

A Little Stint (*calidris minuta*) found in Boundary Bay, Delta: First Photographed juvenile record for British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin

Introduction and Distribution

The Little Stint (*calidris minuta*) is an old world shorebird species that breeds from Northwestern Norway across the central regions of Arctic Russia to central eastern Siberia on the Yana River Delta (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Rossair *et al.* 1995). They mostly migrate to winter in Africa with a small percentage of the population wintering from Bangladesh east around Coastal India to the Red Sea (Hayman *et al.* 1986). There are a number of areas where Little Stints are known to winter throughout the Mediterranean and some even stay the winter in Great Britain (Chandler 1989, Jonsson 1992, Haymen *et al.* 1986). This species is slowly increasing as a vagrant in both the western and eastern coasts of North America as our understanding of the timing of Little Stint migration has become much clearer. It also helps that our identification knowledge has increased on how to identify sandpiper plumages. While adult Little Stint is fairly straight forward to identify, juveniles require more technical knowledge and experience to identify. On September 14, 2005 while watching shorebirds near 104th Street in Boundary Bay, Delta, I encountered a juvenile Little Stint. I immediately recognized this bird as I have found a couple of juvenile birds before including a bird along Boundary Bay Dyke just east of 96th St., September 11, 2004 (Toochin 2012a) and another bird that was seen and confirmed by many observers at Iona Island between October 5-8, 1999 (Toochin 2012a). Unlike the previous two juvenile records this individual was photo documented with many digital pictures.

Identification and Similar Species

All migrating flocks of Western Sandpipers should be scrutinized for possible Stints throughout coastal British Columbia. In the interior of the Province the same scrutiny should be given to Semipalmated Sandpiper flocks. A juvenile Little Stint stands out by its smaller size, round body and head shape and dramatic plumage pattern. The following is a description of the Boundary Bay bird but is useful for an observer to help distinguish any potentially encountered juvenile Little Stint.

The top of the crown was very rusty with fine streaks. The color stopped dramatically due to the gray nape. The nape and the neck were gray this separated the rusty crown from the rusty collar. From the base of the bill to the eye was a thin line. The supercilium is different looking as it is split along the forehead. The white line went from the base of the bill up the forehead as a thin line. The remainder of the supercilium went over the eye. The split effect of the supercilium is dramatic and very obvious in both the binoculars and the telescope. It gives the bird a whitish forehead look. The bird had a light cheek patch but isn't dark in color, it is light.

The throat of this bird was white in color. The buffy colored collar is one of the markings that will attract an observer to a potential juvenile Little Stint. There is a sharp contrast from the gray upper neck and nape to the buffy-rusty collar that appears to go completely around the lower neck area. This rust had light black spots in it. To the best of my knowledge the contrast of the gray upper neck and rusty collar are one of several markings that are diagnostic for Little Stint. This also is apparent in images of the Boundary Bay bird. The belly, breast, flanks and ventral area of the bird looked all white. The feet are black in color. In photographs where the foot is raised there are definitely no webs between the toes. This mark is hard to view when the bird is sitting in mud but can be seen when the bird raises it foot or is sitting on dry dirt. It is best to take photographs of spread feet to definitively tell if a suspected juvenile Stint is indeed a Stint. This field mark is very difficult to see in the field and caution should be given to observers that do not have photographs of the spread feet. The mantle on a juvenile Little Stint is dramatic and has many obvious features that stand out. This is combination with the buffy neck collar help an observer focus in on the markings of the mantle. These important mantle markings include the three white mantle lines that ran into one and continued down the back to where the scapulars started. This is an important mark for identifying the bird as a Little Stint. The rest of the mantle has rusty lines, which were made up of rusty fringed feathers that had black centers. This gave the back a beautiful colorful look. The upper scapulars also are heavily patterned. It gives the observer the illusion of looking like a red line when looking at the bird. The first row of feathers are the most colorful having bright rusty fringes and big black centers to the feathers. This row ran parallel to the mantle lines. The second row of feathers was also interesting looking. They have large black centers but with a distinct white edge along the lower edge of each feather. These feathers gave the illusion of a white line due to the pale edges of each feather. These feathers had more oval shaped black centers which were large in shape. What looked different was the amount of pale buff there was to the outer edges that when combined at a distance made this area look pale overall. The sides of these feathers looked buffy and the actual tips were white. The center of each feather was black. These were oval in shape with the base looking gray. The fringe on the outer edge was rich rust with the tip of each feather being white and the black cutting across the outer tip. These feathers in combination with the tertials gave the bird a dark and rusty edged look. The centers of these feathers to me looked softer in tone than the centers of the Upper Scapulars. In color these looked grayer centered with buffy-pale fringes and white at the tips of each feather broken by the darker center making a line across the tip of each feather. Along the edge of the medium and greater coverts was a clear white line that was visible to everyone. In the centers of each elongated feather started as pale grayish then merged into black that was bordered by a thick rusty fringe. This looked quite dramatic. In length these feathers were not in overall shape attenuated or elongated as in a Red-necked Stint. These were black and short looking projecting out to the tail but not past. This short look helped give the bird an overall round 'ball'

shape. Being considerably smaller to the Western Sandpiper also further enhanced this effect. In flight a vertical black line that ran through the center of the rump. This line helped separate the white sides of the rump. I didn't concentrate on the color of the tail. It did look short in its general shape. I heard this bird a few times. It gave a Sanderling or Red Phalarope like 'tit' tit' call. It was very short and sharp sounding to me.

