

Field Identification of the Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*

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Introduction

The recent reports of Pectoral Sandpiper in Australia (Smith 1963, 1964, 1967 and 1968, Thomas 1971, Wren 1981) and in southern Africa (Ginn & Brooke 1971, Kemp 1972, Sinclair, Robson & Bull 1974, Taylor 1980, Tree 1966, 1971, 1972 and 1981) suggest that the bird is in fact a regular visitor to these areas, albeit in small numbers. This paper is concerned with summarising its field characters and with clarifying the differences between it and similar species.

General Appearance and Voice

Only slightly larger than the Curlew Sandpiper *C. ferruginea*, it actually resembles Reeve (female Ruff) *Philomachus pugnax* more closely. The upperparts are richly hued brown-chestnut and black, with pale snipe-like stripes on the back. A characteristically streaked lower throat and upper breast, sharply demarcated from the lower breast, forms the distinct pectoral gorget which is present in all plumage stages and from whence the bird's name is derived. Although Pectoral Sandpipers vary considerably in size, males are often larger than the largest Sharp-tailed Sandpipers *C. acuminata* whereas females are rather smaller, appearing in the field to be similarly sized or smaller than Sharp-tails.

The call of the Pectoral Sandpiper is a harsh *kriek* or *kreek* which recalls Curlew Sandpiper but is more closely akin to, though less harsh, than that of the Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus* (Glutz von Boltzheim, Bauer & Bezzel 1975, Granberg, 1978).

Plumage Characters

Bill Essentially blackish with a dirty fleshy-yellow basal area of variable size on either the lower mandible alone or on both mandibula. The shape is rather distinctive — slightly decurved and tapering rapidly near the thick base.

Head and Face The supercilium is pale-grey to white, generally broader in front of the eye than behind it. In well-marked juveniles the conspicuous supercilium contrasts markedly with the darkly streaked chestnut crown, giving it a capped appearance. Fine streaking in adults

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however, often obscures the eyestripe. A dark bar running from the base of the bill to the eye is always present and often very prominent.

Upperparts Scapular and mantle feathers in summer adults are dark brown with chestnut fringes, coverts are grey-brown fringed whitish, scapular and mantle lines distinct. Winter adults from as early as July are duller with less conspicuous mantle and scapular lines. Juvenile birds are black-brown above with brightly marked white mantle and scapular lines (the former being the better marked). Mantle and scapular feathers are fringed chestnut, buff and white, wing coverts less dark than scapulars; though the row of feathers below the scapular line is often as dark as the scapulars.

Underparts A pectoral band is present in all plumages, formed by the dark brown streaks (often vertically aligned) on a buffy background, which is sharply demarcated from the white lower breast and belly. Note however, that some winter plumage birds may have rather washed out background colours to their bibs rather than the typically rich tawny background found in the full breeding plumage. Although the underparts are always clean white, there are frequently, though not invariably, a few dark streaks high on the rear flanks and less often an odd streak or two coming from the sides of the pectoral band. Central gorget markings in male summer adults are characteristically arrowhead-shaped.

Legs Distinctly yellow-ochre, often tinted greenish, occasionally brownish.

In flight The dark centre of the upper-tail is flanked by two white lozenges, recalling Ruff — these lateral patches are better defined than those illustrated in many field guides (Heinzel, Filter & Parslow 1972, McLachlan & Liversidge 1978) appearing rather more than those illustrated by Peterson (1974). The ill-defined wingbar is a good field character when it comes to excluding those species in which it is very prominent.

Pectoral Sandpipers appear sluggish in flight, with measured wingbeats, as in Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and Ruff but quite distinct from the frantic flight of Dunlin *C. alpina*. As is the case with Sharp-tail and Ruff, these birds curiously appear larger in flight than at rest.

Similar Species

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *C. acuminata*

This species resembles Pectoral most closely because it also has a pointed tail, two white tail lozenges in flight, a smallish head perched on a long neck in the alert stance, an ample belly and a flat back. In all plumages however, Sharp-tailed Sandpipers appear bulkier than Pectoral Sandpipers and have proportionately smaller heads and appear to have longer legs (Wallace 1979).

