

**The Status and Occurrence of Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*) in British Columbia.**  
**By Rick Toochin.**

**Introduction and Distribution**

The Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*) is an elegant species of shorebird that breeds from Taymyr Peninsula in the central Russian Arctic, east along the shorelines of the Arctic Ocean to the coastline of the Chukotka Peninsula in the Russian Far East and has bred in Alaska at Barrow, Oliktok Point and Deadhorse (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Paulson 2005, O'Brien *et al.* 2006, West 2008, Brazil 2009). This species is highly migratory with the entire breeding population moving south over a large area of both Europe and Asia to spend the winter from Sub-Saharan Africa, east through coastal regions of India, into Bangladesh, Burma, throughout Southeast Asia and south into Australia and New Zealand (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Paulson 2005, O'Brien *et al.* 2006, Brazil 2009). Small groups of birds are also known to winter in Israel, Iraq and occasionally in Western Europe (O'Brien *et al.* 2006). In North America, the Curlew Sandpiper is a regular vagrant along the Atlantic coast with scattered records for the interior states and Provinces (O'Brien *et al.* 2006). Along the west coast, the Curlew Sandpiper is a rare species in Alaska where it is considered a casual migrant in the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea regions as well as the northern regions of the state (West 2008). The Curlew Sandpiper is ever rare in the southeastern regions of the state and is considered accidental in the southern Panhandle region of Alaska (West 2008.) South of Alaska, the Curlew Sandpiper is a rare bird with California having only thirty-three accepted records (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). There are only sixteen accepted records for Oregon, and Washington has only ten accepted records (Wahl *et al.* 2005, OFO 2012, WBRC 2012). Birds have been found both along the coastline and inland down the west coast of North America (Roberson 1980). In British Columbia, the Curlew Sandpiper is an accidental species that is rarely reported with the first record since September 1993, occurring in September 2013, showing how infrequently this Siberian gem is encountered in the Province (Toochin *et al.* 2013).

**Identification and Similar Species**

Identification of the Curlew Sandpiper is covered in all standard North American field guides. In adult breeding plumage, this species is one of the most spectacular looking sandpipers in the *Calidris* family of shorebirds (Roberson 1980). In overall size and shape, Curlew Sandpipers are a slender to medium to large sized sandpiper (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Adults in breeding plumage are rusty-red on the head with dark streaks on the crown and variable white at the base of the bill (Brazil 2009). The eyes are black (Brazil 2009). The bill is black and is long and decurved with a fine-tip and evenly decurved throughout its length (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The neck down to the breast and belly are a rich rusty-red colour with dark streaks on the lower ventral area and flanks (Brazil 2009). The undertail and ventral area are

white and have fine black streaks (Brazil 2009). The legs are long in length and black in colour (Brazil 2009). The mantle area is a combination of black feathers that have rusty edges and white tips (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The wing coverts and tertail feathers lack colour and are a plain gray-brown colour (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The bright breeding plumage of adult birds is only held briefly during the high breeding season of June (Hayman *et al.* 1986). Adult Curlew Sandpipers seen in migration periods such as April through May and late July into August often have less red on the face and head (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). This gives the bird a molted red and white look as the paler feathers representing winter-plumaged feathers either being replaced by breeding plumaged feathers in the spring or are losing breeding plumage feathers by winter plumaged feathers in the fall (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). In flight all birds show a bold white stripe in the secondaries and a pure white rump and gray tail (Brazil 2009). Adults in winter plumage are very pale looking with birds having a gray-coloured crown and a pale gray face with a bold white eye stripe that splits over the eye and runs up the forehead slightly (Brazil 2009, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). From the base of the black bill to the eye is a distinct dark line (Brazil 2009). The back and wings are plain gray (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Paulson 2005). The throat and breast and belly are very white (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The legs are black (Brazil 2009). Juvenile plumage is very distinct with birds having a bold eye-stripe that is split over the eye and runs up the forehead slightly. There is a dark line that runs from the base of the bill to the eye. (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The face, neck and upper breast have a distinct peach wash (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The back and wings have a scaly edge pattern that lacks any V patterns (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Streaking on the underparts is confined to the sides of the neck and uppermost breast area with the lower sides and flanks white and unstreaked (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The legs are black (Brazil 2009). The Curlew Sandpiper often likes to feed in shallow standing water up to its knees, but can also be found feeding on open mudflats (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The calls of the Curlew Sandpiper are a “chirrup” or “kururip” which is low-pitched and coarse sounding (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009).

