

FIRST RECORD OF THE LITTLE STINT FOR MEXICO

MARSHALL J. ILIFF, 246 E. 16th Street, Unit B, Costa Mesa, California 92627

BRIAN L. SULLIVAN, PRBO Conservation Science, 4990 Shoreline Highway, Stinson Beach, California 94970

TONY LEUKERING, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, 14500 Lark Bunting Lane, Brighton, Colorado 80603

BRIAN P. GIBBONS, 7824 El Pensador, Dallas, Texas 75248

ABSTRACT: A juvenile Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*) occurred at Estero Punta Banda, Baja California, Mexico, from 22 to 30 October 2002. The Little Stint breeds in the northern Palearctic and winters primarily in Africa and India. Since 1975 it has been found with increasing regularity as a vagrant in the New World, primarily in Alaska. The observation we report is the first record for Mexico and the first photographically documented record for Middle America.

The Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*) is one of seven small similarly plumaged arctic-breeding shorebirds known collectively in the United States and Canada as peeps and in Britain as stints. Members of this group pose considerable field identification challenges, the most difficult of which arise among the four small, black-legged species: the Semipalmated (*C. pusilla*) and Western (*C. mauri*) Sandpipers and the Little and Red-necked (*C. ruficollis*) Stints, all of which are similar in size, structure, and plumage.

WORLD RANGE

The Little Stint is a long-distance migrant breeding in the high Arctic and wintering primarily in Africa. It has a world population estimated at 1,434,000 (del Hoyo et al. 1996). From June to August it breeds from northern Scandinavia east through north-central Siberia (del Hoyo et al. 1996, American Ornithologists' Union [A.O.U.] 1998), occasionally as far east as the Chukchi Peninsula at Siberia's northeastern tip (Russian literature cited by Gibson and Kessel 1992). It winters throughout Africa and the Mediterranean and east through the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf to India and Myanmar (del Hoyo et al. 1996, Zimmerman et al. 1996, A.O.U. 1998, Grimmett et al. 1999); it winters rarely in Britain and southeastern Madagascar (del Hoyo et al. 1996). The Little Stint migrates widely through Europe and western Asia, typically moving south to southwest from its arctic breeding grounds. Increased attention from birders has revealed it to be rare but regular in Thailand (J. L. Dunn pers. comm.) and Hong Kong (spring only; Carey et al. 2001). Vagrants have occurred in the Cape Verde Islands, Iceland, the Faroes, Spitsbergen, Bear Island, Japan, Brunei, Papua New Guinea, and Australia (Hayman et al. 1986, Brazil 1991); there are no records from Greenland (Boertmann 1994). Fall migration takes place from July through November, spring migration from April to early June (Hayman et al. 1986). Juveniles begin their migration in late August, later than the passage of most adults, which peaks during July and early August (Hayman et al. 1986). Many immatures remain on the wintering grounds throughout their first year (del Hoyo et al. 1996).

FIRST RECORD OF THE LITTLE STINT FOR MEXICO

In the New World vagrant Little Stints have been increasing in frequency since the first records in 1975 (Pellow 1976, Byrd and Day 1986). Of 91 New World records through August 2004, 22 are for on the east coast, 34 for Alaska, and 18 for the west coast south of Alaska (Ilf and Sullivan in press). Outlying records have hailed from the interior United States and Canada (7 records), Hawaii (3 records), Bermuda (1 record), Montserrat (1 record), Barbados (4 records), and South Georgia Island (1 record; Iliff and Sullivan in press). The occurrences of adults in the New World peak from late April to early June and from mid-July to late August, while those of juveniles extend from late August to late October (Ilf and Sullivan in press). Although both age classes have occurred on both coasts, juveniles have been detected more often on the west coast (Ilf and Sullivan 2004).

