



Take a Second Look
42 Baker Avenue
Lexington, MA 02173

Next TASL Harbor Censuses:
November 22 • January 24 • February 21 • March 21

The Purple Sandpiper

A long-eared black dog loped down to the shore by the jetty which extends out from "Simpson's Boatyard" in Revere. To her right was a low mound of stones, dark against the white sand of the beach. On its surface were about 200 Purple Sandpipers. Apparently the dog could not see them. Their backs were dark; they were round in shape; they were close in size to the stones among which they were feeding hurriedly.

The birds rose into the air in a tight flock, banked quickly right, out over the water, then quickly left, towards the jetty; first black; then white as they showed their undersides and the linings of their wings; again black, then white; then black, then white; first in close ranks over the water; than in a long file over the sand where they lit.

The dog could now see the birds clearly against the white background of the sand. She charged. The birds rose again, banked right, and returned to the mound of stones. The dog looked this way, then that; first north, then south. *Calidris* ("a grey speckled sandpiper") *maritima* ("of the sea") was again lost to her sight (Translation from Choate, 1973).

An hour before the dog appeared, the birds had been feeding out at the end of the jetty, dispersing until they had travelled several yards from each other; then regrouping in air; then landing and dispersing again among the rocks; moving a hundred feet closer to shore each time, as the tide receded.

The genus *Calidris* includes many other sandpipers common in our area: Sanderling (*C. alba*); Semipalmated (*C. pusillus*); White-rumped (*C. fuscicollis*); and Least (*C. minutilla*).

The Least Sandpiper is most southerly of the genus in its year-round range; the Purple Sandpiper is the most northerly (Matthiessen, 1973). The Least ranges from Arctic Canada in the breeding season, south to central Brazil; the Purple from arctic Canada to Florida (Terres, 1980). In Jacksonville, Florida, the bird is regularly recorded in small numbers on Christmas Counts (*American Birds*).

In our area the Purple arrives in September and leaves in May, and is with us in greatest numbers from late fall through late spring, along coasts wherever there are stretches of wave-swept rocks which retain the Purple's food in crevices, pools, on rough surfaces, and among clinging vegetation.

The Purple flies from rock to rock as if they were stepping stones; walks with measured steps down slippery, steep slopes, then back up again; faces into high winds unmoved; seeks shelter when it must, among the rocks, to soon reappear; picks hurriedly but delicately at surfaces just washed by waves or freshly uncovered by the falling tide.

The Purple Sandpiper flies along steep slopes like a Bank Swallow; flies among breaking waves like a petrel,

moves in flocks like sparrows across flat stretches of rock; swims in small pools like phalaropes; strides across them like yellowlegs; and probes into the sand like dowitchers.

With such a repertoire of skills, why occupy so narrow a niche? Why leave our winter beaches to the Sanderlings, when waves cover expanses of sand with great abundance of food?

Perhaps because a bird so capable of precision in its movements can exclude all competition from its three-dimensional habitat, a terrain which may offer economies of scale. The Purple need not move far among jumbled rocks to search a surface area which the Sanderling must run far to cover on the two-dimensional beach.

Waves scatter the Sanderling's food when they break on the beach. Waves concentrate the Purple's food when they break on the rocks, leaving crustacea and larvae caught in crevices and pools.

The Purple was very rare south of Cape Ann until man began building jetties and breakwaters in the 1930's, to protect his works against the sea. Since that time, the Purple Sandpiper has been extending its range steadily southward (Pough, 1951). The bird has outdistanced some bird-guides. A pity; for many people south of New Jersey may not know to look for the annual coming of one of winter's best shows, much less that the Purple is not only a dignified but also a highly approachable bird, who will give you a close look at his elegant dark back, light underside, two-toned bill, and yellow legs.

J. H. Barton



Illustration by Ted Davis

Bibliography

- Choate, Earnest A.: *The Dictionary of American Bird Names*; Gambit, 1973.
Matthiessen, Peter: *The Windbirds*; Viking Press, 1973.
Pough, Richard H.: *Audubon Water Bird Guide*; Doubleday & Co. 1951.
Terres, John K.: *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of American Birds*; Alfred a. Knopf, 1980.
American Birds; Christmas Count issues dating back to 1971.
Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts; issues dating back to 1973.
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Summary of 1991-1992 Boston Harbor TASL Censuses

