

# The Maine Peep Cheat Sheet

## Basic tips on identifying Maine's most common shorebirds

### What shorebirds are most common in Maine?

Over 75% of shorebirds seen in Maine belong to just 14 species – these are the birds to learn first. (See the table below for ID tips for these more common species.)

The most common plovers are: Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Plover and Killdeer.

The most common sandpipers are: Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Sanderling, Dunlin, Ruddy Turnstone, Lesser Yellowlegs, Greater Yellowlegs, Willet, Short-billed Dowitcher, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Whimbrel.

Less common shorebirds you may see in Maine include Piping Plover, American Golden-Plover, Purple Sandpiper (a winter visitor), American Oystercatcher, White-rumped Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Solitary Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Red Knot, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Hudsonian Godwit and Marbled Godwit.

Maine also hosts some breeding “shorebirds” rarely seen near the ocean: American Woodcock (woodlands and fields), Wilson's Snipe (marshes) and Upland Sandpiper (large grasslands like the Kennebunk Plains).

Many other species show up from time to time, such as Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Ruff or Curlew Sandpiper. Shorebirds are long-distance migrants so “Anything can happen!”

### Plover or Sandpiper?

When you're observing a shorebird, ask yourself first: plover or sandpiper?

Plovers pick. They find food by sight. They take a few quick steps...look around...peck...repeat. Their bills are fairly short and sturdy.

Sandpipers probe. They find food by feel. They pump their bills repeatedly up and down. Their bills are long and thin.

### What bold field mark did I just see on that bird in flight?

Bold wing stripe on a...

Large bird = Willet

Medium bird = Black-bellied Plover or Killdeer

Small bird = Sanderling

White tail on a...

Large bird = Willet

Medium bird = Black-bellied Plover

White rump patch on a...

Long-billed, long-legged bird = Yellowlegs or Dowitcher species

Medium bird = Black-bellied Plover

Small bird = White-rumped Sandpiper

## What time of year is it?

Many of the shorebirds we see in Maine are just passing through on their way to and from their breeding grounds in the Arctic and near Arctic. So — in general but not always — they're most likely to be seen in April/May and August/September, though some linger longer than others. These include Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, Greater Yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitcher, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Whimbrel.

Some of our shorebirds breed here, and so are mostly find-able in the spring and summer. These include Killdeer, Piping Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, and Willet.

A few shorebirds stick around into the colder months, such as: Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling and Dunlin. Purple Sandpiper is a true winter visitor and might be the only shorebird you'll find on a February birding trip in Maine.

Our *Birder's Guide to Maine* (Pierson, Pierson, and Vickery, 1993) includes a checklist of Maine birds that also illustrates how common each bird is and when you're likely to see it. This invaluable information can really help with shorebird ID!

## Is the bird I'm looking at a juvenile?

Like many birds, most shorebirds molt into different plumages between when they fledge in the fall (their "juvenile" plumage), when they arrive at their wintering areas (their "non-breeding" plumage) and when they first breed the following spring (their "breeding" plumage). In other words, the young birds on their first fall migration often have a different plumage from their southbound parents.

So during fall migration time, if you can first determine whether a particular bird you're looking at is a juvenile bird — one that's just recently fledged — it can make the species identification easier.

As a general rule, juvenile birds have fresher, brighter-looking feathers than the adults. And the scapular feathers (the ones in the "shoulder" area of the wing, most easily visible when the wing is folded) are short, neat, rounded, uniform in length, and may have a distinct pale fringe. The worn-out scapular feathers of the adult birds are longer, pointier, and have a less prominent fringe.

Find a group of shorebirds that look like they're all the same species and give "aging" a try! Are you starting to feel like a hardcore birder yet?

## What's a "peep" and why do I care?

The dreaded "peeps" are the small sandpipers of the genus *Calidris*. Which for Maine birders basically means the Least Sandpiper and Semipalmated Sandpiper.

Here are some tips for differentiating among these common shorebirds in all plumages:

- Semipalmated Sandpiper has dark legs and a sturdy, straight black bill
- Least Sandpiper has yellow/green-ish legs and a thin-tipped, slightly droopy bill

Western Sandpiper, which is also a peep, is very uncommon in Maine during the fall migration and just about unheard-of at other times. However, it is common in the West in migration, and fairly common further south along the US coastline in winter. Western Sandpiper usually has a longer bill than Semipalmated or Least Sandpiper. It also often has distinctive, bright, rusty coloration on the upperwing area while it's present in Maine. If you see a peep-sized sandpiper with a bill that is not only slightly downcurved but also much longer than the bills of surrounding peeps, you might have a Western.

## Want to amaze your friends?

Learn shorebird calls! It's easy. And it's a great way to tell some of the tough ones apart, like Lesser/Greater Yellowlegs, Short-/Long-billed Dowitcher and Semipalmated/Least Sandpiper.

