AFRICA'S WADERS PART 1

A GUIDE TO THEIR IDENTIFICATION

SHORT-LEGGED SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES

Large numbers of waders scattered across a wide mudflat can cause even experienced birders to throw up their hands in despair. In this article, **Phil Hockey** *takes some of the angst out of identifying the smaller scolopacid waders – probably the group that causes the most people the most trouble. The larger scolopacids ('shanks', godwits, curlews and allies) will be covered in a subsequent article.*

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WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN FACED WITH A CONFUSING WADER

Many people find waders confusing because they don't know what to look for – the key features they should try and record before returning to the books. If you have time to record all the information below, you have a very good chance of identifying any small scolopacid wader that you see in Africa.

GENERAL

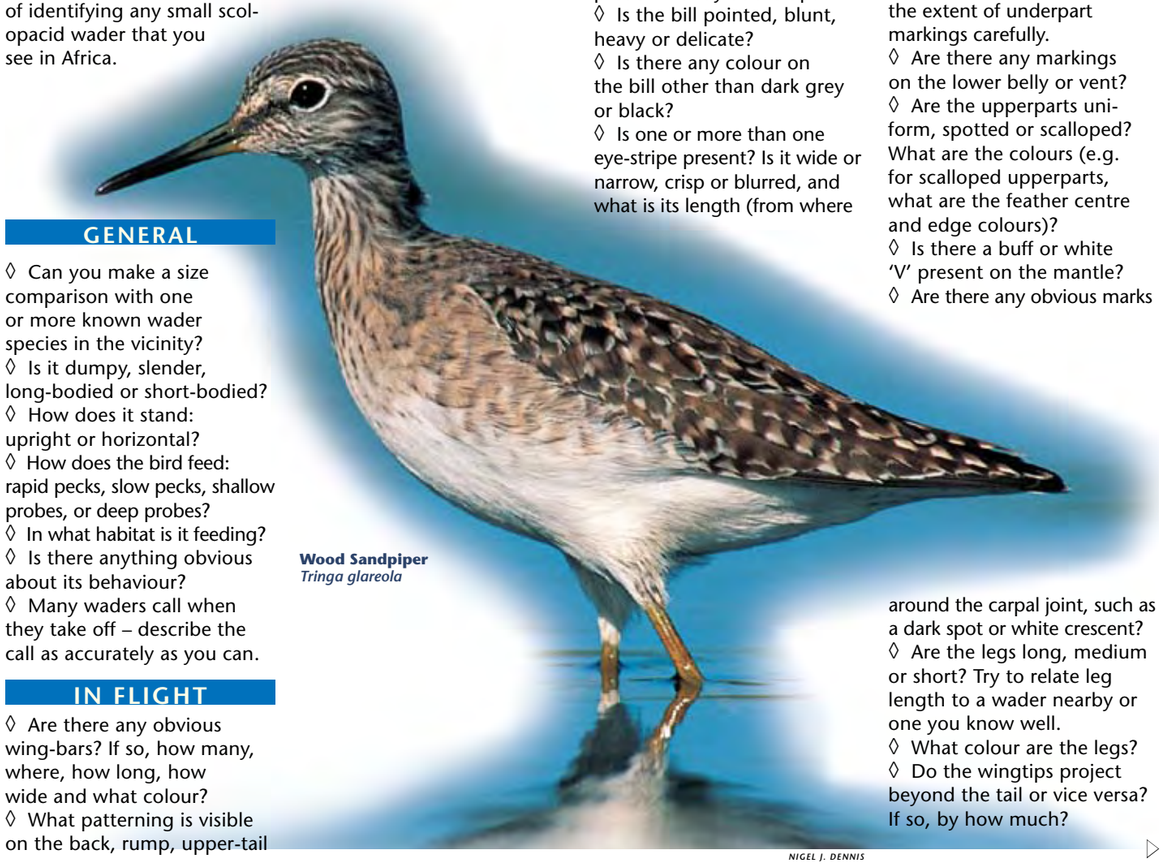
◊ Can you make a size comparison with one or more known wader species in the vicinity?
◊ Is it dumpy, slender, long-bodied or short-bodied?
◊ How does it stand: upright or horizontal?
◊ How does the bird feed: rapid pecks, slow pecks, shallow probes, or deep probes?
◊ In what habitat is it feeding?
◊ Is there anything obvious about its behaviour?
◊ Many waders call when they take off – describe the call as accurately as you can.

