

# Letters

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**The Felixstowe stint** Having studied in detail the article by P. J. Grant (*Brit. Birds* 79: 617-621) regarding the identification of the Felixstowe stint, I am of the opinion that his apparently conclusive eight-point identification in favour of Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla* is rather more open to doubt than it would appear. Following the eight-point summary of the original article:

1. Although the bill is described as 'not too long for an extreme long-billed Semipalmated', there is no explanation as to how the actual bill length was calculated. How much emphasis has been placed solely on plates 317-319? If these plates have been relied upon to a large extent, surely the photographic aspect of each should have been dealt with in detail? Measurements based solely on plates 317 and 318, one head-on and the other slightly turned away, would both give shorter measurements than a full side-on photograph; foreshortening caused by the use of telephoto lenses would also be involved. In plate 272, taken from a greater distance, a slightly different photographic angle makes the bill appear appreciably longer than in plate 318. In addition, from plates 270 & 271, the bill could look much finer-tipped than is shown in plate 317.

As to the conclusion drawn from point 1, that the bill is not too long for an extreme individual Semipalmated, surely, by inference, the bill is not 'too short' for a Western Sandpiper *C. mauri*, so this point cannot be taken to favour either case?

2. The bill shape quoted as 'thick for its whole length' must be based on plate 317, as the bill looks much finer-tipped in plates 318 and 270. In 317, the tip of the bill is slightly blurred at the edges, suggesting slight movement which may be contributing to its apparent thickness. In plate 272, water adhering to the underside of the bill tip gives the same thickening effect, one common in photographs of waders which have paused during feeding in water. Given only the published photographs of Western Sandpiper for comparison, there appear to be no appreciable differences in shape and decurvature between the bills shown in plates 317 and 320. The shape of the Felixstowe bird's bill certainly appears very similar to that of Westerns shown on plate 273.

3. The statement that the crown and ear-coverts are uniformly dark and clear-cut is just not borne out by plates 317 and 318, and presumably refers to plate 319. Here again, the effect of photographic under-exposure has affected the appearance of the bird, and this cannot be regarded as a reliable feature. Indeed, the crown and ear-covert pattern shown in plate 317 appears to be the same as that shown in plate 320.

4. The prominence of the 'complete white eye-ring' appears to be shown equally by plates 318 and 320 and is more prominent in 320 than 321. While this general feature is clearly shown in some photographs of Semipalmated, it appears to be lacking in others, such as those of the Ballycotton individual of September 1982 (*Irish Birds* 2: 387, plate 49; *Brit. Birds* 74: 508, plate 294).

Secondly, when the eye-ring is studied closely, that shown on the Felixstowe bird, plates 317 and 318, can clearly be seen not to be 'complete', but broken in front of the eye, the same as on the Westerns in plates 320 and 323; whereas that of the Semipalmated in plate 321 is unbroken, as is that shown in *Brit. Birds* 76: 511, plate 213. Could this point then be taken as pro-Western?

5. The 'Supercilium rather narrower and clear-cut in front of eye' is not supported by plate 317 and the under-exposure of plate 319 gives a false impression of contrast between the crown, ear-coverts and supercilium.

6. The almost total lack of any fringes to the upper scapulars, presumably lost through wear, seems to fail to demonstrate whether or not they were initially rufous on the inner webs; even on Semipalmated, there should be a much broader fringe (e.g. plate 321).

7. Any difference in shape between the remaining visible lower scapulars in plate 318 and those in plate 320 would appear to be at best minimal, especially taking into account the obvious wear visible at the feather tips.



**270 & 271.** Stint *Calidris*, accepted by the BBRC as Semipalmated Sandpiper *C. pusilla*, Suffolk, November 1982 (left Colin Slater, right David Bowes)

8. Again, the visible difference in breast-side markings between plates 319 and 323 would seem to be minimal from the evidence presented.

