

(Jarrett Wyant)



Scolopacidae the SANDPIPERS and PHALAROPES

Birds in the family Scolopacidae (sandpipers) and the family Charadriidae (plovers) are together generally referred to as “shorebirds.” Twenty-four members of the Scolopacidae are described below. Two additional members in this family have been seen in the region and are discussed in the Supplementary Bird List. This family is made up of a variety of small to medium-sized wading birds of many shapes and sizes. In general, they have longer bills and longer legs than plovers. They use their bills to probe in the sand for a variety of insects, mollusks, and other invertebrates. They continuously walk while feeding, whereas plovers walk and stop. Most sandpipers are less than 12 inches tall. Many species can be quickly identified, while others can be very hard to differentiate. Most are found in this region only during migration. Only one is a regular breeding bird here.

The term “snipe” was once used generically to indicate all types of sandpipers. At the turn of the twentieth century, populations of many sandpipers had been severely impacted by overhunting. *The Gastonia Gazette* published this notice on December 2, 1902: “The American Ornithologists’ Union will hold its convention in Philadelphia next year, on Nov. 16th. The committee on bird protection reported that on the North Carolina coast forty thousand game birds, mostly sandpipers, were recently killed for millinery purposes and their bodies thrown away.”

Two years later, after the passage of the Audubon Law in North Carolina, *The Charlotte Observer* posted this report from the Mecklenburg County game warden:

Game Warden John W. Upchurch, of this county, has returned from a visit to several counties in the interest of the Audubon game law, and will soon go on another trip. He says he finds considerable ignorance as to the law, but that when it is understood it was well liked. Various counties have all sorts of laws and some people think they can shoot all the birds except those mentioned in the special act of that county, no matter in what season. In one county, for example, the only game birds mentioned are partridges and doves. Snipe are now barred, as the open season for them ends March 15th. If snipe had not been protected market hunters would have killed those on the coast by thousands up to the end of May and shipped them North to be put in cold storage. Sportsmen will bear in mind the fact that the law has to guard against all this sort of thing. A year ago your correspondent found along the coast these pot hunters and secured their prompt exit from the State. They brought down shells by the thousands and hired men to help kill beach birds, mainly snipe, willet, and curlew, which they would ship North as rapidly as possible.

Over the past century, conservation efforts have helped stabilize many sandpiper populations, but some are still in serious trouble. More details on shorebirds and shorebird conservation efforts are provided in the introduction to the family Charadriidae.