Because summer adult Sharp-tails differ so much from juveniles and winter plumaged birds it is worth dealing with them separately. Summer adult Sharp-tails have messy looking chests with streaking and scalloping restricted to the upper breast, though these markings merge into the white lower chest. Typically two or three rows of ventrally pointing

chevrons extend down along the white flanks; these 'boomerangs' are well illustrated by Pizzey (1980). Winter adults lack the neat gorget so characteristic of Pectoral and have pale greyish buff breasts, finely streaked laterally with only a few dark streaks and spots on the central upper breast in the form of a necklace. Juvenile Sharp-tails are much brighter on the chest than Pectorals and always lack the sharp border between chest and belly (Prater, Marchant & Vuorinen 1977, Britton 1980).

Sharp-tailed Sandpipers always have better defined white supercilia than Pectoral Sandpipers and these are never obscured even in adults. These are generally broader behind the eye (not in front of the eye as in Pectoral) a feature most marked in juveniles which, together with the chestnut crown gives an angled cap appearance.

Baird's Sandpiper *C. bairdii*

Baird's Sandpiper is significantly smaller than Sharp-tailed Sandpiper but the spotted buffy breast patches, unmarked throat and eyestripe may be confusing. The upperparts however, are distinctly scaled and no scapular or mantle lines are present. The dark bill lacks a paler basal area and is finer than that of the Pectoral. Bairds have shortish dark legs giving it a horizontal stance which is further accentuated by the long wings which extend beyond the tail tip when folded. Although Baird's Sandpiper classically has an ill-defined wingbar, some individuals may show distinct wingbars which immediately rule out Pectoral. The centre of the tail in Baird's is very dark, flanked by white, but there is never a white lozenge effect on the lateral upper-tail coverts.

Baird's Sandpiper has a sharply demarcated pectoral band second only to Pectoral, but differs as follows:

(a) It is largely unstreaked — being quite dense pale buff, with short thickish black streaks at the sides of the breast within the buff.

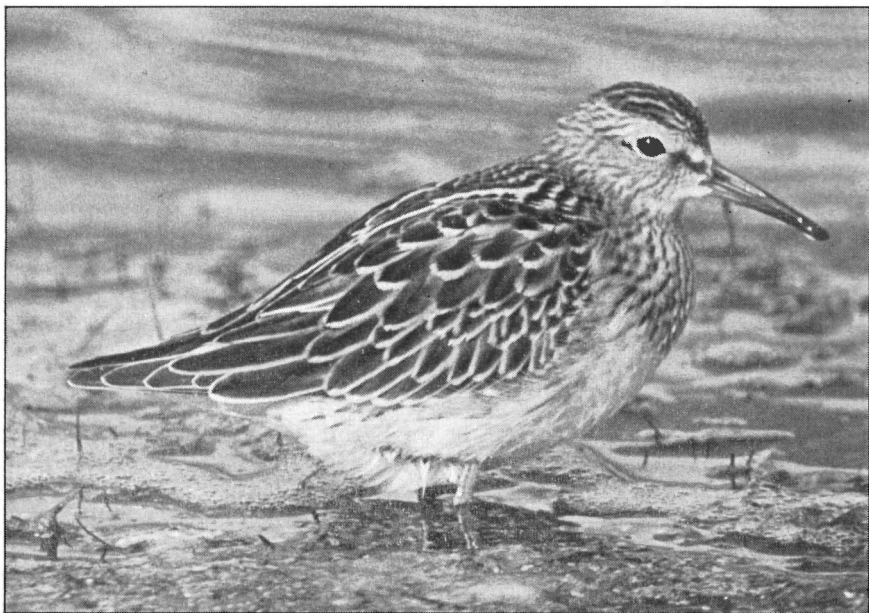
(b) Head-on, the white lower breast extends upwards a little into the pectoral band in the centre whereas Pectoral's is curiously downward pointed in the centre.

Dunlin *C. alpina*

As stated by Britton (1981) some juvenile Dunlin exhibit quite well marked pectoral bands which, together with the clear supercilium and pale scapular lines that may be found in this plumage, could easily confuse the unwary observer. In the case of Dunlin however, the bill is longer and finer, the legs darker and shorter, the bib always less crisply defined and the 'jizz' less elegant.

