

White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis* in the United Arab Emirates: the first record for the Arabian peninsula

OSCAR CAMPBELL & DERMOT O'MAHONY

Whilst birdwatching at Al Ain water treatment plant, Abu Dhabi emirate, United Arab Emirates on 18 May 2012 at 12.30 h, we were perplexed to discover a wader with an appearance that we could not fit to any of the expected candidates. Being rather late in the migration season, only small numbers of waterbirds were present on a recently re-flooded lagoon but, despite the distance (c100 m) and a strong heat haze, this individual was immediately interesting. Conveniently, it was alongside a Little Stint *Calidris minuta*, which provided a prolonged and valuable comparison. After some consideration of plumage and, particularly, structure, we concluded that the bird showed a suite of characters that were compatible only with White-rumped Sandpiper *C. fuscicollis*. One issue was that the bird was in full breeding dress, a plumage of this species that neither of us was especially familiar with. Eventually, the bird made several short flights allowing us to see the rump and uppertail pattern and so confirm the identification. We contacted other UAE birders, many of whom saw the bird that afternoon. Huw Roberts was able to arrange access to that part of the water treatment plant closest to the bird's preferred feeding area and some important documentary images were obtained (Plates 1–3). OC returned with HR and Andrew Ward on 26 May and was able to view the bird at close range. It was not seen again after this date.

FIELD CHARACTERS AND ELIMINATION OF SIMILAR SPECIES

The key plumage features that supported the identification (eg Hayman *et al* 1987, Harris *et al* 1996) were the rather heavily and coarsely spotted breast (with this spotting extending in lines along the flanks and contrasting with the clean, unmarked white belly), a white supercilium (strongest before the eye where quite obvious when the bird tilted its head but somewhat obscured by streaking behind eye) and an obvious but rather narrow white band across the lower rump and uppertail coverts contrasting with a dark grey tail.



Plates 1 & 2. White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*, Al Ain water treatment plant, United Arab Emirates, 18 May 2012. © Huw Roberts



Plate 3. White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*, Al Ain water treatment plant, United Arab Emirates, 18 May 2012 (and two Terek Sandpipers *Xenus cinereus* and a Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*). © Huw Roberts

At medium range and/or in awkward lighting, the bird's structure and shape was actually much more distinctive than its plumage: although bill and legs scarcely appeared longer than the Little Stint's, its body was certainly much (estimated as 50%) bigger, due mainly to a deeper keel and much longer, tapered rear end: the primaries extended beyond the tail and this extension, coupled with rather flat tertials made for a very attenuated, distinctive shape. Observed from behind, the primary tips actually crossed as the feeding bird leaned forward and the rear was generally held raised high as the bird fed, mainly by pecking in very shallow water.

The bird's distinctive shape eliminates all other *Calidris* sandpipers with the exception of the closely related Baird's Sandpiper *C. bairdii*. This, however, is easily separated on plumage features as it typically exhibits a more finely streaked breast, clean flanks and a shorter supercilium, whilst in flight would show a predominately dark rump and uppertail coverts.

DISCUSSION

This record was accepted as the first for the UAE by the Emirates Bird Records Committee and constitutes the third for the OSME region; previous individuals have occurred in Turkey, in May 1996 (Browne 1997) and Israel, in April 2004 (Perlman & Meyrav 2009). White-rumped Sandpiper is a long-distance migrant, breeding in the Canadian Arctic and wintering commonly in southeastern South America, mainly from southern Brazil southwards to Tierra del Feugo and the Falklands (Cramp & Simmons 1983). As well as being an annual autumn vagrant to western Europe, it has occurred as an accidental

to South Africa and Namibia (ABC 2011), Australia and New Zealand (Pizzey & Knight 1997). Only a very small proportion (2.3% of 173 recorded in Great Britain up until 1979) came from the spring period March–June (Cramp & Simmons 1983) and this extremely low percentage (in comparison to *eg* Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*) has continued in recent decades (Wallace in Fraser & Rogers 2007). However, it has been recorded in mid summer from latitudes similar to its Nearctic breeding range (*eg* Spitsbergen and Franz-Josef Land, Cramp & Simmons 1983). A particularly interesting such record is that outlined by Grønningsaeter (2005); this involved two White-rumped Sandpipers observed (including one display-flight) in late June on Bjørnøya, a Norwegian island in the Arctic sea at 74°N. This is believed to be the first record of White-rumped Sandpiper exhibiting behaviour potentially indicative of breeding in the Palearctic. All spring and summer records may be attributable to birds that, having crossed the Atlantic in autumn, then successfully overwinter, presumably in southern Africa, before migrating north in the ‘wrong’ hemisphere in spring. The timing of the UAE record and those from Turkey and Israel fit well with this pattern, as the species is a very late migrant in North America, passing through the United States in late April–May and not arriving on the breeding grounds until early June (Hayman *et al* 1987, Cramp & Simmons 1983).

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- Oscar Campbell, *British School Al Khubairat, PO Box 4001, Abu Dhabi, UAE. ojcampbell25@yahoo.com*
- Dermot O'Mahony, *12 Sonesta, Texas Lane, Malahide, Co. Dublin, Ireland. phyllosc@gmail.com*