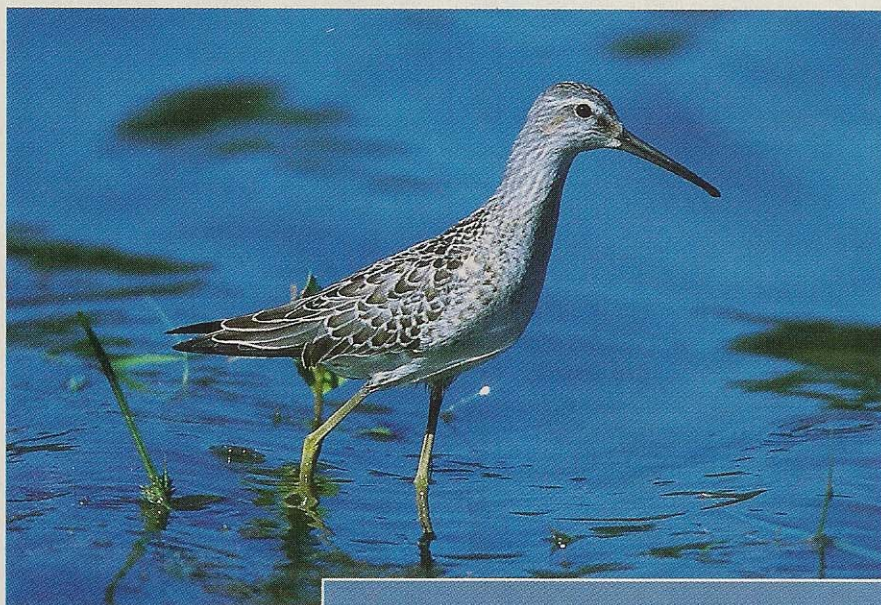


# Juvenile Shorebirds

Text and Photos by Kevin T. Karlson



Birder's I.D. provides an opportunity for you to test your bird identification skills. First, try to identify these birds from memory; you may have observed these species before. Next, consult your field guide for help. The identities of the birds with some I.D. tips and natural history information appear on page 49.

Each year during August and September, millions of shorebirds migrate through the United States en route to southern wintering areas. While many of these birds show a good amount of their breeding plumage, some individuals wear a juvenile plumage that might be unfamiliar to many birders.

This juvenile plumage appears on the breeding grounds and typically includes pale-centered back feathers with buff (tan) or rufous (reddish-brown) fringes and irregular markings below the terminal edge of each feather. These colorful fringes and subterminal markings usually wear off in a month. Many individuals start to molt (replace) the juvenile feathers while on the breeding grounds and appear during migration with a combination of juvenile and nonbreeding feathers.

For this reason, it is easier to identify shorebirds by first looking at permanent features that do not change with the seasons: body size and structure; leg length; bill size, shape and length; and overall coloration. Behavior and types of habitat in use also are useful clues. After narrowing your choices to several species using this holistic approach, you might resort to the Peterson system of field mark identification. The holistic approach definitely will help with the identification of shorebirds, which can show different plumage appearances for each species at the same calendar period each season. Good luck! **WB**

WildBird Advisory Board member Kevin T. Karlson of Rio Grande, N.J., wrote "The Magic of Migration" on page 50 of this issue and operates Jaeger Tours (609-465-2138, [www.jaeger-tours.net](http://www.jaeger-tours.net)).

See page 12.

**Bird #1 — Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*):** This bird looks nothing like the bright, salmon-colored breeding adult. In fact, there is nothing distinctive to its overall gray plumage to help in the identification process, making it necessary to concentrate on physical characteristics. Obvious characteristics show a medium-sized, dumpy shorebird (10½ inches) with relatively short yellowish-green legs, a short neck and a dark bill slightly decurved at the tip.

Plumage characteristics on a juvenile bird include pale fringes on the back feathers with a dark subterminal line, and these disappear with wear in one to two months. In fresh juvenile plumage, a peach blush to the upper breast is noticeable. These plumage features, however, wear off before the fall and give juveniles an overall plumage similar to nonbreeding adults.

Other similar species include Dunlin (which has a much longer, decurved bill), Short-billed and Long-billed Dowitchers (much longer, thicker, straight bills), Stilt Sandpiper (longer yellowish legs and a much longer, decurved bill) and large, female Western Sandpipers (a more slender, elongated body with a gradually tapered rear end and a finer-tipped bill).

