

ROCK SANDPIPER**Donald Shephard**

Rock sandpiper photo by Max Hescheff

While Rock Sandpipers are regular visitors to our coast, they trickle down from Alaska in ones and twos, surrounded by Surfbirds, Black Turnstones and other rock and surf tolerant species. Ron LeValley spotted one Rock Sandpiper for our Fort Bragg Christmas Bird Count this year. Save Our Shorebirds volunteers have never recorded one instance of seeing this species. I called on Dorothy Tobkin to guide us to this rare bird. She told me, to find it you must study the rocks at Laguna Point in MacKerricher State Park at high tide between October and

February; then you must train your binoculars on the thirty or forty Black Turnstones or Surfbirds to winkle out the one or two Rock Sandpipers among them. This species challenges the finest bird watchers.

To make your identification job more difficult Rock Sandpipers show a great deal of variation in size and color pattern among their isolated populations. The largest and brightest birds breed in the central portion of the range, while the smallest and darkest live in the southern and western part (Allen's Rule). The winter range of Rock Sandpipers extends farther north than any other sandpiper.

Where the surf washes nutrients over rocky shores and gravel banks, this species thrives in frigid temperatures, in areas with short winter and long summer days. The sandpiper's species name, "ptilocnemis," means "feather boot" and describes its protective feathers covering the leg down to the heel, one of its adaptations to cold.

Stroll along the Laguna Point boardwalk and watch the rocks for a shorebird with a fairly long, slightly drooped bill, gray upperparts with "scaled" back, and wings with a broad white stripe. Look for short drab-greenish legs. Breeding birds have an obvious black belly-patch, and richer rufous coloring on the upperparts and neck.

Unlike their traveling companions, Rock Sandpipers do not chip or pry attached prey from its substrate. They move slowly along and pick up moving prey from the crevices and seaweed among the rocks. Unusual among shorebirds, this species commonly eats vegetable matter, including seeds, berries, moss, and algae. They also eat invertebrates, such as mollusks, crustaceans, and marine worms.

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Breeding pairs remain monogamous, with bonds lasting several years. Males establish territories and attract mates with displays, which include undulating flights and extended hovering. Males confront each other with lifted wings, parallel runs or flights, and crouching postures. Pairs court around dummy nests, where females inspect, enter, and rearrange the structure. As husband to an interior designer, I have great sympathy for the males. Nests consist of a scrape, with a base of leaves, lichens, sedges, or mosses, and lined with finer plant materials. These they locate on the ground around ponds in open, dry tundra, often on a raised area of lichen or moss.

The female lays four greenish eggs marked with brown, which hatch in approximately three weeks. Both parents incubate the eggs, although males may provide most of the incubation, which lasts for about twenty days. Hatched chicks are covered with down and are active. Within hours of emerging, chicks can walk, feed, and hide. They leave the nest soon after hatching and feed themselves. Males usually tend broods, although sometimes both parents or only the female will do so. After a few days, they keep themselves warm at night. Juveniles fledge in about twenty-three days. Females depart before young fledge, and males stay for guidance and defense which includes hiding, running like a mouse, squealing, bleating, and faking injury.

Adults molt on the breeding grounds before migrating southward late in fall. Some populations that breed on islands off Alaska are resident. The populations that do migrate, winter along the Pacific coast south to northern California.

Rock Sandpipers are a species unique to the north Pacific, with breeding populations found in near-shore habitats ringing the Bering Sea. Likely numbering fewer than 100,000 individuals and with four subspecies, this robin-sized shorebird displays physiological feats inspiring wonder as the farthest-north wintering shorebird in the Pacific region. As fall approaches and most of its congeners migrate far south to warmer climes, Rock Sandpipers move relatively short distances. In fact, the subspecies breeding in the Aleutian archipelago inhabits the same wind-swept stretches of coastline all year long.

You do not have to brave the cold of the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea to glimpse a Rock Sandpiper. With a lot of patience and some luck, you can withstand the blustery winds of Point Laguna and become one of an elite few local birders who have seen the cold-tolerant Rock Sandpiper.

Rock Sandpiper chick. Photo by Jim Johnson

