

The White Rump Revisited

Another look at white rumps and upper-tail coverts: A sandpiper case study

In a previous piece in this column (Leukering 2018), I discussed the problem created by feather terminology and how it relates to actual identification field marks. That piece focused on raptors, particularly on those species that can be confused in the field with Northern Harrier. Here I take another stab at the topic, but this time from a sandpiper per-

spective. As with the Northern Harrier's white "rump" (Leukering 2018), the White-rumped Sandpiper's signature field mark is misnamed. Using that mark as the sole, or even primary, identification feature, whatever its moniker, can lead one astray.

Let's start with a question: When is a white-rumped sandpiper a White-rumped Sandpiper?

Before I give an answer, three points of terminology:

1 • The term "sandpiper" is restricted to members of the shorebird family Scolopacidae. This family includes, in various subfami-

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lies, the curlews, godwits, turnstones, sandpipers, dowitchers, snipe, woodcocks, shanks, and phalaropes. ("Shank" is a British term referring to members of the genus *Tringa* and is taken from primarily Old World members of the genus—the redshanks and greenshanks.) Also, while all sandpipers are shorebirds, not all shorebirds are sandpipers. This note does

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Featured Photo: These sandpipers have white rumps—and white upper-tail coverts—but they are not White-rumped Sandpipers. They are **Wilson's Phalaropes**. The Wilson's Phalarope is one of many sandpiper species that exhibit white on the back part of the upper side of the body, which can create confusion for birders seeking a White-rumped Sandpiper. As with all bird identifications, using multiple characters—plumage, behavior, calls—makes for greatly improved accuracy. *Willcox, Cochise County, Arizona; Aug. 3, 2018. Photo by © Jim Stasz.*

not deal with other shorebird taxa that exhibit white on the back end of the upper side of the body, for example, oystercatchers.

2 • The term “peep” is restricted to the very small sandpipers of the genus *Calidris*, most of which were treated in seminal identification papers in *British Birds* (Grant 1984) and *American Birds* (Veit and Johnson 1984). Thus, the list of the world’s peeps is restricted to Temminck’s, Long-toed, Red-necked, and Little stints, and Spoon-billed, Baird’s, Least, White-rumped, Semipalmated, and Western sandpipers. For an overview of the ID challenges presented by the five regularly occurring and widespread peeps in the ABA Area (Baird’s, Least, White-rumped, Semipalmated, Western), see Cox (2008). Neither the Sanderling nor the Dunlin is a “peep,” and neither are Pectoral and Spotted sandpipers (the latter being a shank relative).

3 • On a bird in flight, the upper-tail coverts fall back of, often well back of, the trailing edges of the wings, while the rump is at least partly forward of the trailing edge of the wings. On many birds, including shorebirds, the feather tract that is the upper-tail coverts appears curved on the flying bird, roughly paralleling the curve of the back end of the body. On other birds, such as the Northern Harrier, this tract of feathers appears as a rectangular block, rather than curved.

The short answer to the question posed above is “never.” Despite the White-rumped Sandpiper’s official name, the species, like the Northern Harrier, has a dark rump (Supplemental Photo 1). The relevant part of the plumage description from the *Birds of North America Online* account (Parmelee 1992) is:

Also distinguished from Baird’s [Sand-



Supplemental Photo 1: This white-rumped sandpiper has the long-winged look and the well-defined white “rump” patch typical of the **White-rumped Sandpiper**. As noted in the text of this note, the white on the upper side of the bird’s body is restricted to the upper-tail coverts; the rump is dark. *Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge, Atlantic County, New Jersey; May 19, 2017.* Photo by © Michael O’Brien.

piper] and others by white band across uppertail coverts (not actually on rump), visible mainly in flight.