RESOURCES FOR FIELD IDENTIFICATION

The field identification of the four species of small black-legged peeps remains one of the more challenging problems within the family Scolopacidae and the genus *Calidris*. In particular, the Red-necked and Little Stints can be so similar in basic plumage that even some specimens have been considered unidentifiable. A classic example illustrating the difficulty of this group is a second-year stint collected at the Salton Sea, Imperial County, California, 17 August 1974 (Erickson and Hamilton 2001; San Diego Natural History Museum 38887). Although it was initially identified as a Red-necked Stint (McCaskie 1975), and the identification was supported by Veit (1988), it is still considered unidentifiable by the California Bird Records Committee (Erickson and Hamilton 2001). Similarly, the Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers are so similar in basic plumage that their respective winter ranges were determined only recently (Phillips 1975).

Wallace (1974) was the first to treat field identification of small *Calidris* sandpipers in depth. Jonsson and Grant (1984) and Veit and Jonsson (1984) updated and expanded on further advancements in the subject; the former treated the issue from a European perspective, the latter from a New World viewpoint. Identification criteria have changed little since, and readers are referred to those two excellent sources. Other excellent treatments of the field identification of small *Calidris* sandpipers are found in the illustrated field guides by Jonsson (1993), Mullarney et al. (1999), and Sibley (2000).

FIRST RECORD FOR MEXICO

At 1030 PDT 22 October 2002, we visited the south end of Estero Punta Banda in northwestern Baja California to check two small impoundments for shorebirds. Sullivan brought the group's attention to a small peep foraging on the shoreline 10 m away; its features initially suggested the Semipalmated Sandpiper. We quickly realized that it was neither a Western Sandpiper nor a Least Sandpiper (*C. minutilla*), and that the bill appeared too slender and the plumage too bright for a typical Semipalmated Sandpiper. Noticing the split supercilium, pale stripes or braces on the mantle, and unusual breast pattern, Iliff tentatively identified it as a juvenile Little Stint, and we imme-

FIRST RECORD OF THE LITTLE STINT FOR MEXICO

diately unloaded the vehicle to obtain photos and examine the bird more closely. Before any photos were secured, the bird took flight, circled around us, and settled again in the pond to the south. In flight, Sullivan and Gibbons noted the bird's soft, repeated, "tsit" call. It took us approximately 5 minutes to relocate the bird, as it apparently had shifted to the far side of the south pond. Once it was relocated, we were able to confirm that this individual possessed a suite of field marks consistent with a juvenile Little Stint. The bird spent much of its time feeding along the near edge of the north pond and allowed us to approach within 5 to 10 m. Realizing that this individual represented a first record for Mexico, we spent the next hour observing, sketching, and photographing the bird at close range (Figures 1–5). Other small sandpipers with it included 90 Dunlins (*C. alpina*), 35 Western and 30 Least Sandpipers, nine Short-billed (*Limnodromus griseus*), and one Long-billed Dowitchers (*L. scolopaceus*), as well as seven additional species of larger shorebirds.

Richard A. Erickson, Peter Gaede, Robert A. Hamilton, and Michael San Miguel next visited the location on 26 October 2002. Aware of our sighting, the group searched for the Little Stint from 1345 to 1430 PDT but to no avail. The same observers returned the following morning and found the bird feeding and roosting in the same location where we had first observed it on 22 October. They studied the bird from 0630 to 0920 PST, and Hamilton recorded 30 seconds of digital video, including audio recordings of the "tsit" call. The same observers returned to the pond on 30 October 2002 at 1300 PST and found the Little Stint still present. The next searches for the stint were 29–30 November 2002 by Kurt A. Rademaker and 18–19 December 2002 by Iliff and San Miguel, but the stint was not seen again.

Description

The following description was compiled with reference to our field notes and photographs. Topography follows Veit and Jonsson (1984).

