

Shorebirds fly vast distances on strong, efficient wings to reach breeding and wintering grounds separated by thousands of miles. Their various whistles and calls have been described as plaintive, evocative, and haunting. They feed in areas which are exposed and uncompromising, battered by rain and buffeted by wind: mudflats, salt plains, marsh, bay edges, and tidal pools. To watch a flock of sandpipers or a small group of yellowlegs drop from the autumn sky with bodies and wings twisting in response to millisecond changes in aerodynamic conditions; to listen to their lonely, compelling calls, is to experience utter wildness. The birds carry with them the desolation of tundra.

Beginning as early as mid- to late July and running through late October and beyond, a number of shorebird species appear on Long Island's coast, fresh from their northern nesting grounds. Their numbers usually peak in early to mid-September. They feed incessantly to gain the fuel necessary to carry them on to their final wintering destinations in the southeastern United States, the Caribbean, and various regions of South America. (A few species reach Tierra del Fuego at the continent's southern tip.) The adults arrive several weeks before the more brightly colored, fresh-plumaged "hatchyear" juveniles.

The "peep" sandpipers are especially common. Hard to identify due to their similarity, the least and semipalmated (so named because its feet are slightly webbed) sandpipers are small and brownish in color with prominent, chisel-shaped bills. In good light conditions these two species can be differentiated: the least has yellow legs while those of the semipalmated are dark-colored, as are those of other peep sandpipers. Birders use a popular mnemonic device to tell the least apart from the other peeps: "The least has light legs." Less commonly seen peep sandpipers include the white-rumped (the white crescent is quite visible in flight), the Baird's, and the western with its characteristic slightly drooping bill.

Not to be confused with the semipalmated sandpiper is the rather common semipalmated plover (also with slightly webbed feet). A handsome brown bird with a short orange bill, a single black neck band, and golden yellow legs and feet, the semipalmated is closely



27-1. A breeding plumage red knot, a shorebird known for eating horseshoe crab eggs.

related to the piping plover which nests on Long Island's beaches (see chapter 3). The killdeer, with its call that sounds like "*kill-deer*," is also brown, but has a bright orange tail and two dark breast bands. Killdeer nest in short grass areas such as soccer fields throughout Long Island.

Another plover, the black-bellied plover, appears in large numbers during fall migration. Early in the season individuals in breeding plumage are common: checkered black-and-white back, white neck and shoulder stripe, and solid black belly, cheek, and throat. Their haunting, slurred-whistle call sounds like "*where? where? where?*"

The sanderling, a peeplike shorebird, can be distinguished from the true peeps by its chunkier appearance and (in the fall) lighter, uniform plumage. Also, they are most often seen feeding along the outer beach and less often in other habitats. As the froth of a wave moves up the beach, the birds retreat before it, then advance to look for food particles as the wave slides back down.



27-2. A flock of ruddy turnstones.

Ruddy turnstones, some of which are still in their distinctive harlequin breeding plumage when they arrive on Long Island, received their name from their habit of turning over stones, driftwood, and other debris in search of food. They are among the most colorful of shorebirds.

Two species of yellowlegs move through Long Island on fall migration. The lesser yellowlegs is about ten inches long and has a thin, straight bill. Its cousin, the greater yellowlegs, is a few inches larger and has a proportionately longer bill that is slightly upturned. They are most easily told apart by their call: the lesser emits a two syllable “*tew-tew*” call, while the greater issues a more piercing, triple syllable “*tew-tew-tew*.”

The two species of dowitchers are also difficult to tell apart. However, since short-billed dowitchers arrive from the north before the long-billed, any dowitchers seen early in the fall season are of the former species. Dowitchers can be distinguished from other shorebirds by their unique feeding behavior. They rapidly move their long, straight bills up and down in a sewing-machine motion, as they probe vertically in the mud of the marshes and flats they inhabit.

Each year brings reports of several of the larger shorebird species such as Hudsonian godwits, whimbrels, and larger still, marbled godwits, and avocets. Mingling on a mudflat, these birds dwarf their smaller shorebird cousins. The whimbrel has a distinctive sickle-shaped bill that is downcurved, while the other three have straight or upturned (recurved) bills.

Most of these shorebirds breed much further north than Long Island—many in the Arctic tundra—but two shorebirds in addition to the piping plover breed here: the oystercatcher and the willet. Given its large size, black-and-white pattern, yellow eye, and large,

chisel-shaped, bright red bill (it uses its bill to break open oysters, mussels, and other shellfish that are its primary food), the oyster-catcher is not likely to be confused with any other bird. It nests on several islands in the south shore bays and along undisturbed stretches of the barrier beach, occasionally in association with tern and piping plover colonies.