The most similar looking species to the Curlew Sandpiper is the Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) in winter plumage (Hayman *et al.* 1986). The Dunlin has a decurved bill but it is overall straighter, thicker throughout with a straighter tip (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The Dunlin is much smaller and has short legs in relation to the Curlew Sandpiper (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Brazil 2009). In flight the Dunlin has a dark rump and a black tail (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The call notes of the Dunlin are buzzing rolling “chrrreet” (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009).

Another species that can be confused for the Curlew Sandpiper is the juvenile-plumaged Stilt Sandpiper (*Calidris himantopus*) (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Brazil 2009). Both species share a long decurved bill, but Stilt Sandpiper doesn't have a split eye-stripe over the eye and has rusty ear coverts (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The juvenile Stilt Sandpiper has an extensive neck and breast streaks and greenish-coloured legs (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Be aware that Stilt Sandpiper has a white rump which is easily visible in flight (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The Stilt Sandpiper also like to feed in standing water up to its knees like the Curlew Sandpiper, and both species can, on migration, use similar habitats to feed (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The Stilt Sandpiper gives a "kirrr" call that is similar to the Curlew Sandpiper, but Stilt Sandpiper also gives a whistled "whu" and a husky sounding "toof" call (Brazil 2009).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Curlew Sandpiper is an extremely rare and infrequent visitor anywhere in British Columbia. There are only eleven records for the Province with records split into four records of adults and seven records of juvenile birds, with the adults all occurring in July and the juveniles all occurring in September (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please See Table 1). There are more records from Oregon and California, likely reflecting the more extensive coverage given coastal regions by observers in both States (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, OFO 2012). The pattern of occurrence remains the same as British Columbia with birds appearing from July to September but there are additional observations with records occurring from October to December (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, OFO 2012). Records of Curlew Sandpiper in November and December are intriguing and open up the possibility for British Columbia observers to have a chance to find a winter record of this species. Given the scant coverage of winter shorebirds in places like Roberts Bank and Boundary Bay, a winter record could be possible in the future. Washington has the same fall pattern as British Columbia, Oregon and California with records occurring from July to September (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). California has a few spring records that span from late April through mid-May from various parts of the State (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). What is interesting is that Washington is the only state, in the Pacific Northwest, to have two spring records from the month of May (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). Like the Little Stint and Red-necked Stint that have spring Provincial records, the Curlew Sandpiper might well be found one day during spring migration in British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2013). The spring Washington records are from both the coast and the interior which is very interesting (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). Given the massive numbers of shorebirds that come through the Fraser River Delta region this species is very likely to found there again in the future and explains why the bulk of British Columbia's records are from the Vancouver area (Campbell *et al.* 1990). With more coverage, luck and identification knowledge, and given that this species can be found

either along the coast or at inland shorebird hotspots, the Curlew Sandpiper is a species that can turn up anywhere in the Province and should be watched for every year by keen observers.



Figure 1, 2, 3 & 4: Curlew Sandpiper juvenile at Sandspit, Queen Charlotte Islands on September 28, 2013. Photos © Andrew Keaveney.

**Table 1: British Columbia Records of Curlew Sandpiper:**

- 1.(1) adult male breeding plumage July 31, 1936: Allan Brooks (specimen: MVZ 101094) 19 km east of Masset (Brooks 1937)
- 2.(1) adult breeding plumage July 30-31, 1977: Bruce A. MacDonald, Ed Sing, mobs (RBCM Photo 491) Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (MacDonald 1978, Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 3.(1) adult breeding plumage July 11, 1981: Jenny Hards, Mary Narod: Kye Bay (Harrington-Tweit *et al.* 1981, Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 4.(1) adult breeding plumage July 14-24, 1981: Vic Goodwill, mobs (RBCM Photo 643) Witty's Lagoon (Harrington-Tweit *et al.* 1981, Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 5.(1) juvenile August 31- September 1, 1981: WCW, mobs: Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Weber 1982, Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 6.(1) juvenile September 17, 1983: Dave Aldcroft, mobs: Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Campbell *et al.* 1990)

- 7.(1) juvenile September 4, 1984: Richard J. Cannings, mobs: Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 8.(1) juvenile September 20, 1987: James Steele: Long Beach, Pacific Rim National Park south of Tofino (Mattocks 1988, Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 9.(1) juvenile September 2, 1990: Ian McLaren (photo) Chesterman's Beach, south of Tofino (Siddle 1991, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 10.(1) juvenile September 15-28, 1993: Mike Toochin, MW, ST, mobs (photo) Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Davidson 1994, Dorsey 1996, Toochin 2012a)
- 11.(1) juvenile September 28, 2013: Andrew Keaveney (photo) Sandspit, Queen Charlotte Islands (A. Keaveney Pers. Comm.)

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