In flight the bird looked much smaller to the Western Sandpipers and almost Least Sandpiper sized. The wing beats of the Little Stint were more rapid to the Western Sandpipers when directly viewed in a same flock. The smallness of the bird was also apparent when it was on the mudflats sitting near the Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers. In general a Little Stint is only a little larger in size to a Least Sandpipers.

Whenever encountering any bird believed to be a juvenile Stint it is vital to rule out the more common species of shorebirds that occur in the region. In coastal British Columbia Semipalmated Sandpiper has the greatest potential to be misidentified as juveniles are variable and can look incredibly similar to a juvenile Red-necked or Little Stint. Semipalmated Sandpiper juveniles can be very bright in late July through August into the first week of September. Birds encountered later in the fall are normally duller and should be separated easier to any potential Stints. Brighter birds must be carefully studied as they can show a buffy collar but shown some important differences in shape and plumage. Bright juvenile Semipalmated Sandpipers have a distinctive looking coarsely marked because they have dark anchor shaped lower scapular feathers that lack the large black centered feathers and thick white edges found on juvenile Little Stints. The mantle stripes can be variable on juvenile Semipalmated Sandpipers giving some individual birds bright white lines but they are not as clean or go as far down the back as juvenile Little Stint. The double V effect of the white lines on the mantle and the white edges found on the lower scapulars of a juvenile Little Stint is obvious and dramatic. This lower scapular white line is lacking in juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper. Juvenile Semipalmated Sandpipers after August and early September are generally duller birds that have a dark ear patch and gray tertial feathers. The bill is long but usually thick based and stout looking which is different looking to the long thin needle-like bill of a Little Stint.

A juvenile Red-necked Stint has a different elongated body shape to the very round ball-like shape of the Little Stint. The steep forehead, thicker straight bill is different but there can be hard to see with a lone bird. The collar of the juvenile Red-necked Stint is gray with fine thin dark spots. The juvenile Red-necked Stint like Semipalmated Sandpiper juveniles can vary in brightness but they lack color on the tertials and greater secondary coverts have grayer centers to the feathers and the entire wing looks gray lacking color or contrast. The crown is a softer,

lighter rusty color and there is less contrast from the separation of the nape and mantle. As with any interesting sandpiper, photographs often help solve any problem birds.

Occurrence and Documentation

Like other species of Stints that have been recorded in both British Columbia and North America the timing of records is closely tied to the peak occurrence of shorebird migration. The Little Stint migrates through Europe and east through Far Eastern Asia (Iliff *et al.* 2004). For adult Little Stints Fall migration commences in July and peaks in August and lasting through till November with spring migration for adults starting in April and peaking in May and lasting into early June. (Iliff *et al.* 2004) Juvenile Little Stints start their migration in the fall in August which is later than adult birds, and this peaks in September and can last till November. (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Iliff *et al.* 2004). The difficulty in identification of stints means observers have to be close and have good views of flocks of peeps in order to distinguish any Stint. Records of adult Little Stint like its close relative the Red-necked Stint has mostly been recorded along the west coast of North America in the early part of the fall migration as they are much easier to pick out of migrating flocks of peeps in breeding plumage. The few records there are along the west coast of North America of juvenile Little Stints mostly come from the last half the fall migration in September into October (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, OFO 2012, Toochin *et al.* 2013). It should be noted that after mid-September brilliant juvenile plumaged Semipalmated Sandpipers are less likely to be found making any brilliant colored juvenile peep stand out more. These birds must be carefully scrutinized as it is highly likely that a juvenile Little Stint could be involved. Most records of Little Stint in British Columbia come from the shorebird mecca Iona Island (Toochin 2012d). This is because at high tide the Iona Sewage Ponds allow observers prolonged and close up viewing of small shorebirds (Toochin 1995). It is highly likely the Boundary Bay, Brunswick Point and the Roberts Bank area gets the odd Little Stint more than the current records indicate. Unfortunately many of these areas are difficult to access or in the case of Boundary Bay is a huge area that is hard to cover fully on any given day. It also the case that in places like Boundary Bay the rising or falling tides make small migrating flocks of peeps constantly on the move. This makes it difficult to get a prolonged view of suspected juvenile Little Stint and relocation of them very unlikely. To date there have been only 4 confirmed juvenile Little Stints for British Columbia (Toochin 2012a, Toochin *et al.* 2013). The species has increased slowly but regularly along the west coast of North America in the past 20 years. California has 7 accepted records that include 2 records of adult Little Stints and 5 records of juvenile birds (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Oregon has 4 accepted records involving 2 records of adult Little Stints with 2 accepted records of juvenile birds (OFO 2012). Washington has 1 accepted record of an adult in breeding plumage photographed and it comes from the interior of the state at the Yakima River mouth (WBRC 2012) There is a confirmed photographic record of a juvenile Little Stint from Baja Mexico (Iliff *et al.* 2004). With the introduction of digital cameras and digi-scoping rare bird

