

Identification pitfalls and assessment problems

4 Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*

Once known, the Buff-breasted Sandpiper should not present an identification problem: the only confusion might be with a juvenile Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, especially a small female. Unlike the Ruff, the Buff-breasted Sandpiper is a *small* wader; although males average slightly larger than females, it is only slightly taller than a Dunlin *Calidris alpina*. It looks diminutive compared with a male Ruff, and even small female Ruffs are noticeably bigger. Although similar in shape, it is more delicate, with a

continued...



76. Juvenile Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*, Scilly, September 1970
(J. B. & S. Bottomley)

short, straight, fine bill, a small head, a long, slim body, and medium-longish legs. Apart from fine black spotting on the sides of the breast, it is uniformly pale buff from the face to the undertail-coverts, although it does become paler on the flanks and vent area. The eye stands out strongly on a bland, plain-looking face. A fine pale eye-ring may be visible at close range, while the finely streaked crown can sometimes give a slightly capped appearance. The upperparts are blackish-brown, with the feathers finely but noticeably fringed pale buff; on juveniles the edgings are broadest and most obvious on the wing-coverts. The legs are noticeably ochre-yellow, although mud-staining may occasionally dull the colour to brownish. The Ruff, as well as being larger and taller, is less delicately proportioned; it is slightly longer billed, longer necked, longer legged and bulkier bodied. On plumage, a Buff-breasted Sandpiper should not be confused with an adult Ruff: in summer, female Ruffs have noticeable black mottling on both the upperparts and underparts, while in winter both sexes are essentially pale grey, usually with strikingly orange legs. Only juvenile Ruffs may present a problem: they too are buff below, but the colour is usually deeper and more orange in tone, fading to whitish on the flanks and belly. The upperparts are prominently scaled with coarse buff edgings, while the legs are invariably dull grey-green or brownish. In flight, any confusion should be instantly eliminated. The Ruff is long winged, with an effortless, easy wing action; there is a prominent whitish wing bar and two prominent white oval patches on the sides of the rump, though some individuals virtually lack the dark central bar, giving a white crescent-shaped rump patch. The Buff-breasted Sandpiper always looks small in flight (only slightly larger than a Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*), and, when seen from below, its short bill

and shape may suggest a small plover. The upperwing in flight is plain, and, although there are narrow pale tips to the greater coverts, it lacks a pale wing bar. The pale-edged wing-coverts of juveniles contrast somewhat with the darker primaries. Unlike the Ruff, the rump appears plain, but the tail has a dark central bar with greyer sides. The underwing is noticeably white, but with dark leading underwing-coverts, a dark trailing edge on the primaries and secondaries and a noticeable dark crescent on the greater under primary coverts. Unlike the Ruff, the legs do not project beyond the tail.

Most individuals seen in Britain are juveniles but, unlike most waders, it may take very close views to make an age-diagnosis. Juveniles have a dark subterminal crescent and a complete, broad whitish fringe on each of the upperwing-coverts (plain with a dark centre on adults), and whitish fringes to the mantle and scapulars (buff on adults). In autumn, adult plumage is likely to be more worn than that of juveniles.

The Buff-breasted Sandpiper is usually associated with short grass habitats, such as airfields and golf courses, but does occur in freshwater habitats, such as reservoirs, where it frequently associates with other small waders; in such habitats, it tends to feed on slightly drier mud, away from the water's edge. When feeding, the stance is often horizontal, the legs are flexed and the head is slightly bobbed while walking. It is an active feeder, walking quickly but daintily, pecking every two or three steps. The actions are, however, rather erratic, with frequent changes of direction, perhaps recalling a phalarope *Phalaropus*. The Ruff, on the other hand, is rather more purposeful, with a smoother, more confident walk, and a slower, more deliberate picking action. The two feeding actions may at times appear more similar, so differences should be used with caution. When found on 77. Juvenile Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* (in comparison with Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*, note proportionately longer bill, longer legs and longer neck, coarser scaling on upperparts, and less bland face; in real life, larger size, more orangey underparts, and dull greenish or brownish legs would also be apparent), Cornwall, September 1981 (*G. P. Sutton*)



their own, Buff-breasted Sandpipers are invariably tame, often allowing approaches to within a few metres. When stalked too closely, they may crouch low and 'freeze'; when pursued too far, they may run off in front of the observer with the neck extended. Like Ruffs, they seldom call on passage; the only call I have ever heard is an instantly forgettable low, rather gruff 'chu'

KEITH VINICOMBE

49 Trelawny Road, Cotham, Bristol BS6 6DY