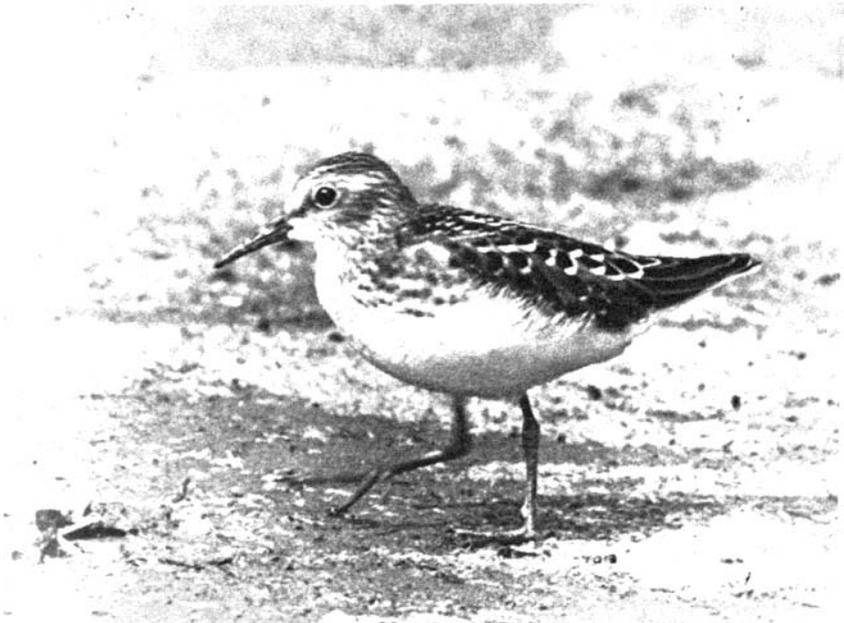


THE WESTERN SANDPIPER IN OKLAHOMA

BY JAMES R. PURDUE

The new world scolopacid known as the Western Sandpiper (*Ereunetes mauri*) breeds "on the coasts of western and northern Alaska" (Gabrielson and Lincoln, 1959, *Birds of Alaska*, p. 398); winters "on both coasts of America from Washington and North Carolina to Peru and Venezuela, including Cuba, Hispaniola, and Trinidad" (Peters, 1934, *Check-list of birds of the world*, 2: 281); and migrates "chiefly along the Pacific coast, rarely in the central interior from North Dakota and southern Ontario southward, more commonly in the southern interior (Texas, Utah), and regularly in small numbers (largely in fall) on the south Atlantic Coast . . ." (1967, *AOU Check-list of North American birds*, p. 203). In Oklahoma the species was considered a "rare transient" forty years ago (Nice, 1931,



WESTERN SANDPIPER

Male in juvenal feather photographed 25 August 1968 at Lake Eufaula, in McIntosh County, Oklahoma, by James R. Purdue.

*Birds of Oklahoma*, p. 94), but today, possibly because of extensive impounding of water, it is common to abundant in late summer and early fall, and fairly common in spring (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, p. 201).

At a shallow pond near Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, the Western Sandpiper was the third commonest of 23 species of shorebirds observed in southward migration in 1961, 1962, and 1963, but the 22nd commonest of 26 species observed in northward migration during the same period (Oring and Davis, 1966, *Wilson Bull.*, 78: 169, 170). At the Cheyenne Bottoms in Barton County, central Kansas, D. F. Parmelee, M. D. Schwilling, and H. A. Stephens have noted a similar discrepancy; in their paper on the "Charadriiform birds of Cheyenne Bottoms" they call the Western Sandpiper an "apparently irregular, uncommon transient in spring" but a "regular, abundant transient in fall" (1969, *Kansas Orn. Soc. Bull.*, 20:18).