Standing in a salt marsh, the nondescript willet is easy to overlook. But let it take flight, and it is unmistakable. Its bold black-and-white wings, heretofore tucked out of sight, flash conspicuously, and it often calls out its plaintive, namesake call, "*will, will, willet? will, will, willet?*" (For me, the call of the willet invariably triggers pleasant memories of summer days spent at Long Island's seashores.)

THE "GRASSPIPERS"

The majority of shorebirds frequent mudflats, shallow pools, tidal wetlands and sandy beaches to feed—hence the common name, sandpiper. The upland and buffbreasted sandpipers, however, are more at home walking through a sod farm than a mudflat. Because of their preference for grassy areas, birders often refer to them as the "grasspipers."

The upland sandpiper was once a common breeding bird on the Hempstead Plains (see chapter 12) and still breeds in a few locations on Long Island where suitable grassland habitat remains. Also, breeding populations from the northern United States and southern Canada pass through on their south-bound migration. In contrast, the buffbreasted sandpiper breeds in the high arctic of northwestern Canada, and the only time of year it is reliably seen on Long Island is during autumn migration.

The birds are similar in appearance. Both have a "small-headed" look, dark eyes and scaly backs. The upland sandpiper is larger and darkly colored. The underside of the buffbreasted is, as its name suggests, a rich buffy color, somewhat the color of a robin's breast that has gone through too many cycles in the washing machine. Both walk with a distinctive upright posture.

Besides being similar in appearance and in their choice of foraging habitat used during fall migration, the birds also choose similar wintering habitat. They overwinter together in the grasslands of Uruguay and Argentina. Their annual round-trip migration from breeding grounds to wintering grounds is among the longest of any bird. Unfortunately, these southern grasslands are following the example set by our own: they are being converted into fields of wheat, corn, and other crops. Not surprisingly, these two wonderful birds, which epitomize open, windswept landscapes, are declining rapidly. Some scientists fear they may become extinct in our lifetime. Fortunately, shore-

birds are the subject of significant conservation efforts by various government agencies and not-for-profit organizations.

Where: Shorebirds can be seen in suitable habitat along most of Long Island's coastline. There are several places, however, where you are virtually guaranteed to see the shorebird species discussed above.

- Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge—off Cross Bay Boulevard in southern Brooklyn is one of the premier sites for viewing shorebirds. The east pond is particularly worthwhile, where refuge officials manage water levels to expose an ample amount of pond margin for the birds to use. Many rare species such as the ruff and the curlew sandpiper (European shorebirds) turn up regularly each fall. Cow Meadow Park Freeport, southern Nassau County, is another site to see shorebirds. The birds use pools that can be viewed from a nearby nature trail or viewing tower, both of which are situated south of the parking lot. Overlook Beach along the Ocean Parkway in Babylon is an outstanding site to view plovers and sandpipers. While you are supposed to be a town resident to gain access to the park, the town graciously allows birders from throughout Long Island to visit the park in the fall. The best location for viewing shorebirds is a pool that is a ten-minute walk east of the pavilion.

- Many sections of ocean beach such as Jones Beach and Robert Moses State Parks, Fire Island National Seashore, and Smith Point County Park provide opportunities to see flocks of sanderlings.

- The section of Shinnecock Bay shoreline on the north side of the barrier beach and on each side of the Ponquogue Bridge in Hampton Bays can be rewarding for shorebirds. A large mussel bed immediately to the west of the bridge, easily viewed during low tide from Dune Road, is a reliable location for oystercatchers. This area is also worthwhile for some of the other shorebird species mentioned. A ride west along Dune Road takes you past stretches of tidal marsh that fringe Shinnecock Bay. Here willets are a "shore" bet.

For "GRASSPIPERS": During the breeding season upland sandpipers can be found on Long Island in areas with exten-

sive grasslands. Floyd Bennett Field, part of the Gateway National Recreation Area in southern Brooklyn, on the east side of Flatbush Avenue south of the Belt Parkway, and the Suffolk County Airport in Westhampton are among the places where upland sandpipers can be reliably seen. You might still be lucky enough to see a bird or two at the Hempstead Plains Preserve in Uniondale. Migrating upland and buffbreasted sandpipers are reliably seen in three areas on eastern Long Island: in the open fields both north and south of the intersection of Sunrise Highway and County Route 51 in the south Manorville/ Eastport area; the sod farms situated north of the hamlet of Riverhead in the vicinity of Doctor's Path and County Route 105; and in Cutchogue, on the North Fork, near Alvah's Lane and Oregon Road.

When: Southbound shorebird migration can start as early as late July, but numbers do not pick up usually until early to mid-August. The abundance and diversity of shorebirds peaks in the month from late August through the last week in September. Good numbers of late-arriving groups sometimes persist into late October and early November.



A lone sanderling,
searches for food in wave foam,
at the ocean's edge