

SPOTTED SANDPIPER**Donald Shephard**

[Spotted Sandpiper photo from Wikimedia Commons](#)

In another century and on a different continent, my mother would have called the Spotted Sandpiper a "forward hussy" even though Arthur Cleveland Bent called it, "one of the prettiest and delicate, and trim of the shorebirds." The rapid swaying up and down of the hinder part of the body contrasts with the plover-like hitching movement or bob, as if hiccupping, of the somewhat similar Solitary Sandpiper.

Save Our Shorebirds volunteers do not see a lot of Spotted Sandpipers on the three beaches they survey. This bird prefers river beds over long stretches of sand, but Becky Bowen tells me of an exception. "Our State Parks Junior Rangers in the shorebird study program found a Spotted Sandpiper attempting to pass as a Black Turnstone on the beach near Lake Cleone a couple of years ago. It was foraging with the turnstones at the water's edge, but the disguise didn't work. The butt-bob gave it away, much to the delight of the 7-year-olds. Seven-year-olds can do a great imitation of Spotted Sandpipers."

One hypothesis is that dipping is a way for birds to deter attacks by demonstrating their physical fitness to potential predators, which would explain why human observers see so much of this behavior. Dipping may also be a technique for more accurately locating prey, or a way to communicate with conspecifics in a noisy environment. Newly hatched Spotted sandpipers, mere balls of fluff, also dip. If they are in danger, juveniles may lie motionless among pebbles. Its

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repetative teetering motion has earned the Spotted Sandpiper many nicknames. Among them are teeter-peep, teeter-bob, jerk or perk bird, teeter-snipe, and tip-tail.

The chief enemies of the Spotted Sandpiper are swift-moving hawks, which young and adult alike sometimes evade by alighting on water and diving below the surface, remaining under for three or four seconds. The hawk, confused, usually gives up.

The breeding adult has an orange bill and bold chest spots, which account for its name. Poised on its slim drab-orange legs, it walks slowly and carefully along the shore, picking up a bit of food now on this side, now on that. It progresses with a switching motion, head reached well forward and a little lowered. The tail is almost continuously in motion up and down, but that is not why my mother would call them forward hussies.

No, the behavior which would shock my Scottish mother is polyandry. In polyandrous species – Northern Jacana, all three phalaropes, and Spotted Sandpiper – after the female lays her eggs in separate nests; different males take responsibility for incubation and rearing of each brood, leaving the female free to seek additional mates. Abundant food (such as annelid worms, fish, spiders, crustaceans, carrion, and insects) on a successful female's territory helps her attract males and lay extra clutches. Male parents of first clutches may father chicks in later male's clutches, probably due to sperm storage within female reproductive tracts, which is common in birds. Females that fail to find additional mates usually help incubate and rear chicks.

In most of the bird species which have a size difference, males are somewhat bigger than females, but in this species females are some 25% larger than males. Polyandry is rare because females invest more energy and nutrients in their eggs than males invest in their sperm.

Becky Bowen approves of this behavior saying, "With so little time and so few birds, it's a good thing, I guess, that the females can get around the track enough times to produce at least two clutches a year." This "forward hussy" behavior improves their chances of survival and is no longer judged by an anthropomorphizing moral stance, any more than we would chastise seven year olds mimicking Spotted Sandpipers on the shores of Lake Cleone.

A Spotted sandpiper in characteristic, tail-bobbing pose. Photo Ron LeValley

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