Other points not mentioned in the discussion which seem more pro-Western include: (a) the presence of some unmoulted lower scapulars with rufous centres, not mentioned under Semipalmated in *Brit. Birds* 77: 303-304, points more towards Western; (b) the long tarsi, very obvious and striking in the field (and shown in plate 319 as easily equalling those of the Western in plate 320), and the more apparent palmations; (c) the shape of the unmoulted row of upper scapulars is clearly rounded,

**272.** Stint *Calidris*, accepted by the BBRC as Semipalmated Sandpiper *C. pusilla*, Suffolk, November 1982 (Colin Slater)





273. Western Sandpipers *Calidris mauri*, Peru, July 1981 (Ed Mackrill)

whereas most photographs of Semipalmated show distinctly anchor-shaped feathers here (e.g. *Brit. Birds* 74: 506, plates 289 & 290; 76: 511, plate 213); (d) the actual jizz/behaviour/feeding action of the bird seems to have received no mention. If, however, the comment in *British Birds* (77: 304) regarding Western 'feeding action often (more methodical, with less frequent pecks and more probing) and Dunlin-like; tends to wade in deeper water than do other stints' is in any way accurate, then the Felixstowe bird fitted perfectly. It spent most of its time feeding with Dunlins *C. alpina* (often belly-deep and almost always at least knee-deep in water) and looking like a miniature version of them; most observers claimed it as suggesting a small Dunlin rather than a stint, both in size and jizz.

In conclusion, therefore, I would claim that of the eight 'diagnostic' points in favour of identification as Semipalmated Sandpiper, at least six are very open to question and at least three alternative points could be used to argue in a similar way for identification as Western Sandpiper. It would thus seem to be unwise at this stage to make such a certain claim of correct identification.

As no single point appears to be totally diagnostic, it would surely be preferable to leave the record open until such time as we are presented with a fully proven case; perhaps a photograph of the much-discussed 'long-billed' Canadian birds, which could, by inference, look similar to the Felixstowe stint, as no other published Semipalmated photographs do.

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The BBRC worked from numerous photographs of the Felixstowe individual, not simply those published in *British Birds*. EDS

**The Felixstowe stint** Without attempting to detract from the excellent diagnosis of the identification of the 'Felixstowe stint' by P. J. Grant (*Brit. Birds* 79: 617-621), an additional feature which has many times been described in the literature is perhaps worth reiterating in regard to this individual. Prolonged views of about 50 Semipalmated Sandpipers *Calidris pusilla* in Ontario, Canada, and six Western Sandpipers *C. mauri* in British Columbia, Canada, in August 1986 left me in no doubt as to the quite distinct differences in body shape between the two species:

**SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER** Generally appeared dumpy, plump and compact-bodied, mainly the result of being distinctly full-breasted and pot-bellied. At times, appeared very 'round-backed', further emphasising the dumpy, rotund look, or 'flat-backed' (though never so strikingly as on Western owing to Semipalmated's less attenuated appearance). Carriage of body higher above the horizontal, in more upright posture than that of Western.

**WESTERN SANDPIPER** Generally appeared very long and slender-bodied, very often strikingly 'flat-backed'. At times, appeared more round-shouldered. Squat postures would make individuals appear dumpier, though never so pot-bellied, rotund and compact as most Semipalmateds, though this more a consequence of body shape and stance than angle alone.

This experience applied to my memories and notes taken during three hours' observations of the Felixstowe stint on 2nd November 1982, as well as examining photographs taken by Tim Loseby, clearly indicate the body shape and structure to be closest to those of Semipalmated Sandpiper. Furthermore, I believe that this structural difference is clearly hinted at by the comments of North American birders that it 'looks much more like Semipalmated than Western.'

It is important to remember that these structural differences are of any real use only in conjunction with all other field characters.

Incidentally, I was in the 'Western camp' until I had the opportunity to study both species, when the seeds of doubt were sown, and finally confirmed on seeing P. J. Grant's analysis.