IN FLIGHT

◊ Are there any obvious wing-bars? If so, how many, where, how long, how wide and what colour?
◊ What patterning is visible on the back, rump, upper-tail coverts and tail? This is often crucial for certain identification.
◊ Do the toes/feet project beyond the tail in flight? If so, by how much?
◊ Are the underwings pale, grey, almost black or patterned? If patterned, how?

ON THE GROUND

◊ How long is the bill relative to head length?
◊ Is the bill upcurved, straight, slightly decurved or obviously decurved? If decurved, where does the curvature occur: evenly, or predominantly at the tip?
◊ Is the bill pointed, blunt, heavy or delicate?
◊ Is there any colour on the bill other than dark grey or black?
◊ Is one or more than one eye-stripe present? Is it wide or narrow, crisp or blurred, and what is its length (from where to where)?
◊ Is there a crown effect or obvious crown colour?
◊ Are there markings on the breast, upper belly or flanks? If so, are these uniform, streaks, spots, blotches, crescents or chevrons, or a combination? Describe the extent of underpart markings carefully.
◊ Are there any markings on the lower belly or vent?
◊ Are the upperparts uniform, spotted or scalloped? What are the colours (e.g. for scalloped upperparts, what are the feather centre and edge colours)?
◊ Is there a buff or white 'V' present on the mantle?
◊ Are there any obvious marks around the carpal joint, such as a dark spot or white crescent?
◊ Are the legs long, medium or short? Try to relate leg length to a wader nearby or one you know well.
◊ What colour are the legs?
◊ Do the wingtips project beyond the tail or vice versa? If so, by how much?



Wood Sandpiper
Tringa glareola

NIGEL J. DENNIS

RED AND GREAT KNOTS, TEREK AND CURLEW SANDPIPERS, DUNLIN

The birds in this group are small to medium-sized waders which, in non-breeding plumage, are pale grey or grey-brown above and mostly white below.

Terek Sandpiper
Adult non-breeding
Xenus cinereus
22–25 cm

Terek Sandpiper should never cause identification problems. The combination of short, yellow-orange legs and a long, thin, slightly recurved bill with a dull orange base is unique among waders worldwide. The flight pattern is also diagnostic, with a grey rump and conspicuous white trailing edge to the secondaries. Juveniles and adults in partial breeding plumage are browner above, but the same suite of identification features applies.

Red Knot and Great Knot can cause problems. In non-breeding plumage, identification rests mostly on size, shape, bill length and structure, and underpart markings. **Great Knot** is the larger of the two and, if the species are seen side by side, this difference is obvious. There is a tendency for Great Knot to appear heavy-chested and **Red Knot** to appear heavy-bellied, but this is only a supporting identification feature, not an absolute one.

Great Knot
Adult breeding
Calidris tenuirostris
26–28 cm

Great Knot
Adult non-breeding

Both have fairly heavy bills relative to other small sandpipers, but that of Great Knot is markedly longer than head length and is distinctly thick at the base. The bill of Red Knot is approximately equal to head length (but may be fractionally longer in some females). The breast of Red Knot is fairly lightly flecked or chevroned with grey (adult) or greyish brown (juvenile). The breast of Great Knot, especially of the juvenile, is much more heavily spotted and streaked, providing an obvious contrast with the white belly.