## Identification Clues for Common Maine Shorebirds

|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| <b>Black-bellied Plover</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Looks gray with black flecks/patches</li> <li>▪ Our biggest plover: Big head, sturdy bill</li> <li>▪ White tail and bold wing stripe</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Semipalmated Plover</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Single black forehead stripe with white below</li> <li>▪ Brown above, white below</li> <li>▪ Small, common and wicked cute!</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Killdeer</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A nesting bird, often seen inland</li> <li>▪ Named for its loud, persistent call: Kiddee-Kiddee!</li> <li>▪ Two dark neck bands – unique – plus a black forehead stripe</li> <li>▪ Orange rump</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Willet</b>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Big and gray</li> <li>▪ Long, straight, sturdy bill</li> <li>▪ Bold black/white flashing wing pattern</li> <li>▪ Rowdy call: Pill-will-willet! Pill-will-willet!</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Sanderling</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Looks pale gray, chunky</li> <li>▪ Short (for a sandpiper), sturdy, black bill</li> <li>▪ Broad white wing stripe</li> <li>▪ Chases the waves</li> <li>▪ Around in the winter</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Dunlin</b>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Long, drooping bill</li> <li>▪ Stocky build; a smidge larger than Sanderling</li> <li>▪ Often hangs out with Sanderlings; also here in winter</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Ruddy Turnstone</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Orange-ish wing feathers and distinctive black-and-white markings on head and upperparts make it easy to spot in the Fall</li> <li>▪ Bright, flashing black-and-white wing and tail pattern at all times of year</li> <li>▪ Compact and chunky with distinctive “pick-and-flip” foraging behavior</li> </ul> |
| <b>Semipalmated Sandpiper</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dark legs</li> <li>▪ Dark, thin bill</li> <li>▪ Topside “brownish-gray” (gray predominates)</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Least Sandpiper</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Pale-ish legs</li> <li>▪ Very thin bill with droopy tip</li> <li>▪ Topside “grayish-brown” (brown predominates)</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Lesser Yellowlegs</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Long, yellow legs</li> <li>▪ Tall and active; runs around, likes to feed in water</li> <li>▪ Long bill, long neck, gray topside</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Greater Yellowlegs</b>     | Bigger and chunkier than Lesser. Best distinguished by call: 3-4 notes for Greater versus 1-2 for Lesser. In Fall, Lesser arrives sooner; Greater stays later.  |
| <b>Short-billed Dowitcher</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Very long bill</li> <li>▪ Squat appearance</li> <li>▪ Drab grayish plumage</li> <li>▪ Often has a thin, white line through eye</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Long-billed Dowitcher</b>  | Best distinguished from Lesser by call: A high, sharp kek versus a liquid run of notes for Lesser. (Dowitchers are tough to tell apart if they don’t call.) Short-billed arrives sooner and is more common overall in Maine; Long-billed stays a bit later.   |
| <b>Whimbrel</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A large, long-legged bird with a very long, down-curved bill</li> <li>▪ Very distinctive dark brown stripe through eye and on crown of head</li> <li>▪ This is an easy bird to ID when see well</li> </ul>   |

## Shorebird Resources

Here are some good starting points to learn more about shorebirds:

- Shorebirdworld.org: <http://www.shorebirdworld.org/>  
The website of the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences' International Shorebird Survey. One of the best places on the Web to learn more about shorebird natural history and conservation status.
- The Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN):  
<http://www.manomet.org/WHSRN/>  
The fascinating website of one of the world's leading shorebird conservation groups.
- The Western Atlantic Shorebird Association (WASA):  
<http://www.hopscotch.ca/shorebirds/cgi-bin/map.cgi?language=en>  
A fun website where you can enter data on your shorebird sightings!
- Shorebirds of the Bay of Fundy: <http://museum.gov.ns.ca/mnh/nature/nsbirds/feat01.htm>  
Includes info about shorebirds that's relevant to Maine.
- The SHOREBIRDS e-mail list: <http://www.listserv.uga.edu/archives/shorebirds.html>  
An e-mail listserv dedicated to shorebird reports and discussions. Most of the participants are scientists and researchers, but you don't have to subscribe to browse the field reports.
- An excellent photographic reference that focuses on shorebird ID is *The Shorebird Guide* by Crossley, Karlson and O'Brien.
- Another excellent photographic shorebird reference is: *Shorebirds of North America: A Photographic Guide* by Dennis Paulson.
- A more definitive shorebird ID and range map reference is *Shorebirds: An Identification Guide to the Waders of the World* by Prater, Hayman, and Marchant.
- Finally, for the dedicated shorebirder, I highly recommend this fascinating magazine article, which "...examines the intriguing connections among feeding behavior, interspecific flocking, and the evolution of flash patterns" in shorebirds: "Why Flight Patterns in Shorebirds?" Dennis Paulson, *Birding*, July/August, 2005.