

PECTORAL SANDPIPER**Donald Shephard**

My trusty *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* defines pectoral as pertaining to the chest. You will distinguish Pectoral Sandpipers by their breast markings. The Pectoral Sandpiper has a gray breast, sharply demarcated at its lower edge; this clear dividing line is particularly conspicuous if the birds are turned toward you. Look for a gray-brown back, brownest in the summer male, and grayest in winter. They are one of the most common North American wading birds.

The legs are yellowish green; the bill is olive with a darker tip. Juveniles are more brightly patterned above with rufous coloration and white mantle stripes. Found most commonly on mudflats with short grass or weedy vegetation this sandpiper appears more at ease in the grass than in water.

Ask Becky Bowen, Save Our Shorebirds volunteer coordinator, and she will tell you Pectoral Sandpipers are the best. She first spotted one on Ten Mile Beach eight years ago. The bird was fearless. He walked right up to Becky and stood staring at her, turning sideways and tilting his head. That bird stood there and never moved. Becky had to walk around it. Since then, volunteers have had several encounters with Pectoral Sandpipers, especially in September when they pass through on their migration south. Becky speculates because Pectoral Sandpipers we see here are young (recently hatched at their remote arctic nest locations) they don't have the same kind of fear of humans as the Whimbrels or Black-bellied Plovers we see on our beaches.



Pectoral Sandpiper photograph by Andreas Trepte

During migration, you will find them in fresh- and saltwater marshes, on mudflats, or drying lakes and wet meadows. On your trips inland, look for them visiting moist grassy places, grass-lined pools, golf courses and airports after heavy rains, and salt creeks and meadows. They winter in South American grasslands where they move along steadily with their heads down, picking up prey on the surface and probing lightly into the sand or mud. They usually forage in vegetation, and when they are disturbed, they stand upright with their necks extended, peering over the grass. The most common North American wading bird to occur in the UK, Pectoral Sandpipers have recently bred in Scotland.

During the breeding season, Pectoral Sandpipers eat flies and fly larvae, spiders, and seeds. During migration, they eat small crustaceans and other aquatic invertebrates, although insects may still be the major food.

Pectoral Sandpipers are promiscuous: males mate with multiple females; and females mate with multiple males. Males arrive on the breeding grounds before females and establish territories.

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When females arrive, the male's courtship display involves puffing up his breast. He inflates a fat throat sac which expands and contracts rhythmically during display flights. The accompanying vocalization consists of a series of hollow hoots, and is one of the most unusual sounds heard in summer on the arctic tundra (the bird's name is based on this phenomenon). The female builds a nest in a well-hidden scrape lined with grass and leaves, sometimes under low shrubs. The nest is so deep that when she lays her four eggs, they are an inch below ground level, which helps to minimize heat loss from the cool breezes whistling across the tundra. Eggs are white to olive buff and blotched with dark brown.

She provides all the parental care, incubating for about three weeks. The four chicks leave the nest and feed themselves soon after hatching. The female stays with the young for 10 to 20 days. The young fly at around 21 days, and have become capable flyers by 30 days. During the short Arctic breeding season food is at a premium. To ensure an adequate supply for the young, male Pectoral Sandpipers depart for the south before the eggs hatch, so they don't compete for food with the mothers and their chicks. Then the adult females leave, too, and in the last few weeks the young have the tundra to themselves. How do they know the way to Mendocino and on their way to South America?

Extreme long-distance migrants, some Pectoral Sandpipers make an 18,000-mile round-trip journey between breeding and wintering grounds. The birds that migrate through Mendocino most likely breed in Siberia and migrate across the Bering Strait and down the Pacific Coast. They winter in southern South America, Australia, and New Zealand.

The Canadian Wildlife Service estimates the population of Pectoral Sandpipers at 400,000 birds, with about half that number breeding in North America. Other estimates are lower. Historical reports of enormous numbers along migratory corridors indicate that the population has declined. While hunting had an impact in the late 1800s and early 1900s, habitat destruction currently poses the most significant threat. The Pectoral Sandpiper is not classified as a species in need of high-priority conservation.



Pectoral Sandpiper photograph by Andreas Trepte

As with other shorebirds, we do not know enough about Pectoral Sandpipers. What are the real numbers of this species? Is the population declining? Is it shifting its range? The volunteers who walk Glass Beach, Virgin Creek Beach, and Ten Mile Beach are helping to fill these gaps in our knowledge. Consider a stroll along our beaches to watch and record birds. What a pleasant way to do a good deed.