

Shorebird Identification

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Delta
Wind Birds



What is a “shorebird”?



What is different about shorebird identification?



Turf-lovers



Mudflat & Shallow-water Shorebirds



Keys to ID of shorebirds

1. Relative size

- (need known-identity birds for comparison)

2. Structure: bill size and shape, body shape, leg length

- use relative proportions, e.g. bill length relative to head length, wing extension past tail

3. Behavior [video: structure and behavior](#)

4. Basic color patterns

5. Voice

- study calls on xeno-canto.org or Cornell website

These silhouettes depict relative sizes and structures of all domestic shorebirds with the exception of American Woodcock. They are intended as a quiz, the answers to which can be found on the page number noted.



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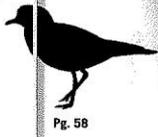
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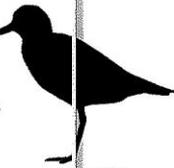
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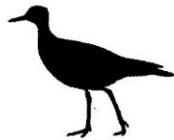
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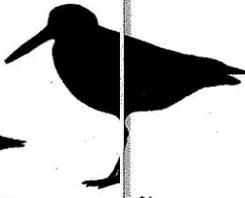
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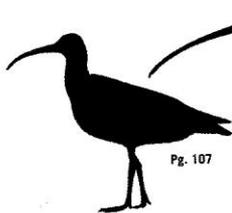
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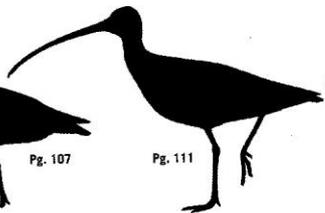
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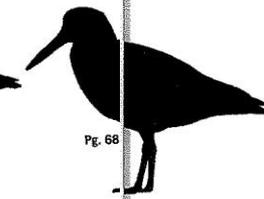
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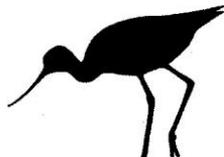
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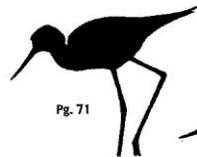
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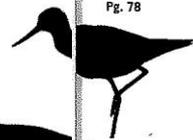
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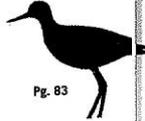
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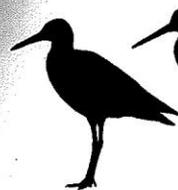
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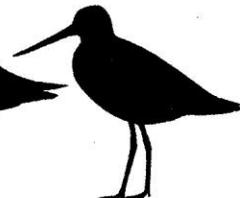
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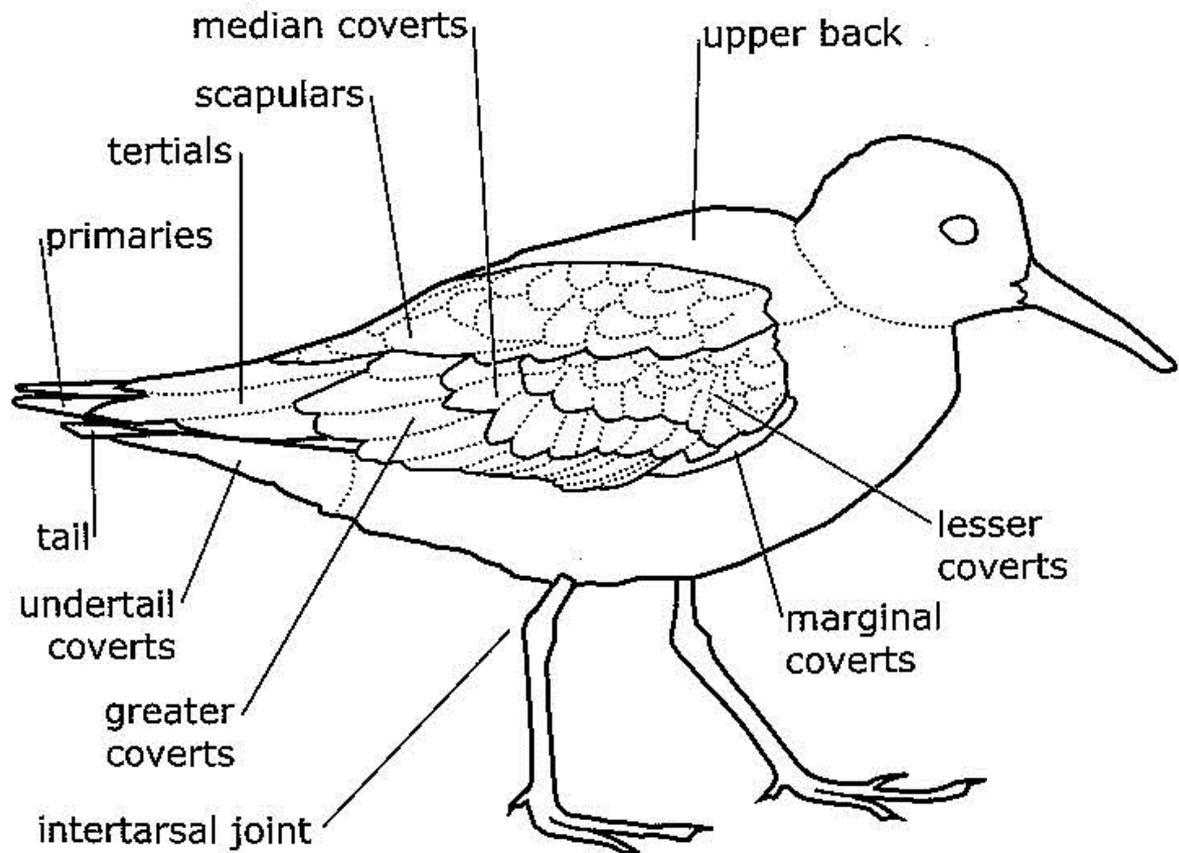


