

WESTERN SANDPIPER**Donald Shephard**

Western Sandpiper. Photo by Alan D. Wilson

Jean Louis Cabanis, a German ornithologist, first described Western Sandpipers in 1857. One hundred and fifty four years later, Joleen Ossello, our president-to-be, walked Ten Mile Beach for the Save Our Shorebirds (SOS) program on July 18, 2011. She counted 3,850 Western Sandpipers, an SOS record. Becky Bowen, whose passion for shorebirds is unmatched, tells me they pass through here in large numbers. They are a source of entertainment for SOS volunteers, dancing around when their feet get caked in wet sand – sandpipers, that is, not volunteers. One handsome bird in breeding plumage amused Becky last July when it performed a fandango on the surface algae buildup of Virgin Creek.

Western Sandpipers have dark legs and a fairly short dark bill, slightly drooped at the tip. They are reddish-brown on the crown. The body is gray- brown on top and white underneath with a black center to the rump and tail. Look for a gray-brown head with some reddish and a lightly marked chest. SOS volunteers report Western Sandpipers in both breeding and winter plumage. In their courting splendor, they have chestnut on the back, crown, and face. Short webbing between toes may elude the birdwatcher. Juveniles appear similar to adults, but with more scaly pattern on their backs.

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continued

Western Sandpipers usually feed in deeper water than the other "peeps" (small sandpipers) and sometimes immerse their bills completely. In most respects, these sandpipers are much alike in their behavior and can be difficult to distinguish in the field. Flocks spread out on mudflats during fall and winter and take flight readily when an intruder nears. When the tide covers their shallow feeding area, they move to higher ground; there they preen themselves, rest, and wait for the next low tide, when they can resume feeding.

This bird can be difficult to distinguish from the locally very rare Semipalmated Sandpiper, particularly in winter plumage, when both species are plain gray. Breeding plumage of the Western Sandpiper changes much earlier in autumn than the Semipalmated Sandpiper. If you bird by ear, you will notice the Western's voice, a soft cheep or kleep, that sounds higher and thinner than the Semipalmated.

The Western Sandpiper breeds in western Alaska and winters along the Pacific Coast from Oregon to Peru, along the Atlantic Coast from New Jersey south to South America, and along the Gulf Coast. In migration, the Western Sandpiper stages in huge, spectacular flocks, particularly along the Pacific coast from San Francisco Bay to the Copper River Delta in Alaska. Estimates suggest that as many as 6,500,000 individuals pass through the Copper River Delta during a few weeks each spring. These birds forage on mudflats during migration and the non-breeding season by probing, or by picking up food by sight. Foraging occurs on tundra and wet meadows during the breeding season.

They breed in coastal sedge-dwarf tundra in eastern Siberia and Alaska. Males typically arrive first and establish territories. The male sings and flies over the nesting area to attract a mate. He may approach a female in a crouched position and make a trilling call. A monogamous pair bond forms. The male makes several scrapes in the ground and lines them with sedges, lichen and leaves. The female will chose one of the scrapes as her nesting site. She lays three to five cream-colored eggs, with red-brown spots. Both the male and the female incubate the eggs. Active chicks, covered with down, hatch in 20-22 days and are able feed themselves right away. If the female stays, both parents will care for the chicks. But she may depart shortly after the chicks hatch, leaving the male will care for them. He tends the young, and broods them in cold weather until they can fly, at 17 to 21 days.

On their breeding grounds, Western Sandpipers eat mostly flies and beetles as well as other insects, spiders and small crustaceans. During migration and in the winter, their diet varies depending on location. In coastal areas they eat crustaceans, small mollusks, marine worms and insects while inland migrants consume mostly insects.

Even though they pass through here in large numbers, they are on the Audubon and American Bird Conservancy watchlist. Western Sandpipers are vulnerable because a large percentage of the population gathers in a few locals during migration. Development, human disturbance, and oil spills near these stopover sites could dramatically affect the population.

A group of Western Sandpipers is called by many collective nouns, including a "bind", "contradiction", "fling", "hill", and "time-step". Perhaps Jean Louis Cabanis saw a contradiction of Western Sandpipers in 1857, but there is no doubt that Joleen Ossello witnessed a combined fling, hill and time-step of them in 2011 on Ten Mile Beach. What a sight. What a joy.