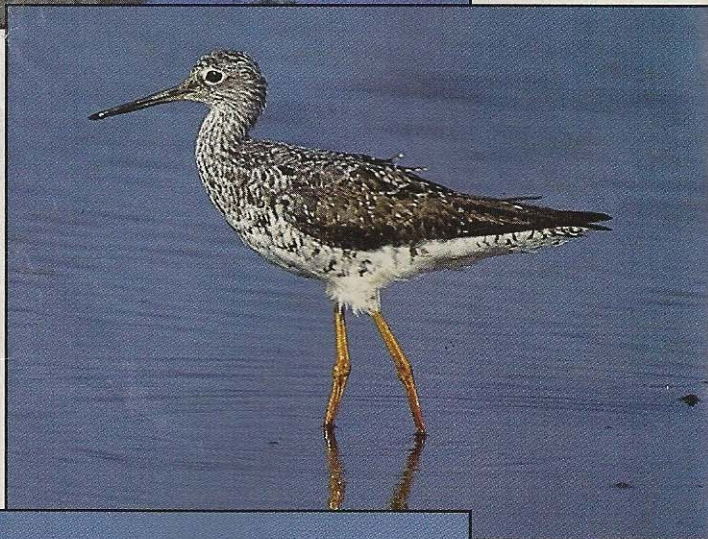
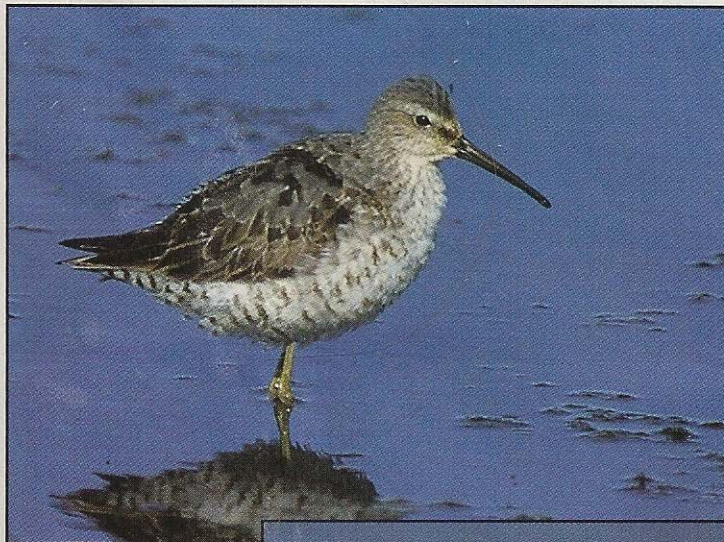


# Fall Shorebird Migration

Text and Photos by Kevin T. Karlson



Each year in late summer and early fall, thousands of shorebirds cross North America during their biannual migration. Some of these birds winter in the United States along coastlines and in southern states where water bodies remain open. Others continue to southern South America. Most long-distance migrants often appear alongside birds that winter locally, providing birders with special shorebird-viewing opportunities.

Adult shorebirds move south before juveniles, first appearing in mid-July and continuing through early October. Some juveniles start sprinkling through in early August, with larger numbers growing from mid-August through October. Adult plumage varies greatly, with a ragtag mixture of worn breeding feathers and fresh nonbreeding ones. Juveniles appear with crisp, neatly arranged feathers and are somewhat easily distinguished from molting adults.

Since shorebird plumage is so variable at this time, it is important to look at nonchangeable features. The most important one is size, followed by shape or structure and behavior. Look carefully at these adult shorebirds in various stages of molt, and notice differences in bill size and shape as well as overall body structure.

While size comparison with other shorebirds is very important for the I.D. of two of these birds, photographs do not allow for this important tool. After noting overall subtle body shapes and bill differences, consult your field guide for the closest match. Plumage characters are not helpful with two of these birds, so practice your impression birding skills. Good luck! **WB**

WildBird Advisory Board member Kevin T. Karlson operates Jaeger Tours (609-465-2138, [www.jaegertours.net](http://www.jaegertours.net)) out of Cape May Court House, N.J.

**Birder's I.D. provides an opportunity for you to test your bird identification skills. The identities of the birds with some I.D. tips and natural history information appear on page 64.**

See pages 16-17.

**Bird #1 — Stilt Sandpiper (*Calidris himantopus*):** All three of these birds show fairly similar plumage appearances in early fall, with a mixture of black, white, gray and worn brown feathers. If you concentrate on overall feather appearance, you will see too many choices in a field guide. By concentrating on physical features that don't change with seasonal feather replacement, you can form a simpler, more accurate impression.

