

DUNLIN**Donald Shephard**

Dunlin and Black Turnstone at Ten Mile Beach. Note the difference in beak shape, chest color and leg color.

Photo by

Save Our Shorebirds (SOS) volunteers recorded a lot of Dunlins migrating through in 2012. They wore their Sunday-best breeding plumage, pausing along Virgin Creek Beach and Ten Mile Beach in April and May on their northbound trip. In October, volunteers recorded more Dunlins in passage south here, than normally seen in either spring or fall. Becky Bowen, SOS volunteer coordinator, tells me she sees them with a variety of other shorebird species, especially Sanderlings. She wonders if they connect on the beaches or they travel together.

At Virgin Creek Beach, Becky once saw a squadron of Dunlin chasing or perhaps following a Black-bellied Plover over the water. Last September 29th, she spent a grand morning on the sand at Ten Mile Beach watching a Dunlin and a Black Turnstone in perfect companionship. They walked and ran together with matched steps as if dancing. Tellingly, Becky says she never met a shorebird she didn't like.

Join Becky or any other SOS volunteers hiking one of their three beaches – Glass, Virgin Creek, or Ten Mile – and you will likely see Dunlins. In breeding plumage, they are medium-sized round-shouldered sandpipers with black-streaked, red-brown upperparts, conspicuous black belly patches, and streaked breasts. When you study these birds through your binoculars, you will notice long and slightly decurved bills. You may spot them moving along the beaches and coastal mudflats they prefer, with a characteristic "sewing machine" feeding action, methodically picking small food. Their flight is swift and direct with rapid wing beats. Legs and feet are black. Sexes are similar.

Dunlins often form large flocks, and are most impressive when they display their coordinated aerial maneuvers to escape predation by Peregrine Falcons and Merlins, an exciting sight for bird and birder alike. Flocks suddenly take flight for no obvious reason, wheel around and drop again to feed. Flocks in flight twist and turn, often changing shape, but usually forming

DUNLIN

continued

thick, tapering lines.

Circumpolar breeders in Arctic or subarctic regions, Dunlins breed in northern Europe and Asia, then migrate long distances, wintering in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The Dunlin you see on our beaches breed in Alaska and the Canadian Arctic then travel relatively short distances to the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of North America, although those nesting in Northern Alaska overwinter in Asia.

They scrape a shallow nest in a grass clump within a dry hummock on the open tundra. They line this nest with vegetation and lay four olive, blue-green or buff eggs marked with brown and gray. Both parents incubate from 20 to 23 days.

Adults brood the precocial chicks during early development. The male performs most brood care, as the female often leaves the breeding area. Chicks fly at approximately three weeks old. Males on the breeding ground have a beautiful song, a descending reedy trill which blends into the wild tundra winds.

Fortunately, current evaluation status of the Dunlin is Least Concern. Dunlins are collectively known as a "flight", "fling", and "trip." Have a fling, take a trip with an SOS volunteer and, sooner or later, you will see a flight of Dunlins gracing our shore.

Dunlin photo by Lajos Rozsa