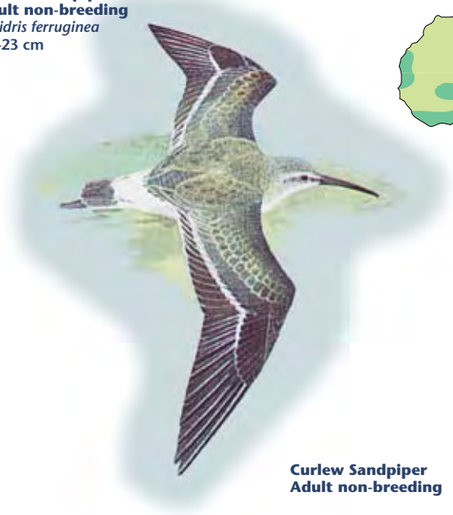
In breeding plumage, the underparts of Red Knot, including the face and neck, become a deep chestnut colour and the back is beautifully spangled in russet, black and white. Great Knots show considerable individual variation in breeding plumage, but typically the breast is heavily spotted with black, and black chevrons extend to the flanks and undertail. The only chestnut markings are on the scapulars and, to varying degrees, the mantle. Red Knots are occasionally confused with Curlew Sandpipers, but are larger, heavier-bodied, have proportionally short *greenish* (not dark grey) legs, and the bill is heavier, shorter (approximately equal to head length) and essentially straight (not decurved).

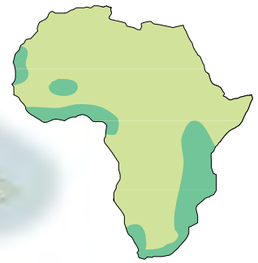
Red Knot
Adult male breeding
Calidris canutus
23–25 cm

Red Knot
Adult non-breeding

RED AND GREAT KNOTS, TEREK AND CURLEW SANDPIPERS, DUNLIN

Curlew Sandpiper
Adult non-breeding
Calidris ferruginea
18–23 cm





Curlew Sandpiper
Adult non-breeding

Separation of Curlew Sandpiper and Dunlin is easy if they show any breeding plumage. Like Red Knot, the **Curlew Sandpiper** is suffused chestnut below and is spangled above. The breast of **Dunlin** is streaked with black and this species has a very obvious and diagnostic black belly patch.

It is the juveniles and non-breeding adults of Curlew Sandpiper and Dunlin that are likely to cause confusion, especially south of the Equator where Dunlins are rare. Both have fairly long (longer than head length) decurved bills, are pale dull grey to grey-brown above and have dark legs. Curlew Sandpipers usually show an obvious white stripe above the eye, extending from the bill to well behind the eye. This feature is absent in Dunlin. Bill curvature is fairly even in Curlew Sandpiper, but concentrated towards the tip in Dunlin. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, Dunlins are generally so rare that a view of the bird in flight is almost essential to secure its identity. The rump of Curlew Sandpiper is white or flecked with grey (sometimes appearing all grey in the field), whereas Dunlin has a conspicuous black stripe down the centre of the rump, bordered with white.

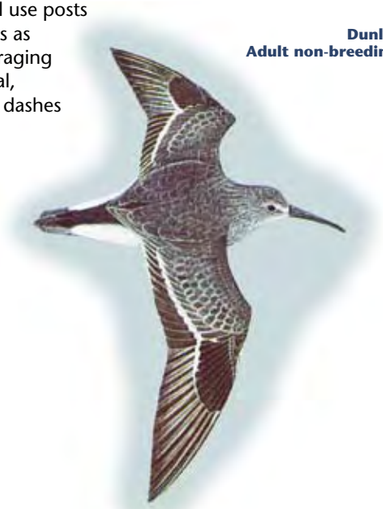
Dunlin
Adult non-breeding
Calidris alpina
15–22 cm

HABITS, HABITATS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Terek Sandpipers are found mainly in estuaries, lagoons and embayments, especially at sites where small crabs are abundant. They forage solitarily or in loose flocks, but roost communally, often with Curlew Sandpipers or sandplovers. In the tropics they regularly roost on mangrove trees and, elsewhere, will use posts and other structures as roost sites. Their foraging behaviour is unusual, involving long, fast dashes with body and bill held horizontal. Red Knot is fairly widespread in western and southern Africa, whereas to date Great Knot has been recorded as a vagrant only in Morocco. However, recent discoveries of flocks of Great Knots in the Middle East suggest that this species may occasionally visit the Horn of Africa, and could occur farther south on the east coast (it has been recorded on Mauritius).

