

## General Field Notes

---

*General Field Notes* briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in *The Chat*.

---

### First North Carolina Record of a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*)

**Bob Holmes**

4003 Trent Pines Drive, New Bern, NC 28562

On the late afternoon of 31 August 2009, I was birding at a sod farm north of New Bern in Craven County, NC. The day was overcast with a 5–10 mph wind from the northeast. This farm, for the most part, is covered by closely-mowed grass and has multiple shallow rainwater pools.

Shorebirds seen that day were Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*), Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*), Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*), Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*), and dowitcher sp. (*Limnodromus* sp.). When a Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*) was spotted on the edge of a pool, the day seemed a success. Further scanning, however, revealed a strikingly-plumaged shorebird, which I had previously seen only in photographs. It was immediately apparent to me that this was a juvenile Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*).

I studied the bird as it walked and fed for about fifteen minutes, using a 20–60 x 82 scope at a distance of about 35 meters. Then the flock of birds spontaneously flushed. The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was not seen again. Efforts to relocate it the following morning and afternoon were unsuccessful.

The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was observed standing in grass just tall enough to make determination of leg length (for comparison to a Pectoral Sandpiper) difficult. Leg color, however, could be discerned and was yellowish green, not yellow. The bill was straight and appeared uniformly dark. The cap was bright rufous. There was a narrow eye ring. The white superciliary line not only broadened behind the eye but also blended into a whitish area on the side of the head posterior to the eye. I have only seen this feature in figure 3, page 295, of O'Brien et al. (2006). The throat was white, and the breast was a bright but rather pale chestnut (not buff) with a bit of very fine dark streaking. The covert edges were mostly bright rufous. The terminal edges of the scapulars and lateral mantle were white, creating the appearance of streaks. The angles at which the bird was seen did not allow

observation of the tail shape or of the undertail coverts. No vocalization from this bird was separated from the calls of the other shorebirds when the flock flushed. Unfortunately, a camera was not available at the time of this sighting. The bird that I observed is nearly identical to the published photograph of a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in figure 2, page 294, of O'Brien, et al. (2006).

The two species most likely to be misidentified as a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper are Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) in juvenal plumage and Pectoral Sandpiper. The Ruff's larger size, longer legs, and slender neck should set it apart from a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, no matter the plumage of the latter. Though reference books often consider the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper to be quite similar to a Pectoral Sandpiper, in my opinion the bird that I observed was similar to a Pectoral only in regard to size and shape.

The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper occurs uncommonly but regularly as a migrant (particularly in the fall) on the Pacific coast of North America, where migrants are predominantly juveniles. It is of much rarer occurrence on the Atlantic coast, where there is a larger percentage of adult migrants. The extreme dates for fall migrants on the Atlantic coast were 12 August (Florida) to 5 November (Massachusetts) for juveniles and 30 June (Massachusetts) to 24 September (Virginia) for adults (Mlodinow 2001).

The first record of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in the Carolinas was an adult seen in Orangeburg County, SC, on 24 July 1994 (Carter and Eastman 1998). The Craven County bird I observed is the first of the species to be reported in North Carolina. Interestingly, a year later, on 15 October 2010, another Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was seen and photographed in North Carolina (LeGrand et al. 2011). Both records were accepted by the NC Bird Records Committee in 2010 (LeGrand et al. 2011), and because the latter record contained photos that were accepted, the species has been placed on the state's Official List.

### **Literature Cited**

- Carter, R. and C. Eastman. 1998. Sharp-tailed Sandpiper observed in Orangeburg County, South Carolina. The first sight record for South Carolina. *Chat* 62:38–40.
- LeGrand, H. E., Jr., K. E. Camburn, S. Cooper, R. J. Davis, E. V. Dean, W. K. Forsythe, J. S. Pippen, M. H. Tove, and R. L. Tyndall. 2011. 2010 annual report of the North Carolina Bird Records Committee. *Chat* 75:1–5.
- Mlodinow, S. G. 2001. Possible anywhere: Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. *Birding* 33:330–341.
- O'Brien, M., R. Crossley, and K. Karlson. 2006. *The Shorebird Guide*. Houghton Mifflin Company.