

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*



Folk Name: Red-backed Sandpiper, Black-breasted Snipe

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Rare

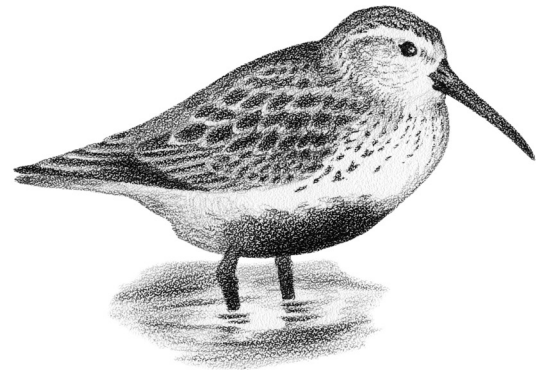
Habitat: Mudflats

At 8 ½ inches, the Dunlin is half an inch larger than the Sanderling. It is highly variable in its plumage between breeding season and winter, but it always appears hunch-backed in shape and has a black bill with a droopy or decurved tip. The Dunlin is a common migrant and winter resident on the coast of both Carolinas. It is also a regular but rather rare migrant inland in the Carolinas in late fall. It is very rare in the Piedmont during spring migration. To date, of the more than 20 occurrences of Dunlin in this region, seven have been seen in the spring. Fall sightings have occurred between 11 October and 27 November, with one December sighting and one January sighting.

The first Dunlin found in our area could be considered a “dual-state” surprise. It was spotted by Flo Cobey on May 3, 1967, at Creech’s Pond, a small farm pond and wetland in extreme northeastern York County. Habitat associated with this pond on Creech’s Farm lay in both York County and Mecklenburg County. This bird was relocated on May 6, 1967, by Mrs. Cobey, Irene Kittenger, and others conducting the Charlotte Spring Bird Count. The Dunlin was “studied carefully through a 30x Balscope at a distance of about 150 feet.” The sighting was reported to have been only the third inland sight record of this coastal species recorded in South Carolina, and it would also have been the third or fourth inland record for North Carolina. At the time, the published record specifically noted the bird was found on the South Carolina side of Creech’s Pond; however, Mrs. Cobey later stated that she believed the bird had been “flying through” the Mecklenburg side of the property as well.

There are five other reports from the twentieth century. Heathy Walker reported one Dunlin at Creech’s Pond on November 27, 1983. On May 5, 1984, she sighted two Dunlin at the McAlpine WWTP in Pineville, and Paul Hart found three Dunlin present at the same spot 4 days later. David Wright found a flock of nine in Gaston County on October 30, 1984. On November 1, 1987, one was seen on Lake Norman on the Lincoln County side of the lake. On November 9, 1991, four Dunlin were reported in Mecklenburg County.

Sightings of Dunlin increased dramatically in the 15-year period from 2001 to 2016, with almost three times the number reported from the almost 25-year period of 1967–1991. The first reported in the region in the new millennium was found on the York Christmas



Bird Count on December 22, 2001. One was reported at Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County on October 13, 2002. Steve Tracy found one at the Allen Steam Plant in Gaston County on October 27, 2002. A sizable flock of 17 was found foraging on the mudflats on the edge of the observation ponds at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge on October 30, 2002. On October 29, 2007, a flock of 13 Dunlin was reported at the McAlpine WWTP in Pineville.

Jeff Lemons photographed a Dunlin in breeding plumage at the Wallace Dairy Farm in Huntersville on May 16, 2011. He noted “the bird had a rufous back and a black belly patch.” This bird lingered a few days. On November 19, 2011, Andrew Thornton reported one Dunlin with a pair of dowitchers at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge. He provided this description: “...distinctly smaller than dowitchers with white belly and underwings, faint white wing stripe, gray rump blending with back (eliminating Curlew), relatively shorter bill than dows but relatively long bill for *Calidris* sp., distinctly downcurved. Also heard calling twice, relatively flat chee note.”

On October 30, 2012, Rob Gilson spotted an amazing flock of 133 along the Catawba River in southern



Dunlin in Mecklenburg County. (Jeff Lemons)

Mecklenburg County. This is by far the largest group of Dunlin ever counted in the region. Gilson noted the birds appeared to have been forced down by stormy weather.

A single Dunlin was photographed by Bill Archer at the Clariant Plant in Mecklenburg County on October 31, 2012, providing a real Halloween treat. Jeff Lemons photographed one a few days later on Governor's Island in Lake Norman on November 3, 2012. Jan and Phil Fowler photographed one on January 5, 2013 at Lake Don T. Howell. The bird remained there for at least a week. Ron Clark found a group of eight at the McDowell Prairie in Mecklenburg County on October 11, 2013. Kevin Metcalf reported two a few weeks later at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge on November 2, 2013.

Kevin Airington reported his life bird Dunlin in Stanly County on April 18, 2015. No details were provided. That fall, Jeff Lemons reported one Dunlin at the Waymer Flying Field in Huntersville on September 12, 2015. On April 21, 2016, Taylor Piephoff found a lone Dunlin with a small group of Least Sandpipers on the edge of a neighborhood pond in Mint Hill. On April 23, 2017, Ronnie Underwood photographed a pair of Dunlin off Midway Road in Statesville. Black feathers were noted on one bird's belly.

The Dunlin is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a species with both "troubling" population declines and "high threats." It is in need of conservation action.