Red Knots are found in estuaries and on sheltered, open coasts where they often feed in association with Curlew Sandpipers. Because they are specialist predators on small bivalves, their distribution is patchy, mirroring that of their food. Great Knots are likely to be encountered in similar habitats. Curlew Sandpipers and Dunlin are much more catholic in their choice of habitat and could be found at almost any coastal or inland wetland.

Dunlin
Adult non-breeding



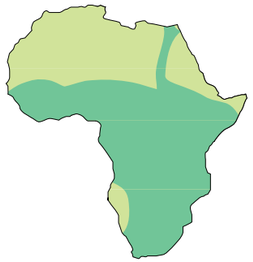
GREEN, WOOD, SOLITARY AND COMMON SANDPIPERS

Common Sandpiper
Tringa hypoleucos
19–21 cm

With the exception of Wood Sandpiper, which often occurs in loose flocks, these species are usually encountered singly or in small groups. They all have fairly straight, needle-like bills equal to or slightly longer than head length. Leg colours range from greenish grey to dull yellow.

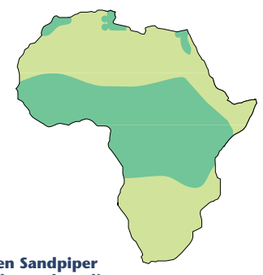
Common Sandpiper differs from the others in several ways. Firstly, at rest, the tail

Green Sandpiper
Tringa ochropus
21–24 cm



projects well beyond the closed wingtips. It also has rather plain, grey-brown lateral breast patches that demarcate an obvious white 'comma' around the forewing. While foraging, and even at rest, this species characteristically bobs its body forwards, imparting a wagtail-like jizz. In flight, a white wing bar immediately separates it from others of this group, as does the level, rapid, fluttering flight with shallow wing-beats interspersed with short glides.

Green and Wood sandpipers do cause confusion, but shouldn't! **Wood Sandpiper** is



Green Sandpiper
Adult non-breeding

Common Sandpiper
Adult non-breeding

distinctly longer-legged and the legs are yellowish rather than grey-green. In flight, the toes project well beyond the tail tip whereas in **Green Sandpiper** only the toe tips project. Wood Sandpiper is more heavily spotted and warmly coloured above and the pale eyestripe usually extends obviously behind the eye; in Green Sandpiper it extends only from the bill to the eye. In flight, separation of the two is easy: the uppertail of Green Sandpiper is white with two complete and one incomplete transverse black bars. The tail of Wood Sandpiper is more finely barred with brown. The underwing colour usually is distinctive: Wood Sandpiper has pale, greyish underwings while those of Green Sandpiper are almost black. However, beware of the slightly paler underwings of juvenile Green Sandpipers and of the occasional Wood Sandpiper which has fairly dark (but not blackish) underwings.

The **Solitary Sandpiper** is the New World counterpart of Green Sandpiper and the two are very similar. Solitary Sandpiper is a very rare vagrant to Africa and concrete identification rests on seeing it in flight. Like Green Sandpiper, it has blackish underwings, but the undertail is heavily barred with black and white. The upperside pattering, however, is most important. Green Sandpiper has a white rump and a banded tail; Solitary Sandpiper has a dark rump and the tail has a dark centre with barred edges.

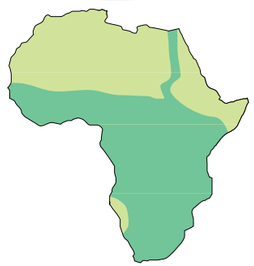
Solitary Sandpiper
Tringa solitaria
18–21 cm

Solitary Sandpiper
Adult non-breeding

HABITS, HABITATS AND ASSOCIATIONS

All of these species are predominantly freshwater-associated, although Common and Wood sandpipers do occur on the coast. Green and Solitary sandpipers favour open inland waterbodies and rivers, whereas Wood Sandpiper is more often associated with marshes and flooded grasslands.