The last phrase of the above quote is also critical to the correct identification of White-rumped Sandpiper, as it is easiest to assess that the white patch is uninterrupted by dark when the bird is in flight. While many sandpiper species have extensive white or whitish areas on the back end of the upper side of

the body, the White-rumped Sandpiper’s white patch there crosses the back end of the body and is sharply defined proximally by the dark rump and, less sharply, distally by the darker tail. However, that white patch meets the white of the flanks on either side of the body. Beware of using the presence of white upper-tail coverts to identify a standing White-rumped Sandpiper or other peeps. All peep species sport white upper-tail coverts, and all but White-rumped have dark *central* upper-tail coverts. These form a distinct dark stripe cutting across the white patch, connecting the dark rump with the more-or-less darker tail.

Both yellowlegs and both dowitchers are much larger than the White-rumped Sandpiper, and the white area on those species’ upperparts is extensive, not just a simple, well-defined band of white near the tail base.

The smaller sandpiper species with a reasonably well-defined patch of white on the distal upperparts can be construed to be the possible confusion species for White-rumped Sandpiper. In my experience, the main confusion is with Wilson’s Phalarope—the species depicted in the Featured Photo.

Yes, it is practically impossible to confuse an alternate-plumage Wilson’s Phalarope—particularly the snazzy females—with a White-rumped Sandpiper, but juvenile and basic-plumage phalaropes have less-spectac-

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Supplemental Photo 2: Like many sandpipers, the **Sanderling** sports white upper-tail coverts. Were this bird a bit higher in our view, we might see the white lateral upper-tail coverts, but not the dark central upper-tail coverts, a situation that could engender confusion with the White-rumped Sandpiper. Granted, one is unlikely to confuse an alternate-plumaged Sanderling (as here) with a White-rumped Sandpiper, but as with many of the possible confusion species, basic-plumage adults and, particularly, juvenile Sanderlings are another story entirely. *Plymouth Beach, Plymouth County, Massachusetts; May 31, 2010. Photo by © Ian Davies.*

ular plumage. I understand that confusion: The phalarope is similar in size to the White-rumped Sandpiper (9.25 inches vs. 7.5 inches in length) and many phalaropes have a dark-enough tail to contrast strongly enough with the white upper-tail coverts as to engender that confusion. Single-character identifications are always fraught with peril, however,

and paying attention to the foraging behavior of a “white-rumped sandpiper” is always useful. White-rumped Sandpipers forage methodically by probing for unseen prey, moving forward fairly slowly. Wilson’s Phalaropes, on the other hand, are frenetic visual foragers, dashing about chasing flies and other agile prey. The species is the Reddish Egret of the

shorebird world. (Phalaropes are of course best known for their habit of spinning while feeding over deep water, but I’m talking here about land-based feeding.) Leg color (see Leukering 2017) is another useful differentiator: yellow in Wilson’s Phalarope in fall, blackish in White-rumped Sandpiper all year.

Other confusion species are primarily the other peeps for reasons of obvious morphological and plumage similarity. So are other smaller shorebird species with at least some white in the upper-tail coverts. In addition to the confusion with the other peeps (Baird’s,





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Supplemental Photo 3: Of the non-White-rumped Sandpiper species presented in this note, the **Curlew Sandpiper** is perhaps the most similar in shape and foraging style to the White-rumped Sandpiper. One wonders how many Curlew Sandpipers have been passed off as White-rumped Sandpipers on the East Coast in the fall, a time when the latter is fairly common. In early fall, mistaking an adult Curlew Sandpiper for a White-rumped Sandpiper would usually be difficult, owing to the reddish plumage most of the former still show then. As early as late August, however, most of that reddish plumage has usually been replaced by the much drabber basic plumage, and confusion seems much more likely. *Chatham, Barnstable County, Massachusetts; Aug. 25, 2012. Photo by © Jeremiah Trimble.*

Western, and Semipalmated sandpipers, and, to a lesser extent, the small and distinctive Least), ID challenges may be presented by the Sanderling (Supplemental Photo 2), Dunlin, and Curlew Sandpiper. As with the Wilson's Phalarope, one is unlikely to confuse a spanking, alternate-plumage Curlew Sandpiper with anything other than a Red Knot—and even that is a stretch. But individuals in other plumages (Supplemental Photo 3) can appear similar to the White-rumped Sandpiper.

Acknowledgments

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