records now everyone, not just professional photographers can get record shots of rare birds. It is very likely that future records of juvenile Little Stint will be photo documented making confirmation that much easier. With further scrutiny of Iona Island, Boundary, Grice Bay, Sandspit and other shorebird hot spots in British Columbia it is highly likely this species will be found again as both adult and juvenile birds. Little Stints have been recorded in the interior of North America so hot shorebird spots in the interior of British Columbia should be on the lookout for this species. There are a few good shorebird areas in the British Columbia interior but the habitat and incredible numbers of shorebirds found in the Salmon Arm area in the fall make this area a prime place to find an adult or juvenile Little Stint. With further coverage and ever increasing knowledge it seems highly likely that more juvenile Little Stints will be found in British Columbia in the future.

The images below were taken over several days in Boundary Bay in the area east of the foot of 96th Street. The camera used was a first generation digi-elf and the quality of the images is not of professional quality. These images do however fully show a juvenile Little Stint and capture both the correct field marks and structure of a juvenile Little Stint. Since this bird was found there has been an additional sighting of a juvenile Little Stint at the San Juan River Estuary at Port Renfrew on Vancouver Island on August 30-31, 2012 and was seen by a few people (Toochin 2012b). It seems highly likely that this age of Little Stint will reoccur again in British Columbia.



Figures 1 & 2: First photo documented Little Stint for British Columbia at Boundary Bay on September 14, 2005. Photos © Rick Toochin [These three Pictures show rusty crown, gray nape, buffy collar, white forehead, split supercilium, round body shape, bold white mantle and scapular lines and small thin bill]



Figures 3: Shows the mantle and scapular stripes of the juvenile Little Stint at Boundary Bay on September 20, 2005 (left). Figure 4: Shows the round ball-like body shape and buffy collar of the juvenile Little Stint [bird on right side]. Both photos © Rick Toochin.



Figures 5 & 6: Shows the smaller, rounder body shape from the side and small thin bill of the Little Stint at Boundary Bay on September 20, 2005 (left) and on September 21, 2005 (right). Photos © Rick Toochin.

Table 1: British Columbia Records of Little Stint:

- 1.(1) adult breeding plumage July 21, 1983: John Ireland, Brian M. Kautesk, Mike Force, many observers (FN) Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Toochin 2012a)
- 2.(1) adult breeding plumage July 10, 1988: Brian M. Kautesk, many observers (FN) foot of 112th St., Boundary Bay, Delta (Toochin 2012a)
- 3.(1) adult breeding plumage July 17, 1988: Mike and Sharon Toochin (photo) Esquimalt Lagoon, Colwood (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 4.(1) adult faded breeding plumage August 18, 1991: Val George (FN) Riley Creek, Graham Island, QCI (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.)
- 5.(1) adult breeding plumage June 2-4, 1992: Dick Veit, Rick Toochin, many observers (photo) Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Toochin 2012a)

- 6.(1) adult molting into winter plumage September 4, 1995: Dick Veit, Rick Toochin, many observers (FN) Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Toochin 2012a)
- 7.(1) adult breeding plumage July 12, 1998: Dan G. Derbyshire, Warwick Redway (FN) RPBO, Metchosin (Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 8.(1) juvenile October 5-8, 1999: Rick Toochin, Dale Jensen, Stan Olson, many observers (FN) Iona Island South Jetty Tip and Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Toochin 2012a)
- 9.(1) adult breeding plumage July 27-28, 2003: Mike Toochin, Sharon Toochin, many observers (photo) Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Toochin 2012a)
- 10.(1) juvenile September 11, 2004: Rick Toochin (FN) just east of 96th Street, Boundary Bay (Toochin 2012a)
- 12.(1) 2nd summer August 5, 2005: Rick Toochin (photo) well off 88th Street, Boundary Bay, Delta (Toochin 2012a)
- 13.(1) juvenile September 14-October 7, 2005: Rick Toochin, many observers (photo) just east of 96th Street, Boundary Bay, Delta (Toochin 2012a)
- 14.(1) adult breeding plumage July 19-22, 2006: Tom Plath, many observers (photo) Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Toochin 2012a)
- 15.(1) adult breeding plumage August 2, 2008: Rick Toochin (photo) San Juan River Estuary, Port Renfrew (Toochin 2012b)
- 16.(1) juvenile August 30-31, 2008: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland, many observers (FN) San Juan River Estuary, Port Renfrew (Toochin 2012b)
- 17.(1) adult breeding plumage May 4, 2011: Rick Toochin (photo) Chilliwack Central Road, Chilliwack (Toochin 2012c)
- 18.(1) adult breeding plumage July 18, 2011: Peter Hamel, Margo Hearne (FN) Sandspit, QCI (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.)

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