Curlew Sandpiper *C. ferruginea*

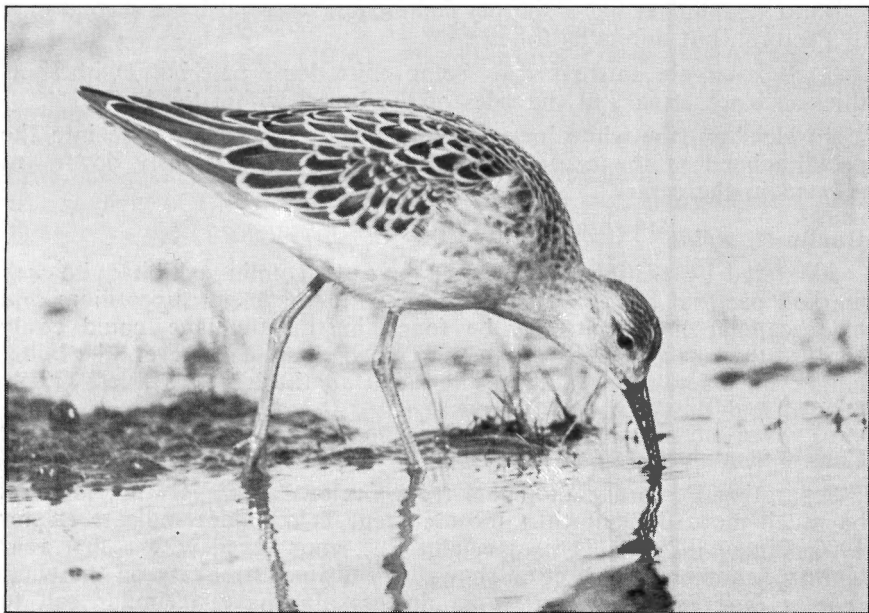
Separating Pectoral Sandpipers from Curlew Sandpipers may in fact be much more difficult than most current field guides indicate (Slater 1970, Pizzey 1980). This is especially true when faced with a first year Curlew Sandpiper which often shows very distinct streaking on the chest (Kieser & Tree 1981). Curlew Sandpipers also have a similar call to Pectorals. It is suggested that observers faced with a choice between these two species concentrate on the upperparts (Curlew always lack



Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*, juvenile, Cornwall, September 1976.

Plate 28

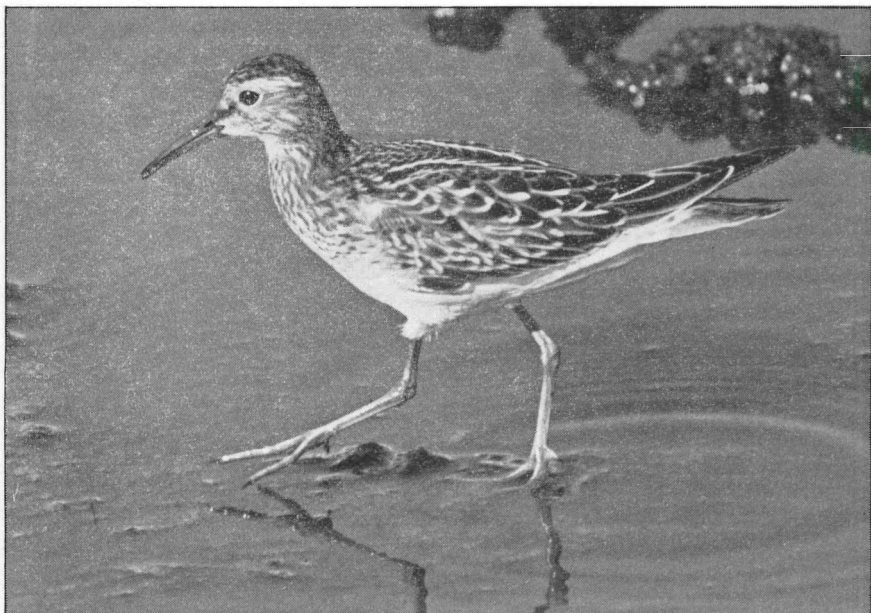
Photo: © J. B. & S. Bottomley



Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, juvenile female, Anglesey, August 1977.

Plate 29

Photo: R. J. Chandler



Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*, juvenile, Cornwall, September 1967.

Plate 30

Photo: © J. B. & S. Bottomley



Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*, in flight, showing unusually distinct wingbar.

Plate 31

Photo: T. Bond



Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*, juvenile, Cornwall, October 1974.

Plate 32

Photo: © J. B. & S. Bottomley



Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*, Durban, October 1973.