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Keys to ID of shorebirds

6. Plumage details

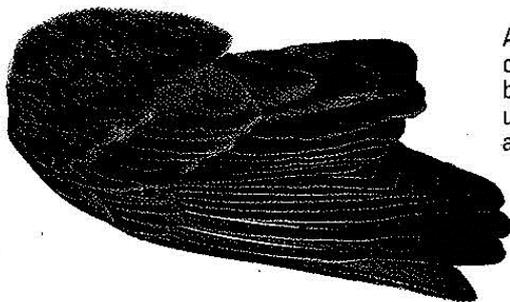
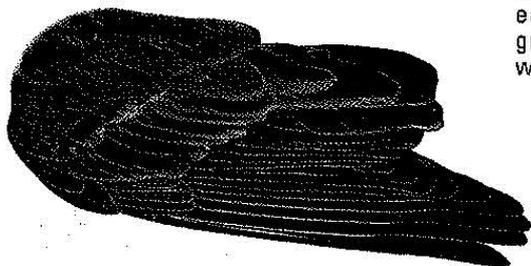
- need to know topography, and consider molt and wear



MOVEMENT OF FEATHERS ON AN OPENING WING



This is the wing of a male House Finch as it appears when completely folded. At this stage, the most obvious feather groups are the greater coverts, tertials, and the tips of the primaries. Study each illustration to see how each feather group is gradually revealed as the wing spreads open.



As the wing starts to open, the secondaries begin to emerge from underneath the tertials and the primaries are appearing from underneath the secondaries. The coverts and the tertials show little change in position so far.



The basic structure of the open wing starts to be apparent here, and the primary coverts are now more clearly identifiable.

Shorebird molt

- Most shorebirds molt 2 times per year: partial molt (head & body feathers) before breeding, then complete molt after breeding,
- “Basic” plumage = non-breeding, “alternate” plumage = breeding
- In early spring, many are still in basic. Later in spring, we see more alternate plumage.
- In early fall, we often see mostly worn alternate adults. As fall progresses, we see more fresh-looking juveniles. In late fall, we begin to see more fresh basic plumage on adults.

Feather age

- **Old feathers** appear faded, paler, often have frayed/nicked edges, and have lost any pale edgings
- **New feathers** are darker, crisper, and have clearer markings. Any pale edgings are obvious, creating a 'scalloped' appearance.









Keys to ID of shorebirds

7. Lighting conditions

8. Variation

- individual, genetic, male vs. female

9. Probability

- study checklists and eBird bar charts

The cast of characters:

24 regularly occurring in our area

- Black-necked Stilt
- American Avocet
- American Golden-Plover
- Semipalmated Plover
- Killdeer
- Spotted Sandpiper
- Solitary Sandpiper
- Lesser Yellowlegs
- Greater Yellowlegs
- Stilt Sandpiper
- Pectoral Sandpiper
- Upland Sandpiper
- Buff-breasted Sandpiper (F)
- Dunlin (esp late F)
- Least Sandpiper
- Western Sandpiper
- Semipalmated Sandpiper
- White-rumped Sandpiper (S)
- Baird's Sandpiper (rare, esp F)
- Long-billed and Short-billed (less common) Dowitchers
- Wilson's Snipe
- American Woodcock
- Wilson's Phalarope

Uncommon to rare away from coast

- Black-bellied Plover
- Sanderling
- Ruddy Turnstone
- Willet
- Marbled Godwit
- Piping & Snowy Plovers
- Whimbrel
- Long-billed Curlew
- Red Knot

Rare anywhere in MS

- Red-necked Phalarope
- Red Phalarope
- Hudsonian Godwit
- Ruff
- Mountain Plover

The image shows two birds standing in shallow, rippling water. On the left is an American Avocet, characterized by its long, thin, downward-curved bill and long, thin legs. It has a white body with dark brown wings and back. On the right is a Black-necked Stilt, which has a long, straight, dark bill and very long, thin legs. Its body is white with a dark brown back and a distinctive black band across its neck. Both birds are reflected in the water. In the background, a small, dark, rounded object floats on the water's surface.

