

LEAST SANDPIPER**Donald Shephard**

Imagine that you have an incredible lightness of being, weighing only three-quarters of an ounce. Your wingspan is thirteen inches and you are six inches long. Your mother left the tundra before you hatched; your father then raised you for a few more weeks. Now, you must find your way from Alaska to South America along a narrow strip of coastal rocks, mudflats and beaches. Such are the first experiences of Least Sandpipers.



Least Sandpiper photo courtesy Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge

Becky Bowen, volunteer coordinator of Save Our Shorebirds (SOS), tells me observers saw a lot of Least Sandpipers coming through this April on their way north to sub-arctic tundra breeding grounds. Early in May, she stood on a Glass Beach bluff wondering why a small offshore rock was so knobby. On focusing her spotting scope, she found eight Least Sandpipers huddled together in a stiff wind. Becky also sees them travelling with mixed groups of Western Sandpipers and Semipalmated Plovers. Arthur Cleveland Bent, in his *Life Histories of North American Shorebirds*, recalls seeing Least Sandpipers running around among Greater Yellowlegs "like pygmies among giants." SOS volunteers often find that three or four hang around for a while in summer, wading and foraging in the shallow fresh waters of Inglenook Creek at Ten Mile Beach.

Least Sandpipers can challenge a beginning birder. Semipalmated Sandpipers, a similar species, but one rarely seen in our area, show more gray on the back and have black legs. Western Sandpipers also show a plainer chest, and have black legs. Least Sandpipers forage by pecking along the upper edge of mudflats or along drier margins of inland ponds, while other small sandpipers will forage in wetter places, by probing.

First described in 1819 by Louis Jean Pierre Vieillot, a French ornithologist, Least Sandpipers are the smallest shorebirds in the world. Their small size and high voice have earned them the familiar name of "peeps." Take a stroll along one of our beaches and you may spy a small shorebird with a short neck. Look for a moderately long bill, which may droop slightly at the tip; moderately long yellowish legs; a black center to the rump and tail; back reddish with black spots (in breeding plumage) and two thin white lines down the back. Above all, Becky advises, "Keep looking for those yellow legs." In flight, Least Sandpipers show a white stripe down their wings and white on either side of their tail. The underwings are slightly darker than those of the other two peeps. Juveniles may be brighter rufous than adults, especially in comparison to the faded fall breeding plumage of the adults.

They migrate all across North America. Look for coastal migrants along tidal creeks, salt marsh edges, and mudflats. They rarely visit sandy ocean beaches. Inland migrants inhabit small, shallow ponds, sandy riverbanks, sewage treatment ponds, and lakeshores.

LEAST SANDPIPERS

continued

Least Sandpipers usually roost by themselves or in small groups. They generally feed at the upper edge of mudflats, often in the vegetation, higher than Western or Semipalmated Sandpipers. When foraging, they walk slowly with their heads down, picking at food on the surface rather than probing into the mud. On the breeding grounds and in inland areas, Least Sandpipers primarily eat fly larvae and other insects. On the coast, they eat small crustaceans, snails, and other marine creatures.

Males arrive on the breeding grounds about a week before females and establish territories. Monogamous pairs form quickly once the females arrive. The nest is located on the ground near water, and usually on a tuft of grass or moss. The male begins the shallow scrape, and the female finishes it, lining it with grass, leaves, and moss.

This is how Arthur Cleveland Bent describes their courtship: "The bird springs into the air on quivering, down-turned wings and circles about, now lower, now higher, reaching at times a height of fifty or more yards. In the air it emits a short sweet trill which is rapidly repeated, and with each song burst the wings are rapidly vibrated."

Both parents incubate the four eggs for about twenty days. As incubation progresses, the male takes a larger and larger share. Chicks leave the nest within a day of hatching, and feed themselves. Adults brood and tend the young; the male generally stays with the brood until they fledge at about three weeks. In later clutches, the female may actually leave before the young hatch, but usually she helps tend the chicks for the first week or so.

Least Sandpipers migrate across North America and winter mainly from the southern United States into northern South America. Many stage at the Copper River Delta in Alaska in spring, but out on the winter range, they spread out, not concentrating in a few spots as many other shorebirds do.

The Canadian Wildlife Service estimates the Least Sandpiper population at 600,000 birds. Christmas Bird Count data suggest that wintering Least Sandpipers have declined. Population estimates tend to be inaccurate for this species, however, as it is often lumped with the other small sandpipers and therefore may be undercounted. Also, winter numbers in North America have always been small and are probably not an indicator of the overall health of the population. Least Sandpipers are adaptable and can quickly colonize new breeding habitat. This, and their tendency not to congregate in major wintering areas, should help the Least Sandpiper to survive in the face of habitat loss, increased disturbance, and contamination.

So take a tip from Becky Bowen, wander along our beaches with an eye for "knobby rocks" that morph into our smallest shorebird. If you are lucky, you will see a "bind", "contradiction", "fling", "hill", or "time-step" of sandpipers. Then, how can you not share Becky's great passion for these tiny creatures?