The opening paragraphs of my paper on the field identification of small stints and peeps in the genus Calidris (Wallace 1974) stressed that the problems set by an odd stint are likely to be severe and often compound. The clouds surrounding the separation of the Nearctic vagrant Semipalmated Sandpiper *C. pusilla* from the common Palearctic migrant Little Stint *C. minuta* have, however, lifted in recent years, as more and more observers have gained experience of small *Calidris* on both sides of the Atlantic. Drawing upon this increased familiarity, the Rarities Committee completed in May 1978 an exhaustive review of all published British records of the Semipalmated Sandpiper (dating from 1953) and coupled to this an examination of four claims of the eastern Palearctic Red-necked Stint *C. ruficollis* (dating from 1973). The Irish Records Panel is currently engaged in a similar review of all records of Semipalmated Sandpipers in Ireland.

This paper presents the results of the review of British records, together with the reasons for the Committee’s changed opinions on those which previously were accepted but which now are rejected. In all such cases, the records were submitted and accepted in good faith, but both the identifications and their acceptance were based on criteria which, since 1974, have been shown to be unreliable. It should be noted that past rejected records of Semipalmated Sandpiper have not been reviewed, but, if observers feel that particular records still have a strong case for acceptance, they are urged to request reconsideration.

**Semipalmated Sandpiper**

**REVIEW FINDINGS**

Between 1953 and 1974, there were 12 published records. The Committee
now regards five as acceptable and seven as unacceptable, including one withdrawn by the observer before the review.

Past published records still accepted


Lincolnshire/Norfolk 1966  Wisbech Sewage-farm, apparent first-winter, trapped, 12th November (not 9th October as previously published) to 26th December (Brit. Birds 60: 319).


Past published records now withdrawn or no longer accepted

Fife 1957  Isle of May, 19th September (Scot. Birds 1: 35-37). Although this bird showed a slightly swollen tip to its bill, the description of its upperparts does not indicate Semipalmated. The most noticeable plumage character was a 'very conspicuous V meeting on the rump'. This points strongly to Little Stint in juvenile plumage, and the rest of the description suggests a rather dark example of that species.

Kent 1965  Dungeness, 6th to 9th September (Brit. Birds 59: 289, 543-547, plate 79). The identification of this bird has caused a decade of confusion. From one photograph, it was found that its feet were unwebbed. It is to the credit of the late R. C. Homes that he always stood out against the original identifications; at least two of the other observers concerned have since shared his doubts. One of them and the majority of the Committee are satisfied that it was a juvenile Little Stint, but there lurks a fear in some minds (including mine) that it may have been a juvenile Red-necked. It is portrayed in plates 127-129.

Kent 1967  Sevenoaks, 10th September (Kent Bird Rep. for 1967; Brit. Birds 61: 342). The original identification stemmed directly from that of the 1965 Dungeness bird, the confusion surrounding the latter affecting the observers and the Committee. As shown by several photographs (e.g. plates 130 & 131), the bill was finely tipped, the back stripes were strongly marked and the feet were unwebbed. The call was transcribed as 'peep'. The Committee is now convinced that this bird was a juvenile Little Stint.

Gloucestershire 1968  New Grounds, Slimbridge, 13th October (Brit. Birds 62: 470). Since no webs were seen, nor any call heard, this record was withdrawn by the observer when the full complexities of stint identification became evident.

Isles of Scilly 1969  Tresco, 19th August (Brit. Birds 63: 277). This bird was an adult in worn summer plumage. The balance of opinions within the Committee is that it was a short-billed Western Sandpiper C. mawii, but, as transcribed, the call points to Semipalmated. Sadly, it must remain indeterminate.

Suffolk 1971  Minsmere, 3rd to 8th September (Brit. Birds 65: 334). One of the observers concerned now feels that no certain claim for this bird can be upheld. The Committee is not convinced that a misidentification occurred, but, since no webs were seen and the bill shape was inadequately described, the bird must be regarded as indeterminate.

Essex 1974  Barking, 4th May (Brit. Birds 68: 318). Again, the Committee is not convinced that a misidentification occurred, but it does feel that, since this is the only spring record, absolute proof is required. The lack of any call hampers assessment of this record.

IDENTIFICATION

It remains to summarise those characters of Semipalmated Sandpiper which are now considered reliable and practical in the field, based mainly
on the field experience of a growing number of observers who have studied the species in North America and have been able to make detailed comparisons with Little Stint.