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The long, tapered body, flat back and round shoulders of Western Sandpiper were mentioned by Jonsson & Grant (*Brit. Birds* 77: 293-315). Eds

**The Felixstowe stint** Grant (1986) discussed the identification of four problematic stints, including one, either Semipalmated *Calidris pusilla* or Western Sandpiper *C. mauri*, present at Felixstowe, Suffolk, from 30th October 1982 to April 1983. I believe that Grant's rationale for its identification as Semipalmated is based on the application of criteria that are in some cases unproven or incorrect or that do not rule out Western.

On arrival, the bird's plumage was substantially as shown in plates 317-319 of Grant's article, taken on 21st November 1982. It was well advanced in moult from juvenile to first-winter plumage, and though it retained some 'identification-important' juvenile feathers, notably amongst the scapulars, they were old and much abraded. This significantly undermines the efficacy of the scapular fringe coloration as a useful identification criterion for this individual, a factor not acknowledged by Grant. Yet 'any rufous tones become reduced through wear and fading, so that juveniles [stints in general] average less rufous

later in the autumn' (Jonsson & Grant 1984), so it is reasonable to insist that this consideration must be applied in the analysis of the Felixstowe stint.

Compounding this oversight, colour photographs of full juvenile Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers are presented, inviting direct, unqualified comparisons (plates 320 & 321). These photographs are labelled 'September', thus depicting birds at least seven, and perhaps as much as eleven weeks earlier in the autumn, and in a rather different state of plumage from that shown by the Felixstowe bird in plates 317-319.

To address Grant's eight-point summary:

1. Bill length: 'Bill not too long for an extreme long-billed Semipalmated . . .', thus, presumably, not too short for a Western either. From the plates, an accurate measurement of bill length is not possible, though in plate 319, given that the bill tip is apparently buried in mud, the bill length appears to be at least three times that of the loral distance.
2. Bill shape: the photographs do not allow a precise judgment of the degree of bill-tip expansion, which 'can be assessed when the bill is viewed head-on with the bill held slightly downwards' (Jonsson & Grant 1984). A slight bill-tip expansion, comparable with that illustrated for both species in fig. 119 of Jonsson & Grant (1984), could, however, be seen in the field (pers. obs., C. D. R. Heard *in litt.*). The bill of the Felixstowe stint lacked the blunt-tipped shape of classic Semipalmated (in plate 319, it is clearly slightly open); to me, it appeared long and comparatively fine-tipped.
3. Head pattern: 'Crown and ear-coverts rather uniform and dark, giving contrasting pattern and making supercilium more prominent and clear-cut . . .'. First, the crown clearly has a mixture of juvenile and first-winter feathers, making an exact determination of what the pattern was when the bird was in full juvenile plumage difficult or impossible. Secondly, the photographic evidence is contradictory: compare plates 317 and 318, where the supercilium does not contrast greatly with the ear-coverts and sides of the crown, and where the centre of the crown is clearly more heavily marked (by retained juvenile feathers), with plate 319, where a change in lighting conditions and focus have produced a clear-cut, capped effect and dark ear-coverts. Which is correct? The former seems more likely, but it is a classic illustration of the caution needed in the interpretation of photographs.
4. Prominence of eye-ring: 'Supercilium faintly grey-streaked over eye, so that white eye-ring complete (not all-white, lacking upper half of eye-ring, as on typical Western).' Yet the juvenile Western Sandpiper depicted on plate 320, immediately below this statement, clearly shows faint grey streaks throughout the supercilium—including the area above the eye—and a clear and discrete upper half to the eye-ring (as does the winter-plumage Western depicted in *Brit. Birds* 78: 291, plate 126). I believe this character to be of little value in distinguishing between the two species.
5. Width of supercilium: 'Supercilium rather narrower and clear-cut in front of eye . . .'. Plate 319 shows the fore-supercilium to be narrower than the extreme rear, whilst plates 317 and 318 show the fore part of the supercilium as apparently the widest. Moulting of the crown feathers, however, makes determination of precise supercilium shape difficult in all photographs and, notably, we believe that the bird had lost a number of feathers at the base of the bill when the photographs were taken; earlier observations noted that the supercilia joined across the forehead (pers. obs., C. D. R. Heard *in litt.*).
6. Coloration and pattern of retained juvenile upper scapulars: 'Fringes on inner webs of retained juvenile upper scapulars thin and only slightly (if at all) warmer-toned than rest of upperparts . . .'. As noted above, these feathers are old and had been subject to wear and fading. In fact, field notes from early November record narrow, warmer-toned fringes to the upper scapulars (pers. obs., C. D. R. Heard *in litt.*). Would a Semipalmated with similarly worn scapulars show any warm tones at all (see plate 114, fig. C, in Jonsson & Grant 1984)?

