Identifying Winter Sandpipers

Audubon Coastal Bird Survey
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What is a Sandpiper?

- **Scolopacidae**
  - excludes
    - Charadriidae: plovers
    - Haematopodidae: oystercatchers
    - Recurvirostridae: stilts and avocets
  - 40 species in North America!!
  - Highly specialized carnivores that forage on invertebrates in wet fields, mudflats and along beaches.
Breeding

Winter

Plumage transitions (molt)

Breeding

Winter
Why so Drab?

Reduced predation risk

Shorebird Predators
Peregrine Falcon
Merlin
Safety in Numbers

How Birders Benefit:

- Clusters of birds (easier to spot)
- Compare sizes
Epic Migrations
Gone for Winter

Solitary Sandpiper
Upland Sandpiper
Hudsonian Godwit
Semipalmated Sandpiper
White-rumped Sandpiper
Baird’s Sandpiper
Pectoral Sandpiper
Buff-breasted Sandpiper
Wilson’s Phalarope
Shorebirds Made Easy

1) Large

2) Medium

3) Small
*Limosa* (godwits) and *Arenaria* (turnstones)

**Large (size > Willet)**

**Medium-sized**
Genus *Numenius* (the “curlews”)

Both are somewhat hard to find in winter

**LONG-BILLED CURLEW**
- Lacks striping in face
- Buffy underneath
- Very long bill

**WHIMBREL**
- Dark striping in face
- Brownish underneath
- Longish bill

Large
Genus *Tringa* (the “tattlers”)

**WILLET**

- Large, vocal
- Size ≈ Black-necked Stilt
- Unmistakable in flight

*Reference Species*
Genus *Tringa* (the “tattlers”)

**LESSER YELLOWLEGGS**
- Perfectly straight
- Size ≈ dowitcher
- “tu-tu” (x1 or 2 tu) calls

**GREATER YELLOWLEGGS**
- Slightly upturned (more dramatic in males)
- Size > dowitcher
  ≈ Black-necked Stilt
- “tu-tu-tu” (x3 tu) calls
Genus *Tringa* (the “tattlers”)
Genus *Tringa* (the “tattlers”)

GREATER YELLOWLEGS

LESSER YELLOWLEGS

Dave Patton
Genus *Limnodromus* (the “dowitchers”)

Dowitchers are chunky and very long-billed. Olive legs. “Sewing machine” foraging style. Medium-sized.

Perhaps the most difficult species pair to ID in winter

Virtually indistinguishable by plumage and shape (Long-billed Dowitcher averages longer billed and longer legged, but overlaps Short-billed Dowitcher)

Short-billed Dowitcher averages:
- Slight curve to bill tip
- Base of bill thickens
- Base of bill with more olive tones

Lee & Birch, Birding 2006

http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~ctlee/LeeBirchDowitcher.pdf
Genus *Limnodromus* (the “dowitchers”)

Perhaps the most difficult species pair to ID in winter...**BUT there’s hope!!**

**Use context**
- Freshwater: 99.9% Long-billed Dowitcher
- Saltwater: 99.9% Short-billed Dowitcher
- (less accurate during migration – i.e., more mixing)

**Use vocalizations**
- Long-billed Dowitcher: almost constantly “chattering” with “kik” notes
- Short-billed Dowitcher: usually silent, with occasional yellowlegs-like “tu tu” notes

Don’t be shy to report “dowitcher sp.”
DOWITCHERS SP.
Often foraging with dowitchers, but probes and pecks
Long, slightly curved bill (like Dunlin)
Yellow legs (like yellowlegs)
BOLD WHITE SUPERCILIUM

DOWITCHERS SP.

GREATER YELLOWLEGS
Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

- **Dowitchers SP.**
  - Often foraging with dowitchers, but probes and pecks
  - Long, slightly curved bill (like Dunlin)
  - Yellow legs (like yellowlegs)

- **Stilt Sandpipers**
  - Medium-sized

- **Greater Yellowlegs**
  - Bold white supercilium
Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

**SANDERLING**: The wave chaser

- Sand-colored back.
- Black legs.
- Very common, but declining!
- Note standard “peep” bill shape for comparison against others.
- Larger than Western & Least Sandpiper.
- A little smaller than Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot, and dowitchers.
Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

[Images of various species of birds, including shorebirds, in different poses and environments.]

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*Calidris* is a genus of small to medium-sized shorebirds, commonly known as sandpipers. They are characterized by their long, slender bills and rapid, darting flight. Members of this genus are found in coastal and freshwater habitats around the world, often associated with mudflats, beaches, and tidal flats. Their diet primarily consists of small invertebrates, such as crustaceans and mollusks, which they forage for by probing mudflats and sandbars. *Calidris* species are known for their remarkable migratory behavior, traveling vast distances between breeding and wintering grounds. They are often seen during migration at shorebird staging areas along the North American coastline, where they may congregate in large numbers before continuing their journeys. The study of *Calidris* species is important for understanding avian ecology and conservation, as many species are threatened by habitat loss and climate change.
Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

With Willet

With Piping Plover

With Semipalmated Sandpiper in spring

Beware of strong, angled lighting making the upperparts appear dark
Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

Fastest declining shorebird in North America!

- Larger than Sanderling
- Note “chevrons” along flanks and streaking in throat
Horseshoe Crab Egg Density

Mean egg density (eggs/sq m)

Year


60,000
50,000
40,000
30,000
20,000
10,000
0

20,892 47,029 51,883 13,689 4,158 6,746 4,186 3,230 2,426 1,761 1,548
Wintering Ground Trends

![Bar chart showing wintering ground trends for Red Knots](Image)
Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

**DUNLIN**
- Long curved bill (recall Stilt Sandpiper)
- Black legs
- Buffy around eye (hard to see sometimes)
- Brown back, smudgy brown face and chest
- Size ≈ Sanderling
  > Western & Least Sandpiper

Reference Species
Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

**LEAST SANDPIPER**
- “hooded” look
- Yellow legs
- Hunched foraging style, head stays lower than back
- Size < Western Sandpiper

**WESTERN SANDPIPER**
- Clean white throat and chest
- Black legs
- Often lifts head above shoulders when foraging
- Size < Dunlin

Photos: Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences
Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

Photo: Manoment Center for Conservation Sciences
Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

Photo: Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences
DUNLIN

Mud-brown back
Black legs
Pale markings around eyes
Smudgy chest

Photo: Diane Lafferty
Find your reference bird!

Photo: Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences
Find your reference bird!
Genus Calidris (the "peeps")

Photo: Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences

SANDERLINGS

WESTERN SANDPIPIERS
Genus Calidris (the “peeps")

Photo: Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences

SANDERLINGS

WESTERN SANDPIPERS

??
(this was taken in fall)
DOWITCHER SP.
(Short-billed, juvenile, by marked tertis)

LEAST SANDPIPER

SANDERLINGS

(this was taken in fall)