

Stilt Sandpiper *Calidris himantopus*



Folk Name: Sand Chicken

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Rare

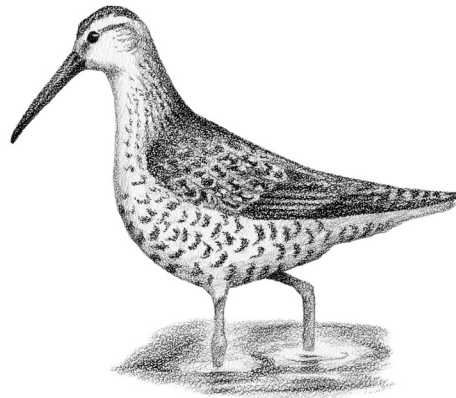
Habitat: Mudflats

This elusive shorebird is a rare stray in this part of the Piedmont. It has been observed fewer than 15 times in the region. It was reported twice in the month of May, and the remainder of the birds were fall migrants, showing up between July and the end of October. All but two of these sightings have been of individual Stilt Sandpipers, and all were found in “mudflat”-like habitat, usually in association with various other shorebirds.

Lois Goforth, an experienced birder and beloved teacher, found three Stilt Sandpipers during the Iredell County Spring Bird Count on May 13, 1973. They were on the edge of her 5 acre lake near Olin. She first heard the birds calling and watched them circle the lake. After the birds landed, Goforth noted “the barred breast and distinctive face pattern.” The birds didn’t stay long... arriving in the late afternoon and disappearing by the next morning.

David Wright found a Stilt Sandpiper foraging along the edge of the coal ash ponds at the Riverbend Steam Station in Gaston County, immediately adjacent to the Mecklenburg County line, on October 21, 1984. The bird remained there 6 days. The following year, Wright documented the first record of this species in Mecklenburg County. He found two Stilt Sandpipers in “almost full breeding plumage” that were visiting the drying beds at the McAlpine WWTP in Pineville on July 25, 1985. He watched the pair for 15 minutes while they were actively feeding on the ground, and he watched them in flight. Later that summer, he and Heathy Walker found another one at the same location on 17 August, and, the following month, birders reported individual birds in the same general location on both 1 September and 21 September.

Taylor Piephoff discovered a Stilt Sandpiper migrating



through Mecklenburg County on September 4, 1990, and another one moving through on July 14, 1996. Rob Van Epps reported one visiting a mudflat at the Wallace Dairy Farm off Eastfield Road on May 13, 1997, and he found a second Stilt Sandpiper at the same location on May 6, 2000. He enthusiastically described this breeding adult as a strikingly “beautiful bird.” In the fall of 2001, three sightings of Stilt Sandpipers were reported at Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County, just 2 miles east of the Mecklenburg County line. On August 9, 2002, another Stilt Sandpiper was recorded visiting mudflats on the edge of the large observation pond located at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge.

The first physical evidence of this rare migrant in the region was obtained by Kevin Metcalf. He located and photographed a pair of Stilt Sandpipers in Pineville at the McAlpine WWTP on September 15, 2011. One of the birds was in juvenile plumage. He described the bill of the bird he photographed as being thinner and shorter than the bill of a dowitcher and noted it was “slightly drooped” at the tip. Our most recent record is of two Stilt Sandpipers reported on Lake Norman in Catawba County on August 24, 2015.