Size and structure. In direct comparison, the Little Stint was much smaller than the Dunlin and slightly smaller than the Western Sandpiper. In body size it closely resembled the Least Sandpiper, but it differed in shape. Compared to the squat, short-necked, and short-legged look of the Least Sandpiper, the Little Stint appeared long-legged, long-necked, and long-winged, all of which gave it a comparatively slender appearance. This was especially noticeable when the bird tipped forward to feed, holding its wings and tail up at an angle of 20° to 40°, recalling the feeding posture of the Stilt Sandpiper (*C. himantopus*; Figures 2 and 4). The Least and Western Sandpipers present appeared proportionally shorter legged and assumed a more horizontal posture when feeding. The wings were fairly long with at least two primary tips visible beyond the tail tip and three primary tips visible beyond the tertials (Figures 1 and 5).

The bill shape was distinctive, being fairly long (about 2/3 head length) and almost perfectly straight (Figure 1). The tip of the bill drooped slightly, though this feature was not as pronounced as on nearby Western or Least Sandpipers. Compared with that of the Semipalmated Sandpiper (though none was present for direct comparison), the bill appeared longer, more

FIRST RECORD OF THE LITTLE STINT FOR MEXICO



Figure 1. Juvenile Little Stint, Estero Punta Banda, Baja California, Mexico, 22 October 2002. Side profile showing straight bill, bold head pattern, and the patterns of the scapulars, tertials, and upperwing covert. A juvenile Red-necked Stint would not have as obvious a pale mantle “V,” would lack the prominent split supercilium, would have plainer wing coverts and tertials, would be shorter-legged with a more squat appearance, and would average shorter and thicker-billed.

Photo by Brian L. Sullivan

slender, and did not have a notably bulbous tip. The bird’s unusual bill structure was the first indication that this individual was not a Semipalmated Sandpiper and, for Iliff, it immediately recalled previous experience with Little Stints in Africa and New Jersey.

Several times we carefully observed the feet—best seen while the bird was preening or running—and were able to confirm the lack of webbing between the toes, eliminating both the Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers. Given similar views of Western Sandpipers, we found the webbing between the toes easy to discern. In addition, we were able to confirm the presence of a hallux, eliminating the larger Sanderling (*C. alba*), a species that has been confused with stints (Figure 4).

Plumage and soft parts. From its uniform brightness and the warm color evident on the upper breast sides, crown, tertials, and wing coverts, the bird was clearly still in full juvenal plumage (Figure 1). The wing coverts had crisp and well-defined buff edgings to otherwise dark-centered feathers (Figures 4 and 5). Although lacking any fresh pale gray of basic or winter plumage, the bird did appear to have begun its postjuvenal molt, having one row of lower scapulars missing.

FIRST RECORD OF THE LITTLE STINT FOR MEXICO



Figure 2. Juvenile Little Stint, Estero Punta Banda, Baja California, Mexico, 22 October 2002. Feeding posture emphasizing long, straight bill, pale mantle stripes, flared tertials, and long rear.

Photo by Brian L. Sullivan



Figure 3. Juvenile Little Stint, Estero Punta Banda, Baja California, Mexico, 22 October 2002. When viewed head on, the pattern of the split supercilium became striking, as did the bold dark central crown and clean white throat and lower malar region. The dusky grayish wash across the upper breast was also evident in this posture.

Photo by Marshall J. Iliff

The head pattern was striking, particularly when the bird was viewed head on (Figure 3). A dark crown and eyeline were set off by a strong supercilium and a narrow lateral crown stripe that merged with the supercilium above and in front of the eye. This head pattern, shared by several species of sandpipers, is typically referred to as a split supercilium (Veit and Jonsson 1984). The supercilium extended from the upper edge of the base of the maxilla to well behind the eye and broadened noticeably behind the eye. The supercilium split on the forehead just above the eye, and the much narrower pale lateral crown stripe extended parallel to the supercilium and ended at a point just below the rear crown. The supercilium and the lateral crown stripe contained small dark streaks. Though difficult to discern, these streaks were most prominent at the rear, where the supercilium blended into the nape and rear crown, and were less noticeable in the supercilium than in the lateral crown stripe. The forecrown was pale, except for a narrow strip of dark feathering extending from just above the maxilla to the crown (Figure 3). The entire crown was dark, producing a capped appearance. This dark crown was composed of dark brown feathers, finely edged with rufous (Figures 2 and 4). At the rear

FIRST RECORD OF THE LITTLE STINT FOR MEXICO

margin of the dark crown patch was a rufous-orange band, making the rear portion of the crown seem quite bright from certain angles (Figures 1 and 2). The lores were dark with a narrow medium-gray line extending through the eye, expanding slightly just behind and below the eye and forming a gray triangular patch on the lower auriculars (Figure 1).

