because of wing length. The least sandpiper was eliminated by leg color and bill shape/size. The most difficult elimination was that of the semipalmateds, especially since other semipals were present in the area. After careful observation and comparison, however, the prototypical western sandpiper bill was too obvious to make the bird into a semipalmated. The bill was enough longer and had an obvious droop. The others in the area had varying bill sizes but none had the general shape of this bird. Consequently, I believe this was a late date western sandpiper.
Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? NA

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:
Good sunlight at back, observed through 40x scope at a distance of approximately 50'. (Distance paced at later date)
Previous experience with species and similar ones:
Many years of working on shorebird identification, although I certainly wouldn't consider myself an expert - particularly in identifying various plumages.
References and persons consulted before writing description:
None prior to field notes; National Geographic Field Guide, Audubon Master Guide, and The Complete Birder were consulted prior to identification and completion of this form.

How long before field notes made? immediately How long before this form completed? 6 weeks