In order to see if this differential in migration pattern held throughout Oklahoma, I compiled records, using published information dating back to 1901, data filed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range, and the personal field notes of such careful observers as J. G. Newell, L. L. Byfield, W. A. Carter, P. F. Nighswonger, J. D. Tyler, and A. F. Halloran, in addition to my own. In essence, I found (1) that the Western Sandpiper has been reported chiefly from central Oklahoma; (2) that it has not been seen in Oklahoma during the first three weeks of June; and (3) that in most parts of Oklahoma it is far commoner in late summer and early fall than in spring, a notable exception being a stretch of the Arkansas River (in Sequoyah County near the Arkansas state line) along which B. W. Beall repeatedly saw the species from 8 to 29 May 1960 — "several hundred" on 8 May; "about 50" on 27 May; 320 peeps, the "great majority" of them Western Sandpipers, on 29 May.

The temporal distribution of *Ereunetes mauri* in Oklahoma as shown in Figure 1 is based on the average number of birds seen per week by dependable

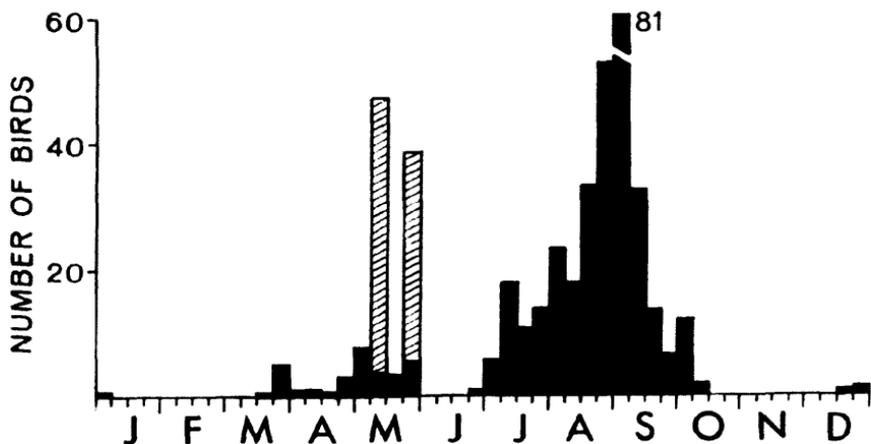


Fig. 1. Average number of Western Sandpipers seen per week in Oklahoma. The two peaks in May (indicated by shading) are probably exceptional.

observers throughout the year. The large numbers reported by Beall for May (see above) I consider exceptional; since such abundance in spring has not been reported from any other part of Oklahoma, I did not include the "8 to 29 May 1960" records in my averaging. The species passes southward through the state from late June (one seen near Moffett, Sequoyah County, by B. W. Beall on 21 June 1960; one seen and shot—female in breeding feather, UOMZ 4993—near Norman by W. M. Davis on 30 June 1961) to mid-October, with a pronounced peak in the last week of August and first week of September. Northward migration takes place from mid-March to the end of May, with a vague peak in the first week of May. During southward migration the average flock numbers 11.6 birds, a larger average than that for spring (6.7 birds).

Holmes (1966, *Condor*, 68: 27) states that in California southward moving adult Western Sandpipers arrive ahead of young birds. This is true in Oklahoma too. Southward moving adults in breeding feather or in postnuptial molt have been taken on the following dates: 30 June 1961 (female, UOMZ 4993); 11 July 1954 (male and female, UOMZ 1260, 1255); 13 July 1951 (female, UOMZ 480); 13 July 1957 (female, UOMZ 3121); 14 July 1954 (female, GMS 12155); 17 July 1963 (female, UOMZ 5252); 18 July 1964 (male and female, UOMZ 5489, 5490); 19 July 1901 (female, UOMZ old no. 3185); 19 July 1960 (two females, UOMZ 4238, 4239); 20 July 1959 (male, UOMZ 3604); and 21 July 1960 (female, UOMZ 4356). The earliest dates for young birds in juvenal feather are: 13 August 1953, male (UOMZ 795, taken at mouth of Big Mineral Creek on south shore of Lake Texoma in Grayson County, Texas); 18 August 1959 (male and female, UOMZ 3626, 3627); and 22 August 1961 (female, UOMZ 5034). Most birds that have thus far been taken in fall are molting into first winter plumage.

