

SANDPIPERS**Donald Shephard**

Lesser Yellowlegs Photo
Ron LeValley
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My wife and I recently visited her cousin in the Bay Area to share two kinds of music, birdsong and Camille Saint-Saens' Organ Concerto. We heard the man-made music in San Francisco and the more natural sounds along Alameda Creek in Fremont. Along with the joy of listening to birds came a visit from an old friend from our days of bird-watching around vernal pools in the Sierra foothills. The old friend was a Lesser Yellowlegs - a sandpiper.

Many species of sandpiper - some common, some rare - grace our shores. This family of relatively thin-billed, long-legged birds was formerly considered closely related to plovers, oystercatchers, stilts and avocets but recent DNA studies indicate painted snipes and jacanas are closer relatives. Sandpipers can present an identification challenge. You'll find them foraging by picking and probing on open shoreline habitats such as mudflats and beaches. Noting the particular habitat and foraging motion will help in your identification. If you segregate birds by habitat from high, dry mudflats with grassy vegetation to relatively

deep water, you will most likely find Least Sandpipers and Western Sandpiper higher up than Dunlin which, in turn, forage in shallower water than Short-billed Dowitchers. So observe the location of the bird and its foraging habits to aid your identification.

Yellowlegs are in the genus *Tringa*, while Spotted Sandpipers belong in the *Actitis* genus. Of the three species of down-curved-bill sandpipers that make up the *Numenius* genus, the Whimbrel is the one you'll likely see locally. The Long-billed Curlew also occurs here in migration. You might spot an up-curved bill on a member of the genus *Limosa* which includes the Marbled Godwit and, rarely seen here, the Hudsonian Godwit.

Besides yellowlegs, other sandpipers hide behind such common names as Wandering Tattler, Surf-bird, Ruddy Turnstone and Black Turnstone. The genus *Limnodromus*, comprising Long-billed Dowitchers and Short-billed Dowitchers, forms another group of sandpipers.

The genus with the largest number of species locally is *Calidris*. You may spot members of seven species within this genus along our shores. Two of them, Red Knot and Dunlin, do not admit to being sandpipers, while five others wear the name sandpiper proudly. These are Western Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, and Rock Sandpiper.

SANDPIPERS

continued

Most sandpipers form roosting and foraging flocks. Join a volunteer of the Save Our Shorebirds program (SOS) and you will thrill to the sudden changes in flight direction of sandpiper flocks maneuvering on powerful and narrow pointed wings. How is it they never collide? Each bird takes its cue from its neighbors whose reaction time puts mine to shame.

These birds all belong to the Scolopacid family which have relatively long legs and slender toes with little or no webbing. Curiously the hind toe of Scolopacids is reduced and raised so that it barely scrapes the ground, although this feature is hard to see.

Sandpiper plumage is generally a mixture of browns, grays and white. Feathers abrade in a sand and salt environment with pale portions wearing more than dark areas, which have more melanin. This causes the darker appearance of worn birds. Pick up a feather along the beach and you may find it has a scalloped edge which follows the contours of the dark markings.

You may sometimes see a “one-legged” sandpiper hopping about awkwardly. Don’t let that concern you, as these birds tuck one leg up against the belly to conserve heat. Fooled by this behavior or not, this is a difficult family to identify. Volunteers who walk one of our three SOS beaches soon hone their skills and get the pleasure of visits from old friends just as I did when I encountered Lesser Yellowlegs last week.



Dunlin photo Wikipedia

THANK YOU FORT BRAGG CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT VOLUNTEERS

Area Leaders:

Ron LeValley, Dorothy Tobkin, Warren Wade, Virginia Wade, Robert Keiffer, Arthur Morley, Jim Havlena, David Jensen, Richard Hubacek, Joleen Ossello

Field Participants:

Allison Cebula, Adam Hutchins, Charlene McAllister, Karen Havlena, Becky Stenberg, Terra Fuller, Carolyn Kinet, Trudy Jensen, Linda Perkins, Catherine Keegan, John Wade, Christine Fleming, Al DeMartini, Ryan Keiffer, Maggie Bertolino, Daniel Haley, Geoff Heiniecken, Cheryl Watson, Dave Bengston, Mike Curry, Erica Fielder, Larry Knowles, K. Schubek, Monroe Robinson, Joleen Ossello, Greg Byers, Jim Bogue, Caroline Bonfeld, Rich Trissel, Nancy Trissel, Joel Franks, Pete Gealy, Jessica Morton, Roger Foote, Jennifer Wildman, Stephanie Steinback, Rick Hewett, Craig Chaffin, Kathleen Chaffin, Penny Lancaster, Sara Grimes, Pam Huntley, Peter Steel, Chuck Vaughn, Jeanne Coleman, Sue Coulter, Roger Adamson and Mike Stephens.

Feeder Watchers:

Jean Morley, Paul Reiber, Marcia Riwney, Bill & Linda Rohr, Ginny Rorby, Loie Rosenkrantz, Caroline Schooley, Colleen Shephard, Virginia Siewert, Judy Steele, Michael Stewart, Susan Tubbesing, Mitchell Zucker.