Spotted Sandpipers nesting in Scotland

Gordon E. Wilson

In June 1975, I discovered a pair of Spotted Sandpipers *Tringa macularia* nesting in Scotland, the first such record of an American species in Europe.

**Sequence of Events**

On 15th June 1975, while on holiday in the Highland region of Scotland, I visited a sheltered bay and saw a bird which at first glance I took to be a Common Sandpiper *T. hypoleucos*. It alighted on a boulder in the centre of a freshwater stream flowing over the gently sloping seashore, and observation through binoculars revealed prominent black spots on its white throat and breast. It was then immediately identifiable as an adult Spotted Sandpiper.

When I returned on 17th June, the Spotted Sandpiper was feeding in the intertidal zone, about 200 metres from where I had first seen it. This time, I obtained excellent views at close quarters and in good light, including direct comparison with a Common Sandpiper, when the Spotted Sandpiper encroached on a grassy area where the latter had chicks and the two adults skirmished.

On 27th June, I saw the bird again, within 200 metres of the initial location, feeding right at the water's edge, on the seaweed uncovered by the receding tide. On being approached, it flew about 100 metres up the stony beach, calling as it went, and alighted well above high-water mark in a small sandy area surrounded by vegetation. Following cautiously, I found that it had disappeared from view, yet had not flown out of the area. After a few more paces forward, I flushed it from rank vegetation in front of me. The behaviour of the bird, which alighted on a log 15 metres away, calling anxiously, suggested to me that it was nesting. I quickly and carefully searched the dense vegetation, located a nest containing four eggs at ground level, and then retired. The bird returned within three minutes, alighted about five metres from the nest and walked directly to it. Later the same day, I returned with a local ornithologist and we saw two adult Spotted Sandpipers on the shore, confirming that a pair was breeding and ruling out the possibility of a female Spotted nesting alone or paired with a Common Sandpiper. The following day, 28th June, another local birdwatcher verified the identification.

On returning from my holiday, I informed the secretary of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, Dr J. T. R. Sharrock, of my discovery and he put me in touch with another member of the panel, R. H. Dennis. Mr Dennis visited the nest site on 2nd July, located the [Brit. Birds, 69: 288-292, August 1976]
nests with four eggs and observed both adults, one of which returned
to the nest and remained there.

By 3rd July, the second local observer found that the weeds in
which the nest was located had grown considerably after two days
of rain. Although cattle were grazing on the shore dangerously
close to the nest, an adult Spotted Sandpiper was seen returning
to it. He could find no sign of an adult on 7th July, however, and
the nest was apparently deserted, probably because of the close
approach of grazing cattle. Mr Dennis paid a second visit on 30th
July. The adults were not seen, the weeds around the nest were
flattened, either by cattle or heavy rain, and it was unquestionably
deserted. He removed the eggs and sent them to the Royal Scottish
Museum, Edinburgh. Two were found to be infertile, but the other
two contained partly developed embryos.

DESCRIPTION OF ADULTS

The following characters of the adults were noted in the field. They
were compared with Common Sandpipers, which they closely
resembled in size, shape, general coloration and behaviour.

The plumage of the sexes was alike. The forehead, crown, nape,
wings and back were olive-brown, slightly greyer than of the Com­
mon Sandpiper, and finely marked with short, dark bars or spots
on the wings and back. A white bar along the wing was revealed
in flight, like that of the Common Sandpiper, but it had a darker,
almost black border towards the trailing edge, which the other
species lacked. The tail was not noted in detail, but was short in
relation to the size of the bird, like that of the Common Sandpiper,
and appeared brown with whitish edges.

The chin, breast, throat, belly, flanks and undertail coverts
were white, uniformly covered with distinctive, large, circular,
black spots. These were estimated to be about 3 mm in diameter
on the breast and spaced at about the same distance, but were
smaller on the chin and throat. A prominent, crescent-shaped,
white supercilium extended over the eye from near the base of the
bill almost to the nape.

The bill was straight, approximately 4 cm in length, and was
yellow with a dark tip. In some lights, it appeared yellowish-orange
with a dark tip, but never brownish like that of the Common
Sandpiper. In good light, the legs looked light flesh-brown.

The only call note heard was a piping, disyllabic ‘weet-weet’,
uttered while on the wing. It was reminiscent of that of a Common
Sandpiper, but not so strong. This was probably the alarm call,
since it was heard only when the bird was flushed.

Although usually remaining on the ground, walking about the
stony shore and actively feeding, an adult twice alighted on a
Spotted Sandpipers nesting in Scotland

Stone wall about 1 1/2 metres high, where it rested for a while. The body was normally held still and only on two brief occasions was the bobbing motion of tail and body, so characteristic of the Common Sandpiper, observed. The normal flight was strong and direct, but on several occasions one was seen to fly with rapid wing beats while holding the wings rather stiffly below body level, alternating this action with short glides. The adult flushed from the nest flew some distance, but returned as soon as the intruder retreated; its mate gave no warning of an intruder, but retired quietly along the shore.