A few observers have seen the Western Sandpiper in winter. Along the Arkansas River, in Sequoyah County, B. W. Beall and R. D. Fox saw one bird on 20 December 1959 and two birds two weeks later (3 January 1960). In the vicinity of Oklahoma City, in central Oklahoma, D. Clark *et al.* saw the species (one bird presumably) on 10 January 1953 (1953, *Audubon Field Notes*, 7: 222), and during the last two weeks of December, 1962, J. G. Newell saw one bird repeatedly at Lake Hefner; this individual was seen during the Christmas Count (1963, *Audubon Field Notes*, 17: 236). At the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma, H. F. Miller *et al.* saw two birds on 26 December 1964 (1965, *Audubon Field Notes*, 19: 274). No Oklahoma specimen in the considerable series of Western Sandpipers (38 specimens) at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range is in complete winter feather.

The spatial distribution of *E. mauri* in Oklahoma is dependent largely on that of proper habitat — i.e., mudflats and open shores on which the birds may feed, drink, bathe, and rest. This dependence on habitat has been noted especially at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Comanche County where, according to A. F. Halloran, "shorebirds are scarce . . . except during dry years or when the lakes are drained. Only then do mudflats form and the shorebirds appear" (letter of 3 December 1968). *E. mauri* has been reported from all parts of Oklahoma, but most records are from the vicinity of Oklahoma City where J. G. Newell has been an extremely active observer, and from Cleveland County, where L. W. Oring and W. M. Davis were afield almost daily gathering data for the paper mentioned above. There are valid records for the far western Panhandle (species seen repeatedly, taken once at Boise City by G. M. Sutton);

for north-central Oklahoma (seen at Salt Plains refuge by L. L. Byfield; taken near Cherokee by J. L. Cracraft); for Tulsa (seen by Anne Reynolds *et al.*); for far eastern Oklahoma (seen in Sequoyah County by B. W. Beall); for Lake Eufaula (seen and photographed by J. R. Purdue); for southeastern and south-central Oklahoma (seen and taken in Bryan, Johnston, Murray, and Marshall counties by G. M. Sutton *et al.*); and for southwestern Oklahoma (seen at Wichita Mountains refuge by A. F. Halloran; taken in "Old Greer" County, probably along the Red River in Jackson County or Harmon County, by C. D. Bunker).

*E. mauri* is common in Oklahoma for about three and a half months in late summer and early fall, yet this fact is not reflected in the reports of most observers. One reason for this is that the Western Sandpiper may easily be confused with the Least and Semipalmated sandpipers (*Erolia minutilla* and *Ereunetes pusillus*); indeed, many Westerns may well be listed and reported as Least or Semipalmated sandpipers (or both) simply because the latter two are so widely believed to be the common small peeps of the Southern Great Plains. The three species often feed together, making direct comparison possible. This being the case, I offer the following suggestions concerning identification.

*Legs.* If the light is good, Least Sandpipers are distinguishable from the other two species at once by their greenish or yellowish legs. All Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers have dark gray legs, hence no one should expect to tell those two apart on the basis of leg-color.

*Bill.* Bill size and shape are important. In the Least Sandpiper the bill is thin, rather short, and slightly decurved. In the Western and Semipalmated it is heavier. Generally speaking, it is longer in the Western than in the Semipalmated; in both species it is longer in the female than in the male, so some female Semipalmateds are virtually as long-billed as some male Westerns. In the Semipalmated the bill is decurved very little, if at all; the same is true for the *male* Western; in most *female* Westerns, however, the bill is fairly heavy, conspicuously long, and slightly decurved.