Wood Sandpiper
Tringa glareola
19–21 cm



Wood Sandpiper
Adult non-breeding

PURPLE SANDPIPER AND RUDDY TURNSTONE

Ruddy Turnstone
Adult non-breeding

Ruddy Turnstone
Adult male breeding
Arenaria interpres
21–24 cm

These two species share a preference for open rocky shores but are very unlikely to be confused with one another (or with any other wader species in Africa).

Ruddy Turnstone
Juvenile

Ruddy Turnstone
Adult non-breeding

Ruddy Turnstone has a short, sharp bill, short orange legs (usually bright) and, apart from a dark band across the upper breast, snow white underparts and mostly white underwings. Breeding adults have strikingly piebald heads and extensive chestnut colouring on the upperparts. Non-breeding birds and juveniles are much duller above and the dark upperpart feathers are narrowly, but conspicuously, fringed with buff, especially on the juveniles. The flight pattern is absolutely distinctive (in Africa), with a white back, wing-bar, stripe at the base of the wing and uppertail coverts contrasting with otherwise dark upperparts.

The **Purple Sandpiper** is a very rare vagrant to the extreme north of Africa (Morocco) – its normal non-breeding range does not extend south of the Bay of Biscay. In non-breeding plumage it is a predominantly slate-grey bird with a faint purple sheen on the mantle and scapulars and a pale lower belly and vent. The legs are short and yellowish, and the bill, which is about the same length as the head, is very slightly decurved and is yellowish at the base.

Purple Sandpiper
Adult non-breeding
Calidris maritima
20–22 cm

HABITS, HABITATS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Ruddy Turnstones are mostly birds of the open coast and coastal wetlands, but do occur inland in southern and eastern Africa, especially during migration. They frequently forage in small flocks of 5–20 birds, flicking over stones and algae with their bills (hence the name). Purple Sandpipers are true rocky shore specialists.

PECTORAL, BAIRD'S AND WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPERS

Pectoral Sandpiper
Juvenile
Calidris melanotos
19–23 cm

All three of these species are vagrants to Africa, although **Pectoral Sandpiper** could be considered a scarce annual visitor. It is about the same size as Curlew Sandpiper but appears stockier and markedly darker. The short legs are greenish or yellowish and the bill, which is about the same length as the head and slightly decurved, is pale towards the base. In some respects, especially upperpart coloration, this bird resembles a miniature Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*. Upperparts are dark, with paler feather margins providing a scalloped effect. One of the key identification features is the streaking on the breast which is always heavy and ends abruptly on the mid-breast, giving a bibbed effect and contrasting strongly with the white lower breast and belly. A pale, rather straight eye-stripe is evident and the crown is dark and streaked, imparting a capped effect. The juvenile is more boldly marked than the non-breeding adult and has a narrow, but clear, buffy white 'V' on the mantle.

White-rumped Sandpiper and **Baird's Sandpiper** differ in shape from any other waders in Africa. They are intermediate in size between Little Stint and Curlew Sandpiper and both are short-legged and very long-winged, giving an attenuated silhouette: wing tips extend well beyond the tail at rest in both species. Both have short, slightly decurved bills (less than head length) – that of White-rumped Sandpiper is usually slightly horn-coloured at the base of the lower mandible. Baird's Sandpiper has an all-dark bill which is slightly finer than that of White-rumped Sandpiper. Both have grey/brown streaking on the breast, face and crown. Non-breeding adults are fairly plain above with narrow white margins to the brownish grey feathers. Juveniles are more obviously scalloped above, Baird's being more uniform than White-rumped Sandpiper. The latter has chestnut margins to the scapular and mantle feathers and has a white 'V' on the mantle.

Separation of the two is easiest in flight. The rump of White-rumped Sandpiper is crispy white whereas that of Baird's Sandpiper is dark, with white margins. The dark tail of White-rumped Sandpiper contrasts strongly with the white rump – this contrast is much more obvious than in Curlew Sandpiper.