Two easy ones:
American Avocet &
Black-necked Stilt

Black-necked Stilt





American Avocet





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the plovers



- short, thick, tubular bills
- distinctive voices: plaintive whistles

Killdeer



- learn it well, as a reference for size and structure



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Semipalmated Plover



- superficially similar to Killdeer, but distinctly smaller, with very short bill and only one breast band



American Golden-Plover



- larger than Killdeer
- check flooded ag fields and sod farms in early spring, and especially sod farms in fall

Black-bellied Plover



- rare away from coast
- a bit larger, with thicker bill and heavier body, compared to American Golden-Plover
- in all plumages, note dark armpits, white tail, white in wing

the Yellowlegs



Lesser Yellowlegs



- body size similar to Killdeer, but much longer legs
- compared to Greater Yellowlegs: smaller size, smaller straighter bill, sleeker body, more faintly marked on neck and flanks, forages more daintily, different [voice](#) (fewer, weaker notes)

Greater Yellowlegs



- body size 40% larger than Killdeer
- compared to Lesser Yellowlegs: larger size, stouter bill often with slight up-curve, heavier body, more heavily marked on neck and flanks, forages more aggressively, different voice (more, strident notes)

Solitary Sandpiper



- same genus as yellowlegs (*Tringa*)
- smaller than Lesser Yellowlegs, with prominent eye ring, greenish legs, darker upperparts, dark underwing, dark-barred tail
- favors small ponds & creeks, bobs head (as do all *Tringa*)

Stilt Sandpiper



- similar in body size and leg length to Lesser Yellowlegs, often associated with them
- but with drooped bill, yellow-greenish legs
- feeding behavior similar to Dowitcher or Dunlin

Spotted Sandpiper



- similar size and habitat to Solitary Sandpiper, but shorter legs, plainer upperparts, different bill shape
- bobs tail, never flocks, distinct stiff wing beats

Short- & Long-billed Dowitchers



- both are long-billed & relatively short-legged, with narrow/long white rump patch visible in flight
- feed with 'sewing-machining' probing motion
- can be distinguished by calls, and often by shape
- have different habitat preferences (Long-billed much more common inland, in Delta)
- basic (winter) plumages very similar, juv & alt plumages distinct



Long-billed Dowitcher



- shape: thick neck, front-heavy body imbalance, usually with hump-back & egg-belly (swallowed-a-grapefruit)
- voice



- spring adult

Long-billed: note gentle arch in outer half of bill, thick neck, bulky shoulders, wide dark bands on tail, **scaps & coverts dark with thin rusty markings** (and bold white spots that mostly wear off by fall)

- fall adult molting



photo by Larry Pace



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Long-billed Dowitcher: juvenile (fall)



- dull & grayish overall
- tertials grayish with narrow rusty edges, scapulars dark with rusty edges
- tertials & scaps lack internal markings

Short-billed Dowitcher



- shape: slighter head/neck, more evenly balanced (forward and back) over legs, never appears to have swallowed a grapefruit
- breeding: broad buff/rust markings on feather edges; [voice](#) differences from Long-bill