*Plumage.* Peeps seen in late summer before the young birds start to move south, are likely to be in worn breeding feather. The wearing away of pale feather-edgings leaves some Least Sandpipers very dark above and heavily streaked on the chest, but with an overall brownish tone; the Western with some rusty above, especially on the head and shoulders, and with noticeable dark flecking on the foreneck, chest, and sides; and the Semipalmated dark gray above, with some dark streaking on the foreneck and chest. In all three species birds in juvenal feather are richly colored by comparison, but the colors are not very noticeable in the field. The juvenal Least is strongly brown above and buffy on the chest, the juvenal Semipalmated less brown above and only faintly buffy on the chest, the juvenal Western somewhat rusty on the head and scapulars and buffy on the chest. In winter all three species are gray — the Least brownish gray; the Semipalmated ashy gray; the Western ashy gray, often with a hint of rusty on the head and shoulders. The above summarization shows that at some seasons heaviness, length, and curvature of bill are all-important.

*Habitat.* As stated above, all three species often feed together on mudflats. However, the Western and Semipalmated are likely to be seen along outer shores, sometimes in mixed flocks, while the Least, in separate flocks, feeds quietly at the edges of shallow, grass-lined pools well away from the other two species.

*Behavior.* Of the three species, the Semipalmated seems to be the most quarrelsome. When feeding close together, Semipalmated Sandpipers often spar — running at one another or even lifting wings and jabbing in threat. The Western also is quarrelsome, though less so than the Semipalmated. The Least is peaceable by comparison (Sutton, personal communication). The Western is said to probe for food in deeper water than its congener, the Semipalmated, sometimes submerging its head (Robbins, Bruun, and Zim, 1966, *Guide to field identification birds of North America*, p. 124). This particular behavior I have not observed myself.

DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA, NORMAN, OKLAHOMA 73069, 18 MARCH 1969.

## GENERAL NOTES

**Winter records for the Sora Rail in Oklahoma.**—On 23 January 1969 (air temperature a little above freezing; no ice on ponds), George M. Sutton, Larry A. Pulliam and I observed a Sora Rail (*Porzana carolina*) at the west end of Grassy Lake, 6 mi. directly southeast of the village of Tom in southeastern McCurtain County, Oklahoma. Grassy Lake is one of about two dozen “cutoff” or “oxbow” lakes just north of the Red River in southern McCurtain County. The south shore of the lake is bordered by woodland, while about half of the north shore is without woods but fringed with emergent vegetation. Pulliam and I flushed the Sora from short grass along the water's edge and watched it drop into rank vegetation several yards out from shore but did not get a very good look at it. After considerable effort, the three of us managed to force the bird from its hiding place and to identify it satisfactorily as it swam slowly across a three-foot opening to another mass of rank vegetation. We clearly saw its short yellow bill.

There are, so far as I know, only three other midwinter records for the Sora in Oklahoma. On 28 December 1947, Hugh S. Davis found a freshly killed adult Sora in a steel trap along the shore of Recreation Lake in Mohawk Park, near Tulsa, Tulsa County (1948, *Audubon Field Notes*, 2: 104). On 26 December 1949, Davis saw another Sora in the same area (1950, *Audubon Field Notes*, 5: 151). On 25 December 1967, J. S. Shackford *et al.* flushed one from a dense stand of spikerush (*Eleocharis* sp.) just below the dam of a small impoundment known locally as the airfield pond near Norman, Cleveland County. The only late fall record that I know about is of a specimen shot by R. W. Harris along the Canadian River near Norman on 30 November 1965 (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, p. 162). Evidently *Porzana carolina* is to be looked for in marshy spots in winter in Oklahoma especially if the weather is mild.

I wish to thank John S. Tomer for details concerning the Tulsa County records.—William A. Carter, *Department of Biology, East Central State College, Ada, Oklahoma 74820, 11 February 1969.*

**Late spring record for Ruddy Turnstone in Oklahoma.**—At about 1800 in the evening on 6 June 1969, along the west shore of Draper Lake, near Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, Mary Avolyn Johns, Ruth Scott, and I observed a Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) on a flat spit. It was by itself. While watching it we remained in our car. Its colors, intensified as

they were by the low sun, were very bright. It seemed to be quite unafraid of us as it proceeded to turn over small rocks, sticks, and other debris methodically, searching for food. We watched it for about a quarter of an hour. The latest spring date on record for this transient shorebird in Oklahoma is 4 June (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, p. 178). We can only assume, of course, that the bird was on its way north. The earliest Oklahoma date for southward migration is 4 August (Sutton, *op. cit.*).—Grace E. Ray, *School of Journalism, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73069, 30 July 1969.*

