

IBL June 1977

Halimi
Early Arrival of Peeps in Eastern Iowa--When the Iowa City Bird Club visited Cone Marsh on March 19, Rob Vane spotted a peep on the muddy banks of the north end (around 9:30 AM). We trained a scope on it, and unequivocally identified it as a Least Sandpiper (Calidris minutilla) from its small size, yellowish legs, fine bill and brownish back. The bird was seen by several other members of the group. The earliest spring date for Least Sandpiper in Iowa given in Brown's Annotated List (1971) is April 16, which evidently refers to a 1955 record by Dr. P. Laude (IBL XXIX:66,1959).

On April 10, I was scanning and scoping shorebirds from my parked car, on the extensive mudflats forming the southern edge of the Coralville Reservoir across from Sandy Beach. It was about 4:30 PM, sunny, hot (maximum: 84 degrees) and windy (similar weather had prevailed on the 9th too). Among 50+ Pectoral Sandpipers I noted 2 peeps that were about an inch shorter, had dark legs, a stubbier, straight, black bill, a similar back pattern with somewhat grayer coloration, some markings on the upper breast (not a bib), a rather prominent white superciliary strip, black tail feathers, and wing tips clearly extending a little beyond the tip of the tail. Both birds were probing the mud vigorously, immersing their bills up to their base. Attempts to flush them were unsuccessful, so I did not see the rump. When one bird flew off (without revealing its rump pattern) and alighted again, indication of a narrow white wing stripe was visible for a moment, and the peep emitted a single high note quite different from the "krip" sounds of the Pectorals. Without having seen the white rump. I still had no doubt that these birds were White-rumped Sandpipers (Calidris fuscicollis). They were of more compact build than the only other peeps of similar size, Baird's Sandpipers, did not show the horizontal position of the body characteristic of the latter, lacked any indication of a buffy wash across the breast, and did not have a scaly back pattern. The earliest spring date for White-rumped Sandpiper given by Brown is May 3, but I have a May 2 record for 1976. In any event, these birds, like the Least, were almost a month early. It was natural to seek a connection between the anomalously hot weather, with gusty winds from the south, and their premature arrival.

See description on previous page
While I was watching the White-rumped and Pectoral Sandpipers, another peep, this one markedly (about 2 inches) smaller than the latter, joined the flock. It did not stay long, but was, like the others, within easy scoping distance (100-150 feet), and the lighting was very favorable. The bird had a grayish-brown back (no rusty feathers seen), black legs, a definitely decurved black bill at least as long as the head, and was probing deep puddles. Had it been fall, I would have had no hesitation calling this bird a Western Sandpiper (Calidris mauri), but spring records of this species in Iowa are few, and I have never seen one in the spring. The earliest spring record for Western Sandpiper is Dr. P. Laude's April 16, 1955 sighting at Swan Lake in Johnson Co., so an April 10 observation is not far out of line. Incidentally, the Kents' 2 sightings of Western Sandpipers in this area were in the spring (May 15 and 21), not in the fall ("Birding in Eastern Iowa", p.67). A.R. Phillips' findings (Am. Birds 29:799,1975), according to which practically all small, black-legged peeps wintering in the U.S. are Western, not Semipalmated, Sandpipers suggest that Anderson (1907) and DuMont (1933) were probably correct in surmising that Western Sandpipers may be more common migrants through Iowa than the records indicate. On the other hand, Phillips also cautions against the separation of Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers in the field by sight only, so a caveat is in order: the bird seen could have been a female Semipalmated with an exceptionally long bill. (The Kents' records, l.c., show no sightings of Semipalmated Sandpipers in the area before the 3rd week of April.)
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