Baird's Sandpiper
Calidris bairdii
14–16 cm

White-rumped Sandpiper
Calidris fuscicollis
15–17 cm

HABITS, HABITATS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Most records of Pectoral Sandpiper are from freshwater and brackish habitats, including ditches, sewage works and flooded grasslands. They usually forage fairly slowly and deliberately. The other two species have been recorded so seldom in Africa that it is difficult to generalize about habitat preference. Most records are from coastal, saline habitats including lagoons, estuaries and rocky shores.

Baird's Sandpiper
Juvenile

White-rumped Sandpiper
Juvenile

LONG-TOED AND TEMMINCK'S STINTS

Temminck's Stint
Adult non-breeding
Calidris temminckii
13–15 cm

Temminck's Stint
Juvenile

***These species are characterized by being very small, short-billed and having* greenish or yellowish legs.**

Temminck's Stint is a dull-coloured bird. In non-breeding and juvenile plumages, upperpart feathers are generally grey-brown, narrowly fringed white (adult) or yellow-buff (juvenile). In breeding plumage the mantle and scapular feathers are darker greyish brown to brown with varying amounts of darker spotting. Unlike all other stints in Africa, Temminck's lacks an obvious pale eye-stripe. The breast has a grey-brown wash, which may form lateral patches (resembling a miniature Common or Pectoral Sandpiper). In flight it appears broader winged than other stints. The only useful plumage feature in flight, however, is that the outer tail feathers are white: those of all other African stints are grey.

Structurally, the **Long-toed Stint** differs from other African stints in being longer-necked and longer-legged; it is also the smallest African stint. Juveniles, the most likely age class to be seen in Africa, have a prominent white eye-stripe demarcating a chestnut crown with long, dark, narrow streaks. The upperparts are richly coloured and patterned, predominantly with black-centred feathers broadly edged with chestnut and buff. There is a very prominent whitish 'V' on the mantle and extensive streaking on the upper breast extending to the sides of the lower breast: the streaks sometimes appear arrowhead-shaped. The non-breeding adult has mostly dark grey-brown centres to the upperpart feathers, but these are broadly fringed with pale grey, creating a rather 'untidy' appearance. The white eye-stripe is less conspicuous than in other plumages. In flight, the toes project slightly beyond the tail tip, which they do not in other stints.

HABITS, HABITATS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Temminck's Stint is widespread in tropical Africa, but Long-toed Stint is a vagrant to the east coast. Both are predominantly species of inland waterbodies, especially marshes, sewage works and the like, but Long-toed Stint also uses coastal mudflats. Both species usually are approachable.

Long-toed Stint
Juvenile
Calidris subminuta
13–15 cm

Long-toed Stint
Juvenile

SANDERLING, BROAD-BILLED SANDPIPER, LITTLE AND RED-NECKED STINTS

Sanderling
Adult non-breeding
Calidris alba
19–21 cm

Sanderling
Adult breeding

The bills and legs of all four of these species appear dark grey or black at all times. All four species do, however, occur in Africa in a range of plumages, so there is latitude for confusion!

In non-breeding plumage, adult **Sanderlings** (the largest species in this group) are very pale grey above and entirely white below. They are stocky, short-legged birds, and the very black, straight bill is equal to or slightly longer than head length. Usually, but not always, a dark carpal patch is evident. The presence of this dark carpal patch eliminates confusion with the smaller Red-necked Stint, but some Broad-billed Sandpipers in non-breeding plumage show this feature. In flight, the conspicuous white wing-bar separates Sanderling from all others in this group. Juveniles are darker above than adults and their upperpart feathers are irregularly notched with white and buff, giving a spangled effect. In breeding plumage the head and breast of the adult is predominantly pale chestnut, streaked with black. The upperparts are spangled with black, chestnut and white.