**Knot in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.**—In late afternoon on 17 August 1968 I flushed a Knot (*Calidris canutus*) in fairly bright breeding feather from a narrow mudflat along the edge of a shallow sewage pond just east of Boise City, Cimarron County, Oklahoma. I recognized the bird from its chunky appearance, ruddy underparts, short bill, and largeness—especially as compared with the many Wilson's Phalaropes (*Steganopus tricolor*), Western Sandpipers (*Ereunetes mauri*), and Killdeers (*Charadrius vociferus*) that were feeding in the same area. The Knot did not circle with the other shorebirds and return to the mudflat, but headed westward across the strong wind, rose to a height of about a hundred feet, paused for several seconds with wings beating rapidly, drifted across wind another fifty feet or so *on set wings*, paused to hover again, and thus proceeded—in a series of glides and hoverings—until its image became dim in the dust-filled air. When last visible, it was well above ground and gliding. It may have been headed for a large alkaline pond 2 mi. southwest of Boise City.

In the far north I have observed Knots gliding and hovering in courtship flight; but never heretofore in Oklahoma have I observed a shorebird of any species leaving one feeding area for another in the manner just described. The sighting is, so far as I know, the first for the Knot in the Oklahoma Panhandle.—George M. Sutton, *Stovall Museum of Science and History, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73069, 9 September 1968.*

**An albino Barn Swallow.** — In the summer of 1968 many pairs of Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) nested in a culvert under a much-used highway about half a mile southwest of my home near the village of Willis, Marshall County, south-central Oklahoma. As young of the first brood fledged, they gathered with their parents in good-sized flocks that perched on wires or fed together over low-lying grassy areas and pastureland. The flocks were especially noticeable when the wind was high, for at such times the swallows did most of their hawking for insects in the shelter of trees lining a dirt road just south of Willis.

On 28 June I noticed that one of the swallows was pure white. The following day, Jan F. Sassaman, a student at the University of Oklahoma Biological Station, also saw the remarkable bird and told George M. Sutton, of the faculty at the Station, of it. Dr. Sutton and members of his ornithology class observed the bird closely, making certain that it was indeed a Barn Swallow rather than a Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*), a species that also nested in culverts of the vicinity.

On 30 June the white swallow was shot by a boy of the neighborhood. I persuaded the lad to present the bird to the University bird collection. The

specimen proved to be a female. Its skull was almost wholly unossified. Its bill, feet, and eyelids were pale flesh-color, its eyes pink; not a feather on it was anything but white. It was, in other words, a pure albino. It is now No. 6378 in the University's bird collection. — Richard Page, Box 15, Willis, Oklahoma 73462, 18 February 1969.

**Baltimore Oriole parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbird in Oklahoma.**—On 28 June 1968 George M. Sutton, the ten members of his ornithology class at the University of Oklahoma Biological Station, and I observed a female Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*) feeding a recently fledged Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) in the top of a large oak on the Tishomingo National Wildlife Refuge in Johnston County, south-central Oklahoma. We saw the oriole and its importunate "offspring" several times, though at considerable distance. Both birds were almost constantly on the move, though they stayed in the one tree. Most of what the oriole fed during the half-hour period of observation appeared to be rather small larvae obtained at a web high in the tree. The cowbird was the only "offspring" that received food, so far as we could ascertain. Nowhere did we see or hear a young oriole or an adult male "parent." We did not find the oriole's nest. Only occasionally did we hear a scolding note from the female oriole. Our identification of the oriole as *I. galbula* is provisional. The bird could have been a hybrid—a "cross" between a Baltimore Oriole and a Bullock's Oriole (*Icterus bullockii*). It was obviously not an Orchard Oriole (*I. spurius*).