Three subspecies of Red Knot breed in North America in high arctic tundra. *C. rufa* breeds in central Canada and winters southern South America. *C. islandica* breeds in northeast Canada and Greenland and winters in western Europe. *C. roselaari* breeds on the Seward Peninsula in Alaska and nearby Wrangel Island, and it winters along the Pacific coast from Southern California to South America as well as the Gulf Coast shorelines into Mexico. Small numbers winter along the Atlantic coast from New Jersey south. This juvenile Red Knot was photographed in Cape May, N.J., in August 2002.



**Bird #2 — Stilt Sandpiper (*Calidris himantopus*):** By analyzing physical features, we find a relatively slender, medium-sized shorebird (8½ inches) with a longish, slightly decurved bill that tapers to the tip. The yellowish legs are much longer than the other two birds. The neck is relatively long, and the head is proportionately small in relation to the body. The somewhat slender body is attenuated toward the rear. These features reduce our choices to Stilt Sandpiper, Dunlin and Short-billed and Long-billed Dowitchers.

Dunlin differs structurally by having much shorter, dark legs and a shorter neck often retracted to its body. Dunlin bills are not gradually decurved but mostly decurved near the tip. Dunlin also lack the pale eyeline seen on Stilt Sandpiper. Both dowitchers are bulky, heavier-bodied birds with straight, stocky bills that do not taper.

The pale buff or rusty fringes to the upper back feathers are typical in most juvenile shorebirds, and this Stilt is no exception.



A remnant of the buff/peach wash on the breast remains on this bird, and the rusty cap and cheeks are mostly faded. Within a month, this bird will resemble an adult Stilt in nonbreeding plumage, with mostly plain-gray back feathers and an off-white breast with diffused gray streaks on the upper breast and flanks.

Stilt Sandpiper breeds in moist to wet arctic tundra from Alaska to eastern Canada, and it winters from the southern United States to South America. This juvenile Stilt was photographed in Cape May, N.J., in August 2002.

**Bird #3 — Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*):** This small shorebird is one of the five “peep” sandpipers that breed in North America. Our “structural” analysis will narrow the choices to two species, so plumage criteria are important.

At first glance, we find a relatively small (6½ inches), short-legged shorebird with a short neck and a small, ever-so-slightly decurved bill. We can eliminate the small plovers by bill length, shape and habit of feeding; plovers feed in a walk-and-stop fashion, while “peeps” and other sandpipers feed in constant motion. We are left with five “peeps” as choices.

By noting that the wingtips of the primaries (the longest flight feathers) do not extend past the folded tail, we can eliminate White-rumped and Baird’s Sandpipers. The overall grayish color and dark legs rule out the brown and buff juvenile Least Sandpiper with its greenish-yellow legs. This leaves us with Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers.

In nonbreeding plumage, this can be a tricky I.D., but juvenile plumage is somewhat straightforward. In all plumages, Western Sandpiper has a longer bill (24-29mm) than Semipalmated (16-23 mm) with a mostly different shape (thick base and fine tip on Western, thick base and often bulbous tip on Semi). Semis that breed in the western part of their range have shorter bills with less decurvature than eastern breeding birds, where a female Semi can have a long (23mm) decurved bill with a fine tip, very similar to a male Western Sandpiper. Females of both Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers have noticeably longer bills than males, with a more decurved shape to the bills.

A juvenile Semipalmated displays back feathers with buff or rust edges on all of them, gray centers and dark, central shafts. A juvenile Western shows rust edges to the scapulars (rows of feathers on the upper half of a folded wing) with plain, gray wing coverts (rows of feathers at lower edge of folded wing). A juvenile Semi tends to show a cap with a rusty or darker contrasting crown color; a juvenile Western shows a fairly uniform crown, nape and sides of the head. Western Sandpiper generally has noticeably longer legs, allowing the species to feed in deeper water.

Semipalmated Sandpiper breeds in arctic tundra from western Alaska to eastern Canada, with the bill length and decurvature increasing from west to east. The species winters primarily in Surinam, off the east coast of South America, with smaller numbers occurring in the southern Caribbean and southern United States. This juvenile Semipalmated was photographed at Cape May, N.J., in August 2002. **WB**