Short-billed Dowitcher: juvenile



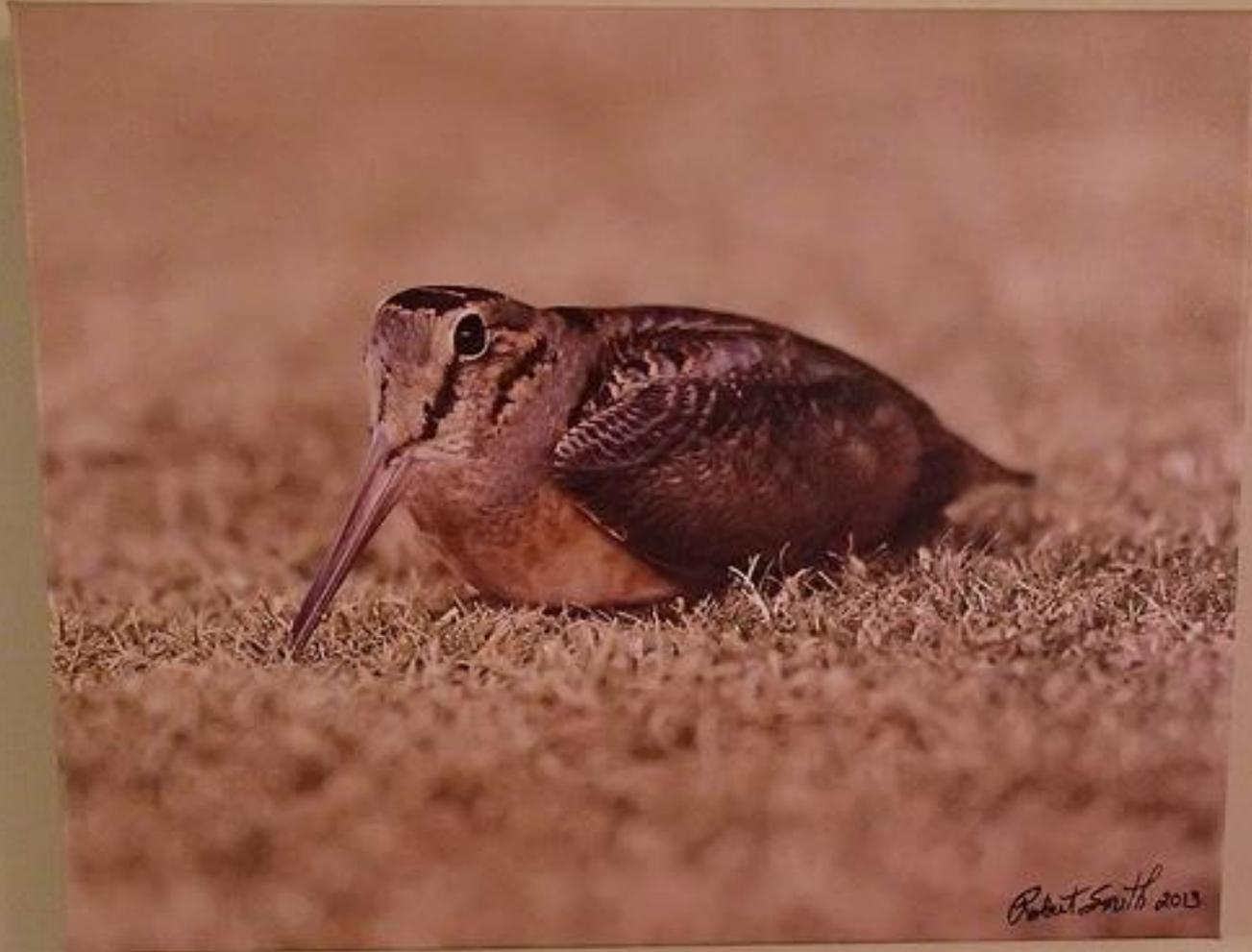
- upperparts with broad buffy edges & bars (including tertials), tertials with internal markings, *hendersoni* has bright buffy breast (very different than juvenile Long-billed)



Wilson's Snipe



American Woodcock



the “Peeps” (and other *Calidris*)



Least Sandpiper



- our smallest sandpiper, 60% size of Killdeer
- fine-tipped slightly drooped bill, yellowish legs
- **in fall, adults are worn & grayish-brown, juvenile upperparts have bright rufous edges & white spots**
- usually our most frequent peep, including winter:
**Get to know it well as a reference species



Semipalmated Sandpiper



- a bit larger than Least, with black legs
- short, straight bill with slightly bulbous tip
- in fall, adults paler brown than Least, juveniles with fresh scaly upperparts but very little rufous, dark cap, dingy breast
- nervous & aggressive on the mudflats

Western Sandpiper



- a bit larger than Semipalmated, with slightly heavier, drooped bill, paler cap/face/breast
- black legs
- fall: adults very gray & worn, juveniles fresh with rusty scapulars





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Baird's Sandpiper



- Larger than Least/Western/Semi, blackish legs
- **very long wings, giving long/slender shape**
- relatively long straight-ish, fine-tipped bill
- always pale-headed with **buffy** tones
- in fall, juvenile with scaly upperparts

Dunlin



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- larger than all peeps, with heavy drooping bill
- plain gray in winter, with pale supercilium

Pectoral Sandpiper



- slightly larger than Dunlin, with heavily streaked breast contrasting sharply with belly, short down-curved bill, yellowish legs



Wilson's Phalarope



Books

- *Shorebirds*, 1986, by Hayman, Marchant, & Prater
- *The Shorebird Guide*, 2006, by O'Brien, Crossley, and Karlson
- *Kaufman Field Guide to Advanced Birding*, 2011, by Kenn Kaufman

Upland Sandpiper



Buff-breasted Sandpiper