This medium-sized shorebird (8½ inches long) is the most distinctive of all three, with a more compact, less tapered body shape. This more rounded shape is apparent if seen beside the other two birds. Subtle differences in structure are very helpful in forming your first impression.

Since leg color appears somewhat similar in all three birds and leg length is difficult to determine due to feeding in shallow water, we need to look for other distinctive physical features. Bill size and shape is a good tool, and this bird shows a fairly long bill that tapers and curves downward (decurves) near the tip. If you have trouble guessing the actual length of the bill, try comparing it to the bird's head width. Is it longer than the width of the head from the bill base to the back of the head or about the same?



If this bird appeared in real-life conditions rather than a photo, you might decide that it is about the same length as a Red-winged Blackbird, with fairly long legs and a somewhat long, decurved bill. The faded bars on the breast that extend from the upper breast to the undertail are helpful, as is the prominent supercilium, or eyeline. Pale-gray back feathers are new nonbreeding ones replacing visible black-centered breeding feathers. Brownish feathers on the lower wing are wing coverts that were replaced in late winter and are older and more worn than the remaining breeding feathers.

By putting together these impressions and consulting your field guide, you would be surprised to find that you have narrowed your choices to Dunlin or Stilt Sandpiper. Dunlin would be eliminated by its shorter, blackish legs and proportionally larger head, leaving Stilt Sandpiper as the only choice.

Stilt Sandpiper breeds on arctic coastal tundra from northern Alaska to central Canada and in taiga habitat along the western shore of Hudson Bay. Most birds winter from Central Mexico south to southern South America, with smaller numbers wintering north to southeast California, south Texas and south Florida. Migration paths include most of eastern North America. This molting adult was photographed in Cape May, N.J., in late August.

**Bird #2 — Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*):** Separating Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs consistently poses a major problem for all levels of birders. Plumage generally is not helpful, and some individuals of both species show marked bill variation. For these reasons, it is important to know subtle differences in overall body structure. One of the best ways to learn these differences is to study both species when they are side by side in the field.

This large shorebird (14 inches long) typically shows a rangy,

sculpted body appearance, with a more angular chest and neck and an overall bulkier appearance than Lesser. When resting, it often shows a prominent "Adam's apple." Lesser has an evenly proportioned, more streamlined body shape and does not show an "Adam's apple." With practice, this simple body shape impression



is very useful with singular birds. Greater also shows a proportionally smaller head to its bulkier body size, with Lesser exhibiting a more evenly proportioned head/body ratio.

Usually helpful is the size and shape of the bill. Greater typically has a bill at least 1½ times longer than the width of the head, while Lesser's bill usually is about the same width of the head or slightly longer. This Greater has a somewhat short bill, but the shape is important. Greater's bill is thick at the base and remains somewhat thick to the tip, often with a slight upward curve. Although not apparent on this bird, it often is quite noticeable if anticipated. Lesser's bill is thick at the base but tapers noticeably to the tip. Greater also has a pale base to its bill in nonbreeding plumage, but this feature often is reduced in breeding birds.

Greater Yellowlegs breeds in boreal forest habitat in south Alaska and across the northern half of southern Canadian provinces. It winters along both coasts, north to British Columbia in the west and New York in the east, and across most southern United States south to South America. In migration, it might appear in all lower 48 United States. This molting adult was photographed in Cape May, N.J., in late August.

**Bird #3 — Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*):** This smaller cousin of Greater Yellowlegs (10½ inches long) is best identified by the company that it keeps. If seen without direct comparison with Greater, compare its size with other nearby shorebirds. If it is slightly longer than the ever-present Dunlin or the Stilt Sandpiper or if it is about the same body length (not leg length) as both dowitchers, then it is a Lesser.



Lesser Yellowlegs is larger than all the "peep" sandpipers but doesn't dwarf them like Greater does. Lesser is a medium-sized shorebird whose body size is relatively proportional to most shorebirds that share the same freshwater habitats. This is one of

the best ways to immediately identify these very similar species without relying on structural or plumage characters.

The mixture of breeding and nonbreeding feathers on the back and head is similar to Stilt Sandpiper. Analysis of these feathers is not helpful in the identification process of both yellowlegs, and both share the same habitats during migration and winter.

Lesser Yellowlegs breeds in muskeg and sparse boreal habitats from Alaska to Hudson Bay, typically farther north than Greater. It winters along southern coasts from central California and Virginia southward, across southern states and south to South America. Migrants might appear throughout North America. This molting adult was photographed in Cape May, N.J., in late August. **WB**