7. Shape of rear lower scapulars: 'Tips of rear lower scapulars rounded (not rather pointed as on typical Western) . . .'. This feature is not mentioned in Jonsson & Grant (1984), but examination of their plate 120 indicates that the differences in the shape and pattern of the upper row of lower scapulars is marginal and thus perhaps unreliable when these feathers are abraded (see also *Brit. Birds* 76: plate 213, where the rear feather of the upper row of lower scapulars on an October juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper is noticeably pointed).

8. Breast pattern: 'Breast-side streaking rather thin, diffuse and extensive (slightly thicker, sharper and more restricted on juvenile Western)'. Comparison of plates 317 and 318 with fig. 5 and plates 114 and 116 of Jonsson & Grant (1984), however, puts the Felixstowe stint as close to Western as to Semipalmated, with sparse, thin and clear-cut streaking; though the fact that the bird is in body moult militates against any firm conclusion.

Based on these eight points, Grant concluded that the bird was a Semipalmated Sandpiper, and the record was accepted as such after its third circulation of the Rarities Committee. Whilst he has demonstrated that the bird should not be accepted as a Western Sandpiper, he has not, in my opinion, proved that it should be accepted as a Semipalmated Sandpiper. Of his eight points, I judge six to be indeterminate, one (the eye-ring) to be spurious, and another (the shape of the rear lower scapulars) to be of unproven validity. Grant acknowledges that none of these criteria is diagnostic of Semipalmated; his is a 'composite' identification, based especially on his evaluation of the head pattern and upper-scapular coloration, the two characters I feel to be the least useful in this case. That being so, he is enshrining these characters in the literature, especially for a problem bird, when their value remains open to question.

I am indebted to Rod Martins and C. D. R. Heard for comments on a draft of this note and to the latter for five years of interesting discussion.

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#### REFERENCES

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 JONSSON, L., & GRANT, P. J. 1984. Identification of stints and peeps. *Brit. Birds* 77: 293-315.

P. J. Grant has commented (79: 621) in relation to this record: 'Debate over the identification of this individual will doubtless continue, hopefully aided by the reasons given here for acceptance as Semipalmated. Naturally, it is hoped that the BBRC's carefully considered decision was correct, and that it will become more widely endorsed among the many observers who studied the bird during its stay. It should be stressed, however, that (as with all rarity decisions), this case is not closed, and the BBRC will always review the record on receipt of a considered, contrary case.' The above contributions were received in response to this invitation. Further comments should be sent direct to the BBRC's Hon. Secretary, M. J. Rogers, Bag End, Churchtown, Towednack, Cornwall TR26 3AZ. EDS

**First European record of Dead Sea Sparrow** During the first week of October 1972, the Danish Ornithological Society (Dansk Ornithologisk Forening) visited the Greek island of Rhodes. On several visits to the tamarisks outside Kalithea (the northernmost town on the east coast), we

noticed a flock of approximately 20 Dead Sea Sparrows *Passer moabiticus*, the first record of this species in Europe.

Summers-Smith (1988) mentioned recently discovered breeding in Cyprus and records from the Mediterranean coast of southern Turkey. Birdwatchers visiting the islands in the eastern part of the Aegean Sea should look out for this interesting new colonist of Europe.

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