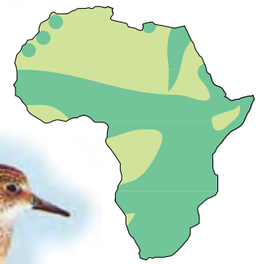
The status of **Broad-billed Sandpiper** in Africa is not well known (although the Sabaki River estuary in Kenya is a good place to see them) and this species probably is frequently overlooked. Although comparisons are often made with Curlew Sandpiper, these are misleading. The first impression is of a very short-legged, stint-like bird with a longish bill. The bill, if seen well, clinches the identification. It is slightly longer than head length and is decurved at the tip, which is dorso-ventrally flattened, appearing spatulate when the bird is seen head-on. The emphasis placed on the 'double eyestripe' can also be misleading – although always present it is not always easy to see. Red-necked and Little stints can also show this feature. The upperparts of breeding adults and of juveniles are blackish, with the feathers fringed chestnut, white and buff: both show a distinct whitish to yellow-buff 'V' on the mantle. In non-breeding plumage, the upperparts are greyer and a dark carpal patch is usually, but not always, present. The upper breast is streaked to varying degrees in all plumages. In flight, the leading edge of the upper-wing appears dark and a narrow white wing-bar is evident – but is much less conspicuous than that of the Sanderling. The rump and uppertail are black or grey, bordered with white. Non-breeding birds in flight could be confused with Dunlin: in such cases it is important to check head markings and bill morphology.

Broad-billed Sandpiper
Adult non-breeding
Limicola falcinellus
16–18 cm

Broad-billed Sandpiper

SANDERLING, BROAD-BILLED SANDPIPER, LITTLE AND RED-NECKED STINTS

Little Stint
Adult non-breeding
Calidris minuta
13–15 cm



Little Stint
Adult breeding

Separation of **Little Stint** and **Red-necked Stint** in breeding plumage is fairly easy. The cheeks, throat and fore-neck of Red-necked Stint are brick red and *unstreaked*. On Little Stint, the cheeks and fore-neck are yellowish or buffy chestnut, streaked with black, and the throat is always white. In non-breeding plumage, separation of the two is possible only on a combination of features – even then, many individuals cannot be safely identified in the field and some are difficult to identify in the hand! The first clue that you may be on to a Red-necked Stint (very much the rarer of the two in Africa) is its rather dumpy, almost pot-bellied appearance, vaguely reminiscent of a Chestnut-banded Plover *Charadrius pallidus*. The legs are shorter than those of Little Stint and the entire leg above the tarsus is often hidden by the belly feathers. Little Stints are more 'leggy', but in high winds forage in a hunched position when they can also appear short-legged.

Having assessed the jizz, you now need to concentrate on upperpart feather details. In both species, the upperpart feather shafts are black, but in most (not all) Little Stints, there is a dark smudge on the feather centre around the shaft. In Red-necked Stint, the upperpart feathers are uniformly grey – usually paler than Little Stint – and lack this smudging. Both species have short, almost straight, dark bills, but the bill of Red-necked Stint is slightly thicker than that of Little Stint, especially at the base. This is a subtle feature and direct comparison of the two species is needed. Very rarely can non-breeding Red-necked Stint in Africa be identified with complete certainty.

HABITS, HABITATS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Sanderlings favour open coast, especially sandy beaches and coastal lagoons, but also occur on rocky shores and in estuaries. They also turn up at inland waterbodies where they may cause confusion because they are unexpected. They are frequently in close-knit, active, single-species flocks, foraging energetically close to the water's edge. Broad-billed Sandpipers are very rarely found on the open coast, favouring estuaries, salt pans (especially for roosting) and a range of inland waterbodies. They forage singly, in among other waders, but join communal roosts at high tide, often with Curlew Sandpipers. Their foraging behaviour is snipe-like and distinctive. They usually forage in very soft mud and the bill is held vertically while probing, and is driven, hammer-like, into the mud. They frequently forage together with Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers.

Although all three species walk at approximately the same speed while foraging, Broad-billed Sandpipers generally probe at one half to one third of the rate of the other two.

Little Stints are uncommon on the open coast, but are common at almost all other types of wetland. Little is known about Red-necked Stints in Africa. Most records are from South African estuaries, lagoons and salt pans. □

The author is grateful to Tony Tree for his constructive (and unstinting!) criticism of an earlier draft.

Red-necked Stint
Adult non-breeding
Calidris ruficollis
13–16 cm

Red-necked Stint
Adult breeding