The Baltimore Oriole is said by Friedmann (1929, *The Cowbirds*, p. 214) to be an "uncommon victim" of the Brown-headed Cowbird. Friedmann reports further: "This oriole is parasitized very infrequently by the brown-headed cowbird; only 13 actual cases have been noted and no observer has written that this bird is a common victim anywhere in its range" (Friedmann, 1963, *U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull.* 233, p. 132). In Oklahoma no one has reported finding a parasitized nest (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, pp. 547, 558). R. Crompton Tate found a heavily parasitized nest of the Bullock's Oriole near Kenton, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma, on 12 July 1911, but none of three "Baltimore" Oriole nests found by him in the same area—one in 1912, two in 1922—had been parasitized (Nice, 1931, *Birds of Oklahoma*, pp. 168-69). Dr. Sutton informs me that in Norman, Cleveland County, central Oklahoma, he has on many occasions observed adult Baltimore Orioles feeding clamorous broods about to fledge or not long out of the nest, but that he has never observed a young cowbird among the young orioles or an adult oriole caring for a young cowbird.—George A. Newman, Department of Biology, Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene, Texas 79601, 15 March 1969.

**Wintering of Rose-breasted Grosbeak in Okmulgee County, Oklahoma.**—In late November 1968 a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*) in first winter feather almost killed itself flying into a picture window of the J. V. Woods residence at 1207 West First Street in Okmulgee, Okmulgee County, east-central Oklahoma. Mr. and Mrs. Woods picked the grosbeak up, noting that its right leg had been injured—probably (though not certainly) when it flew into the glass—and that its tail feathers were full grown. Believing that the bird was dying, they laid it on a table inside

a screened porch. Presently it revived. When released, it flew off confidently, as if uninjured.

On 22 December Mr. and Mrs. Woods found in their sparrow trap a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak that they felt sure was the same individual that had struck the picture window about a month previously. The toes of this bird's right foot were contracted and seemed to have no grasping power. All the tail feathers were missing.

After release the bird came frequently to a feeder just outside the picture window. By the middle of January its new tail had reached full length; its right leg appeared to be functioning normally; and it was aggressive enough to drive other birds—even Blue Jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*)—from the feeder. It was last seen on 2 April 1969, on which date the breast patch had become bright rose-red. Whether or not the bird continued to visit the feeder no one knows, for the Woods residence was not occupied for about a month after that date.—Mary P. Williams, 1205 East Tenth St., Okmulgee, Oklahoma 74447, 27 May 1969.

**Lesser Goldfinch in Comanche County, Oklahoma, in winter.**—In the afternoon on 23 December 1968 I saw three Lesser Goldfinches (*Spinus psaltria*) on the west-facing slope of Mount Scott in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma. Two of the birds were adult males, each with very bright yellow underparts, black back, and black crown. The third bird was of the same size, but the yellow of the underparts was pale and the upperparts, including the rump, were brownish green. The weather had been cold. Air temperatures had been down to 10-20 degrees below freezing. Most of the small ponds on the refuge were frozen over. But the spot at which I saw the birds had been warmed by the sun. They were drinking at a trickle of water that seeped over the rocks.

*Spinus psaltria* has been reported from the Wichita Mountains refuge on two occasions in summer (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, p. 596), but it has not heretofore been seen there in winter. The only other area in the main body of the state from which the species has been reported in winter is the vicinity of Altus, Jackson County, about 40 mi. west of Mount Scott. Here the late R. C. Brummett saw the species in the winter of 1950-51 (Baumgartner, 1951, *Audubon Field Notes*, 5: 214). In Cimarron County, where the Lesser Goldfinch is known to have bred, it has been recorded only once in mid-winter: on 23 December 1960 W. Marvin Davis took a specimen (female in first winter feather, UOMZ 4392) from a flock of five along the Cimarron River 13 mi. north of Boise City. — Robert B. Payne, Department of Zoology, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73069, 15 January 1969.

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