**Structure** The following points are most important, being valid for individuals of all ages.

- **Size** Semipalmated averages slightly larger and more robust than Little Stint.
- **Bill Shape** Blunt-tipped in profile and slightly spatulate at the tip (blob-ended when viewed head-on at close range); looks short and stubby on typical individuals, but appears quite long on those breeding in eastern Canada. Bill of Little Stint is longer on average, invariably looking fine-tipped or with only a slight bulb. Perception of the supposed thicker bill-base of Semipalmated is difficult in the field.
- **Foot-webbing** When seen, diagnostic so long as the possibility of Western Sandpiper

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127-129. Juvenile stint *Calidris*, originally identified as Baird's Sandpiper *C. bairdii* and then accepted as Semipalmated Sandpiper *C. pusilla*, but probably either Little *C. minuta* or Red-necked Stint *C. ruficollis* (in plate 129, Dunlin *C. alpina* at left) Dungeness, Kent, September 1965 (Pamela Harrison)
piper (the only other stint with webbed feet) has been eliminated.* Webbing is more extensive between the outer and middle toes than between the inner and middle; it is readily visible on dry habitats, even at long range if a telescope is used. Observation of this feature can be practised by looking for the unwebbed feet of Little Stint and other small waders at every opportunity.

**Voice** Compared with the sharp, rather high-pitched ‘tit’ flight call of Little Stint, the lower-pitched, rather harsh, throaty or coarse quality of a typical call from a Semipalmated sounds very different: variously transcribed in field notes as ‘chirrup’, ‘churrup’, ‘chittup’, ‘chirrt’ and ‘trrp’ (examples from accepted British records), it recalls Pectoral Sandpiper *C. melanotos* to some ears. Shorter, monosyllabic versions, often repeated in series (as in Little and other stints), and a multisyllabic, whinny-like trill also noted.

**Plumage** No firm plumage differences from Little Stint have yet been established for summer adult and first-summer plumages (with much confusing variation stemming from wear and bleaching), and winter adult and first-winter (mainly uniform grey above with dark feather centres, like Little Stint). Structural and voice distinctions are thus vital for individuals in these plumages. To experienced eyes, however, the plumage of juvenile Semipalmated does look quite different from that of a typical juvenile Little Stint. Given that all juvenile stints are readily aged as such by the regular pattern of scaling on their upperparts and their fresh, neat appearance, typical Semipal-

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* Western Sandpiper is larger, between Little Stint and Dunlin *C. alpina* in size, with longer, Dunlin-shaped bill and longer legs: juveniles and summer adults have strong rufous coloration on crown, ear-coverts and scapulars, often partially retained in winter plumages, especially first-winter. It has the character of a small Dunlin rather than a stint; its calls are high-pitched and penetrating. See Wallace (1974) for detailed discussion of the field characters of Western Sandpiper.
Semipalmated Sandpipers and Red-necked Stints

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132. Juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper Calidris pusilla, USA, autumn 1961 (James Baird)

133. Juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper Calidris pusilla, USA, October/November (Allan D. Cruickshank)

132. Juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper Calidris pusilla, USA, autumn 1961 (James Baird)

133. Juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper Calidris pusilla, USA, October/November (Allan D. Cruickshank)

mated at this age (plates 132 & 133) has rather drab upperparts, with just a suggestion of warm buff or orange tones on the feather edgings; they lack both the invariably prominent white lines forming a V on the sides of the mantle, and the rich brown or rufous tones on the head, mantle and scapulars of most Little Stints of the same age; these features are best assessed when viewed head-on or from behind. There is now generally little support for characters involving the head pattern, the white partial collar, or the presence of streaking at the breast-sides, all of which are clouded by individual variation of juvenile Little Stints.

By far the most frequent pitfall in stint identification is the lack of general awareness of the appearance of Little Stints in other than the familiar juvenile plumage. In Britain, the overwhelming majority of autumn migrant Little Stints are juveniles (plates 134-136), and the occasional appearance among them of an adult in worn summer plumage, or individuals (probably first-years) which have moulted early into winter plumage—the latter can be encountered as early as late August—
has caused many false alarms (plate 137). Worn summer adults have a generally drab appearance and lack a prominent V on the mantle, and individuals in winter plumage have strikingly white underparts and face,
Semipalmated Sandpipers and Red-necked Stints

First-winter or adult winter Little Stint Calidris minuta, South Africa, March 1974
(J. C. Sinclair)

and uniform brownish-grey mantle and coverts, with dark feather-centres which give a blotched appearance to the upperparts. When a rare stint is suspected, a firm assessment of its age should be a priority: this diagnosis will be easier for observers practised in ageing common waders. Close study of juvenile Little Stints, to assess the normal variation of the strength and extent of their rufous tones, is also recommended. The biometric and detailed plumage data in Prater et al. (1977) are useful, especially for trapped birds. It is clear, however, that the identification of a lone Semipalmated in Britain is not to be taken lightly: an acceptable diagnosis will rest on the clear observation of the majority, if not all, of the distinctions, by observers—preferably several—totally familiar with the voice and the different plumages of Little Stints.

