

## COMMON SANDPIPER IN NORTHLAND

By A. T. EDGAR

---

A Common Sandpiper (*Tringa hypoleucos*) visited a shellbank on the southern shore of Kerikeri Inlet on 20/3/69. The shellbank is a high tide roost, and when the sandpiper was first noticed about 1½ hours after high tide Pied Stilts, New Zealand Dotterel and Caspian Terns were also present — the terns in small parties on the outer edge of the shellbank near the tideline, dotterels resting on the dry shell, stilts scattered on the tideline, shellbank and around pools of brackish water. The sandpiper did not associate with the other waders but moved among them as it fed round the rim of the pools, on the edges of a small runnel between pools and along the edge of the tide. At one time it paused for a few minutes to preen on a mound of dry shell. It was under observation by me in good light, using x 10 binoculars at ranges of from 40 to 20 yards, for about an hour. It did not appear at all shy and even closer observation would probably have been possible but for the presence of the stilts. Eventually something disturbed the stilts and terns; the sandpiper rose when they flew, and did not return to the shellbank. The following is a summary of my field notes.

Size, about that of a Banded Dotterel, but the sandpiper is a slim graceful bird with rather a small head; bill straight, rather fine, about one inch long, dark brown with a suggestion of lighter colour at the base of the lower mandible. Tarsus about the same length as bill, greenish grey; iris brown. Upper parts olive brown, edges of quills on the closed wing darker brown and primary coverts slightly browner than the rest of the upper surface. A whitish line over the eye; dark eye stripe. Ear coverts, sides of face and neck and sides of breast pale greyish brown, the brown on the sides of the breast extending to just below the angle of the wing, but separated from it by a narrow vertical white line. Rest of underparts white. A broad conspicuous white wing bar shows in flight, when the centre of rump and tail are seen to be brown, with white edges to the rump and outer tail feathers white, lightly barred. Flight quite distinctive; low over the water, rapid shallow wing beats alternating with short glides during which the wings are held motionless in a bowed position. Food was obtained by picking, not probing. The bird fed along the edge, just in the water or just above it, progressing with an active walk which sometimes quickened to a run. Frequent head bobbing, and continual wagtail-like up and down movement of the tail. When at rest it did not adopt an erect stance. The body was held at a slight angle to the horizontal so that the tip of the tail was about the same level as the head.

This appears to be the second record of a Common Sandpiper in New Zealand. The first suspected sighting was near New Plymouth in October 1964 (*Notornis* XII, 107-8). Young birds and adults of the Spotted Sandpiper (*A. macularia*) in winter are said to be indistinguishable from *T. hypoleucos* in the field, but *A. macularia* breeds

in North America and in winter it is stated to range southwards to areas east of the Andes, with stragglers reaching Europe. *T. hypoleucos* is a palaearctic breeder, wintering birds on our side of the globe ranging south through S.E. Asia to Australia. In Malaya, where I lived for many years, it was a familiar migrant, arriving about August and last birds leaving about April/May. The call is a high-pitched "twee-dee-dee," uttered when the bird takes wing. I heard no call from the Kerikeri bird — the sound may have been lost in the clamour from terns and stilts as they rose from the shellbank.

The line of white between the angle of the wing and the brown patch on the side of the upper breast may be a variable field character. It is not specifically mentioned or illustrated in the Handbook of British Birds (Witherby) or mentioned in Birds of Western Australia (Serventy and Whittell) but is shown in the illustrations facing page 119 of Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe (Peterson, Mountfort and Hollom) and on page 21 of Field Guide to the Waders (Condon and McGill, 1965). A Guide to the Birds of Ceylon (G. M. Henry, 1955) mentions it as a good recognition character in the field.

The habit of frequently moving its tail up and down (as distinct from mere "bobbing") is said to be shared by the Spotted Sandpiper and by the Green and Wood Sandpipers, both of which have a white rump; the Wood Sandpiper reaches Australia and the Green Sandpiper comes as far south as Borneo.

As further examples of the Common Sandpiper may turn up in New Zealand, a note on its habits in Malaya may be useful. It is commonly found on the banks and beds of clear running streams in the lowlands, but also up to 4000 ft. a.s.l. Less frequently but quite often around mining pools, on rice fields, on mudflats and on the sea shore. On the coast it seems to have a preference for stretches which include rocks as well as sandy beaches, and for the edges of stream mouths and lagoons. Birds frequently perch on stones in rivers and rocks on the coast, sometimes on snags, fallen tree trunks, jetties and boats. Food is normally obtained by picking along the water edge; I once saw a bird jump upwards and pirouette in the air as if in pursuit of a flying insect. Most books emphasise the solitary nature of the species outside its breeding season and state that it does not flock, though several birds may at times be seen together. In Britain, Witherby mentions as exceptional a compact flock of 20 in April and 30-40 seen together in August. In Malaya, from the time of its arrival about August until the end of the year it is usually seen in ones and twos, but parties of 5-6 or even more may be seen flying up or down a river, particularly in the evening. On an unfrequented stretch of coastline in late December I found 18 together in the early morning on a sandspit by a lagoon; during the day they scattered in ones and twos along several miles of coast and at dusk a party of c. 30 had collected on some rocks further along the beach.