

# Mecklenburg Audubon Society

## Species Notes: Shorebirds 101

Five basic principles are especially important in shorebird identification:

### 1. Learn habitat preferences.

Like the 'song' in 'songbird', the 'shore' in 'shorebird' is something of a misnomer. Most shorebirds prefer marshes and wetlands to coastal shores and inland areas attract nearly as many species as saltwater areas. In fact, several species - upland and buff-breasted sandpipers, mountain and golden plovers, and others - are actually easier to find thousands of miles inland no where near the ocean.

### 2. Slow down and specialize.

Shorebirding requires a radical change of pace from other forms of birdwatching. Since only a handful of shorebirds are identifiable

at a glance, it's seldom possible to reel off a string of identifications without hesitation. Ordinarily, a lot of work is involved, and there is much time for doubt. Urgency and impatience are mortal sins, dogged persistence the cardinal virtue.

### 3. Concentrate on standing birds.

Shorebirds fly fast; several species can cruise at seventy miles per hour. They also tend to fly erratically and evasively, twisting and twirling against the sun, into shadow, back against the sun. A few species (willet, black-bellied plover and a couple of others) are best identified on the wing, and shorebird experts can identify almost all species in flight. As a rule of thumb, however, less experienced shorebirders need not concern themselves with flying



birds. Shorebirds spend the majority of their time with their feet on the ground. For most of us one shorebird on the ground is worth ten in the air.

### 4. Study the silhouettes. Postpone the plumages.

Most shorebirds are better identified by their shapes than by their colors. Their light browns, creamy buffs, and subtle grays tend to wash out in the harsh light of the open areas they prefer. Even more important, the seasonal changes of shorebird feathering are complex and variable. All species have at least three visibly distinct plumages.

### 5. Divide and conquer.

Identifying shorebirds is a sorting operation. Here more than with any other group of birds, the process of elimination is the key technique.



### Habitat Preferences of Migrating/Wintering Shorebirds

[Only those species found regularly in the Carolinas are included here.]

#### *Sandy beaches:*

Wilson's plover, piping plover, sanderling, dunlin, red knot

#### *Rocky shores and jetties:*

purple sandpiper, ruddy turnstone

#### *Coastal marshes and mud flats:*

black-bellied plover, semipalmated plover, American oystercatcher, ruddy turnstone, red knot semipalmated sandpiper, western sandpiper, black-necked stilt, American avocet, greater yellowlegs, lesser yellowlegs, willet, spotted sandpiper, marbled godwit, least sandpiper, dunlin, short-billed dowitcher, Wilson's snipe

#### *Inland, freshwater marshes, wet fields, and rain pools:*

killdeer, greater yellowlegs, lesser yellowlegs, solitary sandpiper, spotted sandpiper, semipalmated sandpiper, western sandpiper, least sandpiper, Baird's sandpiper, pectoral sandpiper, buff-breasted sandpiper, Wilson's snipe

#### *Edges of freshwater rivers, large ponds and deeper lakes:*

killdeer, greater yellowlegs, lesser yellowlegs, solitary sandpiper, spotted sandpiper

#### *Inland fields without water: [prairies, meadows, sod farms, plowed fields]*

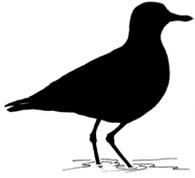
lesser golden plover, killdeer, upland sandpiper, buff-breasted sandpiper

#### *Deep, wet woodlands:*

woodcock

# Six Questions for Sorting Shorebirds

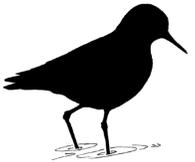
*Instantly identifiable:*  
American oystercatcher, American avocet, black-necked stilt



*Plovers:*  
killdeer, Wilson's, semipalmated, piping, black-bellied, American golden.

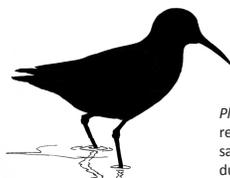
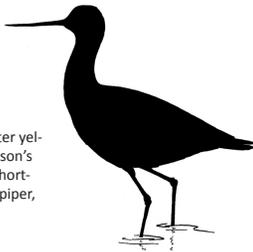


*Odd sandpipers:*  
long-billed curlew, whimbrel, marbled godwit, woodcock



*Peeps:*  
sanderling, white-rumped, Baird's semipalmated, western, least

*Longlegs:*  
willet, upland sandpiper, greater yellowlegs, lesser yellowlegs, Wilson's snipe, long-billed dowitcher, short-billed dowitcher, solitary sandpiper, stilt sandpiper



*Plumps:*  
red knot, ruddy turnstone, purple sandpiper, buff-breasted sandpiper, dunlin, pectoral sandpiper, spotted sandpiper

## 1. Is it one of the instantly identifiable shorebirds?

There are a few shorebirds that are instantly recognizable because of distinct plumage pattern or some other physical characteristics like the bill on an avocet or skimmer.

## 2. Is it a plover?

The key components of plover silhouettes are: rounded, relatively thickish bills that are shorter than the length of its head; short necks; body lengths not much longer than body heights; and legs that appear roughly equal to the body heights. The plover silhouette is made of circles and soft curves.

## 3. Is it one of the odd sandpipers?

Five sandpipers are identified by their weird, eye-catching bills. The three curlews have long, curling bills and two godwits - God, what bills they have - up-swung, huge, and two-toned.

The other three odd sandpipers are made easy by their exclusive habitat preferences. The woodcock is the only shorebird to be found under a closed canopy in deep woods. Two phalaropes, the red and the red-necked, are the only shorebirds regularly found far offshore.

From this point onward, the questions become tougher, and the distinctions blur.

## 4. Is it a peep?

And most of the time most of us hope the answer is no. The term 'peep' is correctly applied to only six species, the sanderling and the five *Calidris* sandpipers that are smaller than the sanderling. They are clustered together in all the field guides, but the fine distinctions required within the group make identifying the peeps one of the toughest problems in all birding. [See Connor's book for a detailed explanation of how to identify these birds.]

## 5. Is it a longlegs?

Eleven sandpipers fit this description. They have legs that are noticeably longer than their body heights; body lengths noticeably longer than their body heights; and relatively straight bills that are at least as long as their head lengths and in most cases obviously longer. Most members of this group have long necks and a lanky look. The lesser yellowlegs is typical.

## 6. Is it a plump?

Ten midsized sandpipers have short necks and a chunky look. In specific contrast to the longlegs the plumps have legs that seem not noticeably long and in many cases much shorter than body heights; body heights nearly equal to body lengths (excluding the wings); and bills of various shapes but most obviously curved or noticeably shorter than head length. The ruddy turnstone and purple sandpiper are typical plumps.

Since apparent leg length and body width can change with posture, "Longlegs or plump?" is sometimes a close judgment call, and a couple of species barely fit into one group or the other.

[This is an excerpt from Jack Connor's *The Complete Birder: A Guide to Better Birding*. He goes into detail on how to distinguish between the individual species.]