Feeding was entirely by picking among patches of seaweed and jetsam left by high tides, and at no time by probing or turning seaweed over.

Nest and Eggs
The nest site was close to a gently sloping seashore in a small sheltered bay, within 400 metres of a small village and 200 metres of a freshwater stream flowing into the sea. The nest was about 100 metres back from high-tide mark, in an extensive patch of dense vegetation about 40 cm high and consisting predominantly of fat-hen Chenopodium album. It was on the ground among the damp bases of the weeds, and constructed of broad blades of grass and plant stalks, rather loosely assembled, but forming a well defined cup.

The four eggs, arranged in the nest with their smaller ends toward the centre, were a light buff-brown, heavily spotted and blotched all over with dark reddish-brown. Measurements taken later showed that the dimensions (in mm) were: 317 × 232, 322 × 239, 331 × 235 and 332 × 239.

Discussion
The Spotted Sandpiper is widespread and common in North America, breeding in almost the whole of the United States and Canada, and winters in Mexico, Central America and the northern countries of South America (Witherby et al. 1940, Robbins et al. 1966). Up to the time of these Scottish observations, however, the species had been recorded as a vagrant on only 26 occasions in Britain and Ireland, mostly from mid-August to mid-November and during May-June.

Although the proved breeding of Spotted Sandpipers in Scotland was a very exciting event, the nesting of a species of American wader on this side of the Atlantic was not entirely unexpected. The number of American waders recorded in Britain and Ireland has increased dramatically in recent years. About 340 individuals were noted up to 1957, but 1,015 were seen in the next 15 years (207 during 1958-62, 311 during 1963-67 and 497 during 1968-72)
Spotted Sandpipers nesting in Scotland

(Sharrock and Sharrock 1976). This dramatic increase has been linked by Williamson (1974, 1975) with a southwards shift by about 10° in the mean path of North Atlantic depressions between the 1900's and 1960's. Most American waders are seen in Ireland and western Britain, however, which are areas where watching was relatively far less intense before the 1960's. Sharrock and Sharrock (1976) have also shown that the increase during 1958-72 merely matches the increase in the number of all rare birds, both Palearctic and Nearctic vagrants being recorded far more often by the growing band of field observers, who have gained in competence and awareness of the possibility of finding American birds. It nevertheless remains a fact that the numbers of American waders recorded in recent years has led to speculation that breeding could occur.

Spotted Sandpipers, with 15 records during 1958-72, rank rather low in the list of American species recorded here; figures for the same 15-year period for the six commonest were 488 Pectoral Sandpipers Calidris melanotos, 101 Buff-breasted Sandpipers Tryngites subruficollis, 82 White-rumped Sandpipers C. fuscicollis, 81 dowitchers Limnodromus griseus and L. scolopaceus combined, 62 Lesser Yellowlegs Tringa flavipes and 52 Wilson’s Phalaropes Phalaropus tricolor. After a summer record of a Pectoral Sandpiper in Caithness in 1973, one was seen displaying in the same county in late May 1974 (Byrne and Mackenzie-Grieve 1974, Dennis 1975); the Pectoral Sandpiper and the Wilson’s Phalarope have been the species most tipped to nest in Europe. Sharrock (1971, 1974) argued, from the high proportion of British east coast (compared with west coast and Irish) records, that some Pectoral and Baird’s Sandpipers C. bairdii reached Britain by moving west from Siberia; the establishment of a small breeding (or at least summering) population in northern Europe now seems equally likely, and this has also been proposed to explain the early autumn records of White-rumped Sandpipers on the British east coast (Sharrock and Sharrock 1976).

Although observed here far less commonly than some other American waders, Spotted Sandpipers are not such long-distance migrants as the commoner ones and this could aid the meeting of individuals to form pairs, which must be the greatest problem confronting potential breeders with a tiny population. In retrospect, it is probably significant that Spotted Sandpipers have remained at localities for long periods (an average of 17 days for those seen during 1958-72), and both summering (Lincolnshire/Norfolk in June-August 1971: Smith et al. 1972) and wintering (Dorset in December-March 1973/74: Smith et al. 1975) have occurred in Britain.

One may hope that the record documented in this paper marks
the first instance of a natural enrichment of the breeding avifauna of Europe by other Nearctic species.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
I wish to express my thanks to Peter Standley and Dr J. T. R. Sharrock for their helpful advice on recording my observations and to R. H. Dennis for the effort he made to verify my record. I also wish to thank the other two independent ornithologists who confirmed my observations; unfortunately, they must remain anonymous, since to publish their names would disclose the locality of the nest site, to which there seems a chance that the birds will return in another year. I am grateful to Dr Sharrock for expanding the discussion section of this paper.

SUMMARY
A personal account is given of the discovery of a pair of Spotted Sandpipers Tringa macularia nesting in Scotland. Breeding was unsuccessful, the nest with four eggs (two of which were fertile) being deserted, perhaps because of trampling by cattle or after heavy rain.

REFERENCES

Gordon E. Wilson, 34 Birch Road, Burghfield Common, Reading, Berkshire RG7 3LX