

Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*



Folk Name: Peep

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Very Rare to Rare

Habitat: Mudflats

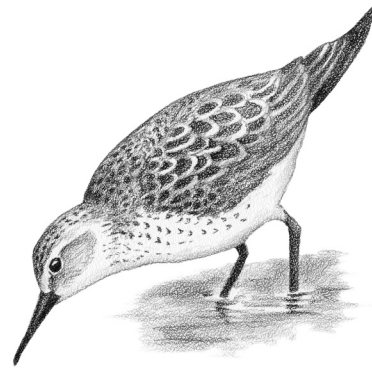
Birders often misidentify the Western Sandpiper and the Semipalmated Sandpiper. The two look very similar and great care should be taken when trying to differentiate between them. The Western Sandpiper is a very rare migrant in this region. It may be overlooked in flocks of other peeps.

A recent study on the diet of the Western Sandpiper provided new insight into the dietary needs of many types of migrating shorebirds. Scientists discovered that Western Sandpipers feed on a substance called “biofilm” at their migratory stopover sites. Biofilm is “a thin layer of sugars and microbes that grows on the surface of mudflats.” Fecal analysis revealed that, at some sites, biofilm comprises as much as half of this bird’s diet. Stopover habitats with extensive mudflats harboring rich supplies of biofilm are a vital link in the long-distance migration of these sandpipers and many other shorebird species. One birder in this region, Kevin Metcalf, had already noted sandpipers’ affinity for feeding in these microhabitats on mudflats in our region, and had labelled them “muck zones.”

Our earliest dated report is of a lone Western Sandpiper found by David Wright on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count held on December 31, 1983. The bird was seen with a group of Least Sandpipers for comparison. Wright found six at the wastewater treatment plant in Pineville on July 25, 1985. Taylor Piephoff found two Western Sandpipers in breeding plumage at Creech’s Pond in York County on May 7, 1988. This report is cited as the first detailed report for a spring sighting of Western Sandpiper ever recorded in the interior of South Carolina.

Lyle Campbell reported three at Needmore in Spartanburg County in the spring of 1997. Six were reported at the Broad River Wildlife Management Area in Fairfield County on August 15, 1998. Three were reported at Claremont in Catawba County on July 14, 1999. Three were reported on Lake Hickory in Caldwell County on August 31, 2002.

A possible Western was reported at the Wallace Dairy Farm in northeastern Mecklenburg County on May 23, 2002. The observer couldn’t confirm that it wasn’t a Semipalmated, but believed it to be a Western. John Bonestell reported one at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge



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on August 14, 2005, and Judy Walker reported one there on August 27, 2007.

Ron Clark reported a pair at the McAlpine WWTP in Pineville on August 18, 2011. Steve Tracy reported one in Gaston County while he was helping out with the Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count on December 18, 2011. He described this bird as a “[p]eep sandpiper with dark legs...less than half the size of nearby Killdeer. Bill slightly down-curved.”

There have been five reports from Catawba County in recent years. One Western Sandpiper was reported on Lake Norman near Mountain Creek Cove on September 15, 2011, and single birds were reported on Lookout Shoals Lake on August 29, 2012, and at Riverbend Park on September 1, 2012. A total of five were seen at the Upper Lake Norman Cove on August 12, 2015, and one was reported at Mountain Creek Cove on August 16, 2015.



Western Sandpiper (right) with Least Sandpiper on Governor’s Island in Lincoln County. (Chris Talkington)