

# General Field Notes

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## Spring Migrant Shorebirds in Watauga County, N.C.

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31 October 1978

It is not unusual to find shorebirds inland in North Carolina in the fall and spring. A number of observations have been made and published (Chat 32:102, 40:96, 33:24-25, 38:39-40). Few reports, however, have come from the mountains of North Carolina.

Price Lake is located approximately 3.5 miles W of Blowing Rock, N.C., near mile marker 297 on the Blue Ridge Parkway. The lake is approximately 28 acres in size. The water level in the lake was lowered during the winter months of 1977-1978 so cracks in the dam could be repaired. Lowering of the water level exposed a mudflat, approximately 7 acres in size, which attracted shorebirds during April and May of 1978.

The table below lists the first and last sighting of each species seen, the maximum number of individuals present at one sighting, and the date of that sighting.

<i>Species</i>	<i>Extreme dates</i>	<i>Peak no.</i>	<i>Date of peak</i>
Semipalmated Plover	30 April-20 May	25+	9 May
Spotted Sandpiper	16 April-23 May	20	7 May
Solitary Sandpiper	24 April-22 May	10	7 May
Greater Yellowlegs	24 April-18 May	8	29 April
Lesser Yellowlegs	24 April-9 May	8	24 April
White-rumped Sandpiper	2 May-9 May	12	2 May
Least Sandpiper	16 April-23 May	40+	9 May
Short-billed Dowitcher	18 May	4	18 May
Semipalmated Sandpiper	5 May-18 May	7	9 May

All observations were made with the aid of 7 x 35 binoculars and a spotting scope with a 20-45X zoom lens. The mudflat at Price Lake was checked almost every day during April and the first 3 weeks of May.

## Ruff at Huntington Beach, S.C.

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4 May 1978

About 1500 on 16 April 1978, my wife Lisa and I saw two Ruffs (*Philomachus pugnax*) at Huntington Beach State Park, Georgetown County, S.C.

On the main freshwater impoundment, along the dike-roadway, was a barely submerged mud-bar about 7 m (23 feet) long. Resting here were several Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*), three American Coots (*Fulica americana*), a Double-crested

Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*), and the two shorebirds. The birds were roughly 50 m (150 feet) SW of us, so that, as the sky was cloudless, it was necessary to look in the direction of the sun. Fortunately, the sun was still rather high in the sky.

We observed two rather large, husky-looking shorebirds. By comparing them to the other nearby birds, I judged them to be about the size of Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*). The bills were similar to those of Lesser Yellowlegs (*T. flavipes*): straight, slender, and longer than the head. Indeed, relative to the head the bills were intermediate in length between those of the two yellowlegs. Peterson's sketch of the Ruff on Plate 25 of his *Field Guide to the Birds* is an excellent likeness of the birds, as far as the shape and bill-length are concerned. (We did not have any field guides with us at the time, however.) The bill color of both birds was gray or bluish-gray.

Just from the "gestalt" alone, then, we were sure that this was a species we had never seen before. We quickly considered all of the commonly occurring species and eliminated them as possibilities. The deciding factor was the plumage of the birds. The back of one bird looked dark gray; but because of the relatively poor lighting, it is hard to say with certainty what the color was. White feather edgings on the back feathers were very noticeable. The face was browner than the back and very dull looking—no eye ring or eye line. The breast of this bird was basically white, but with numerous obscure gray streakings. The belly and undertail coverts were white. As the bird walked around the light shone on its legs from various angles. The leg color, under all these different views, was best described as "dark", i.e., gray or possibly green, but certainly not yellow, orange, or red.

The second bird exhibited the same back and head plumage and the same leg color. But starting right below the throat and extending two-thirds of the way to the legs, the breast feathers were a rusty-red color, redder and darker than the plumage of a Short-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*). This red color was not uniform, however: it was made patchy looking by some randomly placed white feathers, so that the bird appeared to be in molt. This bird did not walk around, so we did not have the benefit of different angles or views. Neither bird ever lifted its wings in our presence.