Red-necked Stint
CLAIMED RECORDS

Between 1973 and 1975, the Committee received four claims of Red-necked Stint:

Suffolk 1973 Minsmere, 4th August to 26th October. This was an apparent adult in heavy moult, often among juvenile Little Stints. It was first identified as a Semipalmated Sandpiper, but doubts soon multiplied. When it was trapped and its feet were found to be unwebbed, opinions split between Red-necked and Little Stint. As noted in the Committee's file, the resultant controversy comes 'close to being the most complicated...of all time'. Opinions remain firm and hopelessly divergent. The balance within the Committee is that it was a first-summer or adult Little Stint assuming winter plumage. Plates 138-140 feature this bird.

Humberside 1973 Brough Haven, River Humber, 14th to 19th September. This bird was in quite fresh juvenile plumage and was in company with similarly aged Little Stints. It lacked any V on the back, recalled the 1965 Dungeness stint and closely resembled an undoubted Red-necked photographed in Australia in October. It was seen by one past and two present members of the Committee, none of whom is happy to write it off as an odd Little Stint; but other opinions on it are widely divided.

Lincolnshire 1974 Covenham Reservoir, 7th to 19th September. This was another unusual stint in rather dishevelled plumage, again unlike companion Little Stints in juvenile plumage. It was well photographed (plates 141-143), but again it has provoked a range of opinions within the Committee.
Stint *Calidris*, originally identified as Semipalmated Sandpiper *C. pusilla*, then as Red-necked *C. ruficollis* or Little Stint *C. minuta*, now considered to be first-summer or adult Little Stint molting into winter plumage, Minsmere, Suffolk, September 1973 *(H. E. Axell)*

**Durham 1975** Hurworth Burn Reservoir, 1st to 3rd September. This bird was in fresh juvenile plumage and was in company with similarly aged Little Stints. Noticeably paler than the three individuals noted above, it was first identified as a Semipalmated Sandpiper, but closer observation showed a clear lack of foot webs. The choice clearly lay, as with all these records, between Little and Red-necked Stints. One photograph of the latter species, taken in Japan in September (plate 145), was considered a close match by two observers, both past members of the Committee, but they and one current member could not agree on a certain identification. On circulation, the customary range of opinions was provoked.
DISCUSSION

Given the above situation, the Committee is unable to accept any of the claims of Red-necked Stint. Its members agree that this species may well be occurring in Britain, but they have found no secure criteria on which to base its differentiation from Little Stint. It is clear from an analysis of members’ comments that there are several factors of confusion. First, there is the difficulty of visualising from photographs what juvenile and winter Red-necked Stints really look like. So far, only one member of the Committee and one other expert observer feel competent, on the basis of close-timed field study, to make comparisons between them and the
other stints. No amount of peering at transparencies or photographs can fill this gap for others. Secondly, there is the danger of observers straining for differences and forgetting the quite wide morphological variation in the juvenile plumages of both Red-necked and Little Stints. Thirdly, there are arguments on the age of the birds concerned. At least two of the
four claimed Red-neckeds have provoked disagreement on this crucial aspect. The Committee feels that the fact that adult Little Stints in autumn and early winter look very different from their much commoner juvenile companions is not sufficiently appreciated: adults lack the classic V on the back of juveniles and can look strangely mottled above as their moult progresses. Furthermore, bleaching and wear breaks down their chestnut tones into those resembling other adult and immature stints. Finally, there is the well-known—but continuing—difficulty of assessing voice as heard by differing human ears.

If greater clarity can be obtained on the diagnostic characters of Red-necked, the Committee will reconsider all the above claims, but, for the moment, all is caution. Meanwhile, if a suspect Red-necked is trapped, the biometric and detailed plumage data in Prater et al. (1977) must be carefully read to ensure that every helpful character is recorded or checked.

The Committee appeals for further assistance in its research of stint identification, particularly with the haunting Red-necked, and will welcome photographs and comments relevant to the general problems or specific problem individuals.

Acknowledgements
I must note first the efforts of P. J. Grant and the other members of the Rarities Committee who have commented on the earlier drafts of this paper and are responsible for the revised judgments published within it. I also thank A. J. Prater and J. H. Marchant for suggestions on the form of the identification section and, more particularly, for providing would-be wader identifiers with their excellent guide (Guide to the Identification and Ageing of Holarctic Waders, 1977). Finally, I must praise the skill of the photographers, especially Dr Pamela Harrison whose pictures of the 1965 Dungeness and 1967 Sevenoaks birds provided an invaluable record and greatly aided the general research.

Summary
In May 1978, the Rarities Committee completed a 26-month review of the 12 published British records of Semipalmated Sandpiper Calidris pusilla and four claims of Red-necked Stint C. ruficollis. In the light of new criteria established since 1974 and the greater strictness necessary to ensure that atypical Little Stints C. minuta are not identified as their rarer consins, the Committee has upheld only five records of Semipalmated Sandpiper and has not admitted, for the time being, any of the Red-necked Stints. The important field characters of Semipalmated are summarised. The reasons behind the changes in judgment and the general caution are discussed.

References

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