Plate 33

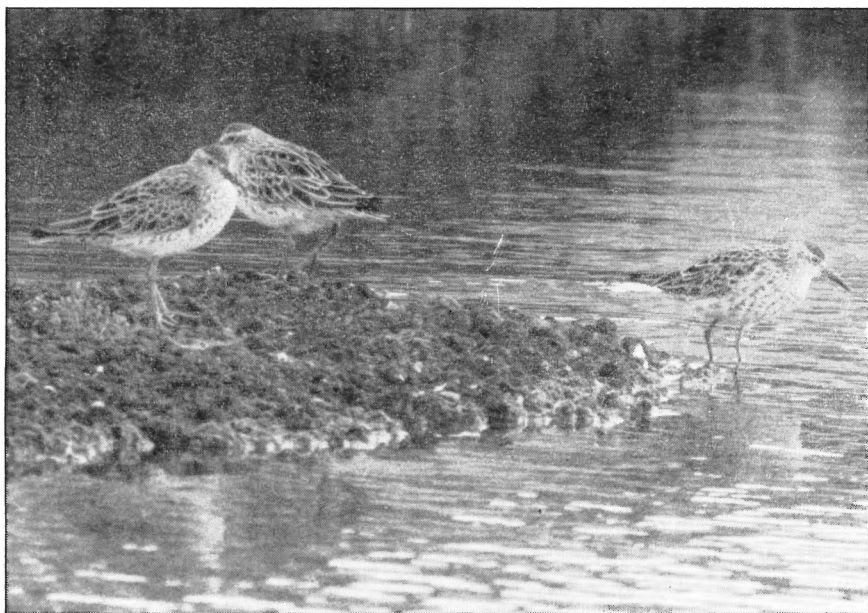
Photo: Gerry Nicholls



Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*, adult, Howick, Natal, December 1973.
Plate 34 Photo: Gerry Nicholls



Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, juvenile, Kent, September 1979.
Plate 35 Photo: R. J. Chandler



Sharp-tailed Sandpipers *Calidris acuminata*, adult, Melbourne.

Plate 36

Photo: Peder Weibull



**Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata*, adult winter plumage, Melbourne,
winter 1972.**

Plate 37

Photo: P. Klapste

V-lines), degree of definition of the bib (never very crisp in Curlew Sandpipers) and of course the rump pattern in flight.

Ruff *P. pugnax*

Juvenile Pectoral Sandpipers often resemble juvenile Reeve, which are only slightly larger than the former birds and which often show distinct V-shaped lines on their backs. The rather plain-faced Reeve however, always lacks the distinctive Pectoral Sandpiper facial pattern. A feature to look for is the absence of the distinct dark line extending from the base of the bill to the eye which is so characteristic of Pectoral. Another characteristic Pectoral feature which Ruff lack is the neatly demarcated bib.

Pectoral Sandpiper in Australia

The first record of Pectoral Sandpiper for Australia was a specimen collected by J. Carter at Albany, Western Australia, in 1910. Not until 1936 however, was this incorrectly labelled specimen recognised as a Pectoral Sandpiper and not a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. The second specimen was taken by W. B. Hitchcock on 18 January 1952 from Geelong in southern Victoria (Amiet 1957). Since that time the bird has been recorded in all Australian states and may now be considered a rare but regular spring and summer visitor to Australia. One of us (F.T.H.S.) has noted 450 individuals since 1962 mostly in southern Victoria. It has been found that their main time of arrival in this area has been during the second half of November of each year. Although the majority of birds leave by the end of March, some individuals have been seen as late as the first week of May.

Wherever they occur these birds mix freely with Sharp-tails and Curlew Sandpipers on natural marshes, commercial salt fields and large sewage farms, and their coexistence with the latter two species may make identification extremely tricky, to say the least.

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Corrigendum

A couple of errors inadvertently occurred in my manuscript for the article 'Birds of the City of Wagga Wagga, New South Wales' which appeared in the Australian Bird Watcher volume 9 no. 4 December 1981 pp. 110-123.

First, the entries for the Rufous and Brown Songlarks on p. 120 were reversed; second, the White-fronted Chat was omitted from the annotated bird list p. 121.

The correct and modified entries are:

Rufous Songlark

Common in summer about crops and grassland; also in bush where small grassy open patches are found.

Brown Songlark

Common in summer in rural parts, especially about crops.

White-fronted Chat

Common to rare in rural parts according to season; mainly in summer. Most frequently found in hilly grazing country east of Livingstone State Forest.

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