

WESTERN SANDPIPER IN SASKATCHEWAN: FIRST CONFIRMED RECORD

CHRISTOPHER J. ESCOTT, 271 Sylvian Way, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7H 5G1



The rain was pelting through from the northeast in short showers on 19 September 1985, when I visited the mudflats north of Radisson. These flats are about 1 km north of the town and straddle Highway 340. Radisson Lake, which is a waterfowl refuge, is 1.6 km farther west. The flats on the east side of the road were mainly mud with widespread grassy tufts, a band of shallow water along the south edge and a narrow pebbly beach. On the west side of the road the bulk of the slough was open water, but the arm at the north end beside the road was wet mud.

A Peregrine Falcon had just flown through and only ducks and a family of Ross' Geese were in evidence at the west

end of the slough. Within minutes a small flock of peeps settled on the mud immediately beside the west edge of the road. I checked them with binoculars noting one rather brown little bird with a fair bit of streaking on the chest, a rather long and slender bill, and yellow legs (a Least Sandpiper); three greyer little birds with clear white chest, short chunky bills and black legs (Semipalmated Sandpipers); and a fifth bird, a bit larger than the Semipalmateds but similar in coloring, with a long heavy downcurving bill and black legs.

I knew immediately that I was looking at a Western Sandpiper. I put my scope on the bird to get a closer look. There was a brisk breeze blowing in my face,

with intermittent raindrops, and the day was overcast so light conditions were not optimal. I was only about 25 m from the bird, however, so had an excellent view. The legs were black, but I was unable to tell if the feet were webbed. The bill was proportionately longer than that of the Least Sandpiper and thick at the base like those of the Semipalmateds. It appeared to droop, but the impression was one of decurvature rather than a drooping tip. The underside of the bird was clear white, with only a shade of pale grey on the chest and some streaking on the upper breast (i.e. at the sides). The primaries and secondaries were greyish brown with wide creamy fringes. The majority of the back feathers were similarly colored. The upper scapulars, however, were a rusty brown color with creamy edges, as were the back feathers immediately below the nape. The nape itself was paler. The crown and sides of the head were greyish brown, intermediate in color between primaries and scapulars, with the exception of a prominent white eyebrow and forehead. The overall impression was of a robust Semipalmated Sandpiper with one heck of a long bill.

Having confirmed the diagnostic field marks, I took a quick shot with the short lens that was on my camera at the time. As I hurried to mount a 1250 mm mirror lens for a close-up, (wouldn't you know it!) a truck went past and flushed all the birds. They had been probing in the mud along the edge of the open water. When flushed they flew across the road and settled on dryer mud beside the east edge of the highway. Camera ready, I drove slowly over and was on the verge of snapping the shutter when another vehicle drove the birds farther from the road but still on the east side. At that point I donned rubber boots, put camera on tripod and from about 8:00 to 11:00 a.m. I squelched around those mud flats observing and photographing the Western Sandpiper, sometimes from as close as 10 m.

On the east side of the road the birds were harder to spot because of the grassy tufts. The original small flock merged with another group which included three Semipalmated Plover, several more Semipalmated Sandpiper, a couple of Baird's Sandpipers and a couple more Least. The Western Sandpiper now began to show a preference for associating with the Semipalmated Plovers. For 3 hours the birds worked their way back and forth across the fairly firm mud, several times flying short distances. The Western Sandpiper was more of a prober than the other peeps which tended to peck at the mud. Finally the group flushed, and when last seen the Western Sandpiper was on the south shore of the east side slough in company with a small flock of Sanderlings and Baird's Sandpipers. That flock shortly took off, and a careful search of the area did not again turn up the Western Sandpiper.

The Western Sandpiper (WESA) breeds in northeastern Siberia, and northern and western Alaska. It winters along coastal areas from California and North Carolina to southern Peru and Surinam. Most of the population migrates along the Pacific coast, but small numbers occur regularly on Atlantic coastal mudflats.

In Canada the WESA is rare or uncommon everywhere except in British Columbia where it is a common coastal migrant. There are fewer than a dozen reports of WESA in the Maritimes known to the author, with all but one being fall records. In Quebec and Ontario this species is a regular fall and sporadic spring migrant in very small numbers. The author knows of only two published records for Manitoba, both spring reports from the Churchill area. Alberta, on the other hand, has some 20 published reports including a number of unconfirmed sightings; again, the majority of these are fall records.

There are no prior confirmed reports of WESA in Saskatchewan, supported by photograph or specimen, so until now the species has been considered hypothetical. The photographs taken near Radisson clearly show a Western Sandpiper. This was confirmed by Dr. Henri Ouellet of the National Museum of Natural Sciences in Ottawa who kindly examined the best slide and had no doubt about the identification of the bird as a Western Sandpiper. Previous sightings of this species in Saskatchewan (as known to the author) are:

- 1) spring 1968, more than once in Regina ⁴
- 2) 25 July 1974, 1 near Purdue ⁴
- 3) 30 May 1977, 4 northwest of Catherwood Lake ⁴
- 4) 15 May 1978, 2 near Biggar ⁴
- 5) 18 May 1980, 1 at Moose Jaw ⁴
- 6) 15 May 1984, 2 near Saskatoon ¹
- 7) 16 May 1984, 2 near Regina ¹
- 8) 29 July 1984, 1 near Saskatoon ⁶
- 9) 25 August 1984, 1 near Saskatoon ²
- 10) 5, 6, 17 August 1985, 1 at Old Wives Lake ³

The long thick bill and rusty upper scapulars of the bird I saw were of classic proportions and made identification easy. In many cases individuals of this species have less color and/or shorter bills, and they become very difficult to separate from the Semipalmated Sandpiper. It is quite possible that the species occurs with greater regularity in Saskatchewan, even if only in small numbers, but is usually not recognised. The references below include the titles of several recent works which are of great benefit in trying to accurately identify this and other peep species.

The author gratefully acknowledges the guidance and assistance of Dr. H. Ouellet of the National Museum in Ottawa, who provided published record data and access to study skins for examination; and of Dr. J. B. Gollop of the Canadian Wildlife Service in Saskatoon, who reviewed this article prior to publication.

- ¹ GOLLOP, J.B. 1984. Prairie Provinces Region. *Am. Birds* 38(5):925-927.
- ² HARRIS, W.C. 1985. Prairie Provinces Region. *Am. Birds* 39(1):67-69.
- ³ HARRIS, W.C. 1986. Prairie Provinces Region. *Am. Birds* 40(1):120-131.
- ⁴ HOUSTON, C.S., M.I. HOUSTON and J.B. GOLLOP. 1981. Saskatchewan bird species hypothetical and rejected. *Blue Jay* 39(4):196-201.
- ⁵ MELLON, R. 1968. A dichotomous key to the shorebirds of North America. Mellon Biological Services, Morrisville.
- ⁶ O'NEIL, J.B. (Mrs.), Ed. 1984. Saskatoon Field Notes 13(2) 11 pp.
- ⁷ PRATER, A.J., J.H. MARCHANT and J. VUORINEN. 1977. Guide to the identification and aging of holarctic waders. BTO Guide No. 17.
- ⁸ STEVENSON, H.M. 1979. Identification of Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers. *Birding* 11(2):84-88.
- ⁹ VEIT, R. and L. JONSSON. 1984. Field identification of smaller sandpipers within the genus *Calidris*. *Am. Birds* 38(5):853-876.