

BAIRD'S SANDPIPER**Donald Shephard**

**Baird's
Sandpiper
Photo by
Omar
Runolfsson**

Save Our Shorebirds (SOS) volunteers are not surprised when they spot a small number of Baird's Sandpipers on Virgin Creek Beach in late summer. Becky Bowen, SOS volunteer coordinator, sees at least ten every summer on Ten Mile Beach, where they forage in kelp on dry sand. "It's special to find either a Baird's or a Pectoral Sandpiper on our surveys. That makes it a day worth celebrating."

With fresh feathers, especially on the back with a pattern reminiscent of silk embroidery, this species is one of the most beautiful shorebirds that passes through our area. Unfortunately, they only migrate through, touching down briefly to refuel on their way to and from South America.

Birders refer to five sandpiper species as "peeps": the Semipalmated, Western, Least, White-rumped, and Baird's Sandpipers. To distinguish Baird's Sandpipers from similar species focus your binoculars on the long wings, which extend beyond the tail when the bird is on the ground. Next, train your optics on the black legs and feet. In flight, it shows white wing-stripes and a dark line down the middle of its tail, with white on either sides of the rump. As Becky noted, Baird's prefers drier areas to forage than do similar sandpipers.

Those long wings allow Baird's Sandpipers to migrate great distances at speed. After departing their high-arctic breeding grounds and staging in southern Canada and the northern United States, most individuals travel 3,700 miles or more directly to northern South America, where they feast on insect-rich grasslands. Some fly as far south as Tierra del Fuego. Many individuals complete the round trip 9,300 mile journey in as few as five weeks.

They nest on northern tundra from eastern Siberia to Greenland, scraping a depression on

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continued

the ground or among rocks in dry locations with low vegetation. The female lays four dark brown-spotted, pink to olive eggs shortly after arriving in the Arctic. This production over four days equals up to 120% of her body mass, with essentially no stored fat. To replenish during and after this amazing feat they forage mudflats rich in high energy insects and small crustaceans, picking up food by sight. Both parents incubate, for twenty-two days.

The precocial chicks leave the nest and feed themselves shortly after hatching. Once they develop their back feathers capable of shedding rain or snow, they no longer require brooding. The female abandons them to migrate south. The male stays with them until they fledge at about three weeks. Males follow their partners south. Without competition for food from the adults, the young mature more quickly, and a month later, begin their first migration. Research shows that in the fall most adults fly along a narrow route through the Great Plains of North America, while young birds migrate over a broad front, and sometimes appear on both Pacific and Atlantic coasts. The ones we see are juvenile birds.

The Canadian Wildlife Service estimates the population of Baird's Sandpipers at 300,000 birds. Their use of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, as well as major migration staging areas, makes them vulnerable to loss or degradation of these areas.

Baird's Sandpipers are named for Spencer Fullerton Baird, a nineteenth century professor of natural sciences and Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. He also headed the Bureau of Fisheries which later became the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Join Becky or any of the SOS volunteers on Glass Beach, Virgin Creek Beach, or Ten Mile Beach and sooner or later you will spy a Baird's Sandpiper. You will likely not discover a flock of them, but if you did, then call them a "bind", "contradiction", "fling", "hill", or "time-step" of sandpipers.



**Baird's Sandpiper
chicks. Photo courtesy
of USFW**

**Note the cryptic
coloring.**