SPECIES	11/24/91	1/14/92	2/2/92	3/29/92
RED-THROATED LOON	23	3	5	2
COMMON LOON	5	1	3	3
HORNED GREBE	164	30	22	38
RED-NECKED GREBE	5		2	3
NORTHERN GANNET	1			
GREAT CORMORANT	71	23	20	19
DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT	90	65	10	26
CORMORANT (SP.)	22	2	3	
GREAT BLUE HERON	31	2		
BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON	1			1
MUTE SWAN	12	2	1	2
SNOW GOOSE	1			
BRANT	1959	875	1059	2244
CANADA GOOSE	67	337	142	111
GREEN-WINGED TEAL		1		
AMERICAN BLACK DUCK	1282	1739	1629	1014
MALLARD	117	383	133	118
NORTHERN PINTAIL	1	2		6
GREATER SCAUP	1059	314	528	129
COMMON EIDER	9497	3559	4739	3991
HARLEQUIN				1
OLDSQUAW	23			
BLACK SCOTER	14	1	1	
SURF SCOTER	8	40	7	5
WHITE-WINGED SCOTER	421	48	163	111
COMMON GOLDENEYE	618	965	1017	507
BARROW'S GOLDENEYE			2	
BUFFLEHEAD	1916	1181	1320	953
HOODED MERGANSER	15			1
COMMON MERGANSER	5			28
RED-BREASTED MERGANSER	2378	684	845	1711
NORTHERN HARRIER		1	1	
RED-TAILED HAWK	3	2	4	1
AMERICAN KESTREL	2	1		2
BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER	27			
GREATER YELLOWLEGS	2	1		
LESSER YELLOWLEGS				1
RUDDY TURNSTONE	13	1		
SANDERLING	100			
WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER	1			
PURPLE SANDPIPER	25	9	14	107
DUNLIN	313	7	36	62
LITTLE GULL	1			
COMMON BLACK-HEADED GULL	4	5	2	2
BONAPARTE'S GULL	1497	251	131	
ICELAND GULL	1	2		
BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE		2		
BLACK GUILLEMOT			3	2
SNOWY OWL	3	3	3	5
HARBOR SEAL	4	2		8
WEATHER	Cloudy, rain	Sunny	Ptly cloudy	Sunny
WIND	7-10 E	20-25 NW	10-15 NW	20-30 NW
TEMP	65F, 18C	10F, -14C	25F, -4C	40F, 5C
HI TIDE	12:30 PM	10:45 AM	10:30 AM	7:45 AM

Participants:

Nahant: Mike & Toby Gooley, Kenton Griffis, Marge Rines, Bob Stymeist

Winthrop: James Aliberti, Wayne Barron, Kate Durham, Jane Nalwalk, Pat Randall, Fay & Peter Vale

Central: Scott Bickerton, Fred Bouchard, Michael Fager, Kathy Foley, Phil Helfaer, Jim Powers, Robin Snyder, Norman Smith, Soheil Zende

Quincy: Dave Desmond, Ron Donovan, Paul FitzGerald, Kenton Griffis, Dave Lange, Bob Lohmar, Mike McInnis, Mimi Murphy, Bert Nickerson, Dave Petrie, Elizabeth Sims, Kathleen Strange, Lee Taylor, Kathleen Winkler

Hingham: Tom Aversa, Maury Hall, Dennis Oliver, Betsy Peterson, Sydney Smith, Polly Stevens

[Our apologies to anyone whose name was inadvertently left off this list.]



Illustration by Denise Braunhardt Cabral

Keep Taking those Second Looks

The 1992-93 TASL Harbor Census dates are listed on the reverse. Please mark them in your calendars. Note that the November date is the 22nd, not the 29th as incorrectly listed by South Shore Bird Club. These dates are chosen to coincide with high or incoming tide during the morning.

As always, we will start each census at 8:30 AM and go until early afternoon. We are now censusing in eight separate parties: This cuts the number of hours down for each party, as the largest areas -- Winthrop, Quincy, and Hingham/Weymouth -- are each split into two sections. But it also means we really need at least 16 volunteers per census date. Unfortunately we have been losing more volunteers than gaining. Can you drag along a friend or

two and break them in?

Please remember: this is an excellent opportunity to learn—and teach—about the common water birds of the harbor. You do not have to be an expert to participate. Each area will be led by at least one competent birder. That person will need help with navigation, driving and record-keeping. So make yourselves useful and learn something in the process.

For more information call Maury Hall (268-7571) or Soheil Zende (863-2392H, 923-0941W).

Please mail census results to Maury Hall, 849 East 3rd St. #2, South Boston, MA 02127.

TASL (Take Second Look) is organized and staffed entirely by volunteers. TASL data is compiled by Maury Hall. This newsletter is produced by Soheil Zende.