All of the standard field guides point out the great degree of variability in the plumage and size of the Ruff. Most books say that the back plumage is brown; however, the depiction of back color on Plate 31 of Pough's *Audubon Water Bird Guide* for the fall plumage fits our birds perfectly. Also, the color and length of bill that we observed are depicted well on page 173 of the *Book of British Birds*. According to Wentworth and Kibbe (Kingbird 23:116), bill and leg color are thought to change with age. The bill changes from lead-gray to red and the legs from greenish-gray to orange or red. In winter plumage, "the feathers of the upper parts are various browns, ranging from dark brown to brownish-grey. These feathers have prominent pale margins, creating a scalloped effect." The male is, of course, much larger than the female, up to 30 cm (12 inches) in length. The bill of the male is also longer than that of the female, up to 38 mm (1.5 inches). Males are in breeding plumage from mid-April to mid-June. There is little doubt, then, that the birds we saw were young male Ruffs.

This appears to be the second record of this Eurasian bird in South Carolina. According to Burton, writing in the supplement to the 1970 edition of *South Carolina Bird Life*, the first record occurred on 22 January 1961 at the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge (Denton, Harrington, Mellinger, and Tomkins). See also the article in *The Chat* (25:33). Recent records from nearby states include the following: in North Carolina, 29 July 1962 at Beaufort (Audubon Field Notes 16:466), 14 July 1966 at Bodie Island (Chat 30:109), 21-25 May 1973 at Pea Island (American Birds 27:759); in Georgia, 11 July 1971 at Atlanta (American Birds 26:47); in Virginia, 29 December 1966 near Norfolk (American Birds 21:402); in Florida, 7 April 1974 at Rockledge and 6 May 1974 at Merritt Island, third and fourth state spring records (American Birds 28:792), 27 March 1975 at Merritt Island (American Birds 29:680). Though still very rare, the species seems to occur with greater frequency in the northeastern United States than in the southern Atlantic Coast states.

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## **A Report on an Alder Flycatcher Colony at Roan Mountain with Comments on the Status of the Species in the Southern Appalachians**

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Received 5 October 1978

On 13 June 1978, I saw a small brownish flycatcher with wingbars on the North Carolina side of the Appalachian Trail at Jane Bald, 2 miles E of Roan Mountain, Mitchell County. Because the bird was singing *fee-bee-o*, I identified it as an Alder Flycatcher (*Empidonax alnorum*) despite the seemingly unusual location—the dry shrubby edge of a grassy bald at 5600 feet in elevation. Actually though, mountain alder (*Alnus crispa*) was the most prominent shrub.

After hearing another Alder Flycatcher one-half mile farther E on Grassy Ridge Bald, I met Ed Schell of the Tennessee Ornithological Society (TOS) and pointed this bird out to him. He mentioned that birders from New England had reported an Alder Flycatcher there in 1977. Immediately upon leaving Mr. Schell, I heard a third Alder Flycatcher. Like the second bird, it was on the Tennessee side of Grassy Ridge Bald. Returning the next day, I found a fourth bird, this one on the North Carolina side at 6000 feet in elevation. The original bird was found again at Jane Bald. Later in the summer Mr. Schell told me that many TOS members had gone to see the Alder Flycatchers and that seven singing males as well as a female and a fledgling were found along this short stretch of the Appalachian Trail. This first nesting record of the Alder Flycatcher in Tennessee is being written up for *The Migrant*.

After I told Harry LeGrand about these birds, he went to similar habitat (scattered deciduous saplings and small spruce trees) at Graveyard Fields, Haywood County, N.C., on 17 June 1978 and found an Alder Flycatcher. On 23 July 1978 he returned and found two Alder Flycatchers, one singing and one calling *pip*. This location at 5800 feet is where Joshua Lee, Walter Holland, and others reported a bird on 22 May 1976 (Chat 40:103).

There are only a few other reports of Alder Flycatchers in the southern Appalachians. Schell (pers. com.) found one at Mount Rogers, Virginia, several years ago, and there is a report of one at 5100 feet in southwestern Virginia in 1974 (Am. Birds 28:904). Harry LeGrand and I found one singing in a small bog at 3500 feet in Price Park near Blowing Rock, N.C., on 29 May 1972 (Chat 36:114). We also found a non-singing *Empidonax* flycatcher in the same territory that summer. In 1976 George Hall wrote in *American Birds* (30:956) that Alder Flycatchers were dwindling in numbers in West Virginia and were confined to a few high mountain bogs. The 1977 report for the Appalachian Region (Am.