The pale gray, lightly streaked hindneck and lower cheeks set off the prominent face pattern. The throat was well defined and unmarked whitish. The belly, flanks, vent, and undertail coverts were unmarked pale or whitish. The upper breast was crossed by a very faint smooth pale gray wash, forming a dusky breast band of medium width (Figure 3). The breast band was visible in good light given head-on views, but it was pale enough that it was rarely visible at other angles. The faint breast band connected warm buff-orange extensions on either side of the upper breast, above the wings, recalling the pattern of the adult Little Stint in alternate plumage. As on an adult, the warm buff area on the sides of the breast was marked internally with some indistinct dark spotting. A finger of white penetrated along the leading edge of the folded wing, resulting in a fingerlike extension of white into the dark upperparts, recalling the pattern of a basic-plumaged Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularius*; Figure 4).

The pale gray hindneck contrasted strongly with the dark back. Some pale rufous edges on the back feathers remained, but it seemed that most edges had been worn away. On either side of the back, a single well-defined line of white-tipped feathers traced a white "V" pattern on the back, boldest on the lower mantle (Figure 2). The upper scapulars were more strongly marked, being dark brown in the centers and retaining substantial orange fringes. The first row of lower scapulars (most distal) appeared quite pale, apparently because the pale gray bases of these feathers were exposed. This pattern might have been due to the second row (next most proximal) of lower scapulars having been dropped in the beginnings of a postjuvenile molt. Indeed, photos show just one row of lower scapulars (Figures 1, 2 and 4). The lower scapulars each appeared to have a prominent anchor pattern: their bases were gray, their fringes were orangish, and their tips were medium brown with a darker brown shaft streak that widened to follow the contour of the feather and form an anchorlike shape. The wing coverts contrasted slightly with the rest of the upperparts, being medium brown with narrow buff to whitish fringes. The folded wing showed prominent white tips to the greater coverts. The most proximal two or three median secondary coverts had a faint rufous tinge that set them off from the rest of the wing. The tertials were worn but still brightly edged with rufous-buff. The shortest (innermost) tertial retained a fairly bright rufous-orange edge. The next tertial, distally, had a somewhat paler fringe, with the next tertial being even paler and only faintly edged with rufous or buff. The longest tertial seemed especially tattered and retained only a worn whitish edge. The longest primaries were visible beyond the tertials and were dark, almost blackish, with very narrow pale fringes detectable only under ideal conditions.

In flight, a fairly strong white wing stripe was evident, though it was not noticeably different from the similar pattern shown by Western and Least Sandpipers. Photos show the underwings were mostly pale, with pure white

FIRST RECORD OF THE LITTLE STINT FOR MEXICO

axillars and pale gray underwing coverts. The leading edge of the underwing was dark, penetrated by a narrow strip of white near the body, and the outer three primaries were mostly pale whitish below with an extensive dark tip and narrow dark leading edge. The tail was dark centrally and at the tip but white along the basal edges, forming a "T" pattern. The rump was dark in the center but whitish along the edges, as on all small *Calidris* sandpipers except the White-rumped Sandpiper (*C. fuscicollis*) and Temminck's Stint (*C. temminckii*).

The eye, bill, legs, and feet were black. We scrutinized the soft parts carefully to discern true skin color and to rule out the possibility of mud affecting overall impressions. No mud was visible on the bill or legs (Figure 1).

Voice. The Little Stint called regularly throughout the observation, both in flight and during territorial disputes. While in flight, it gave a soft high-pitched "tsit" call, often more exaggerated when it was chasing Western Sandpipers. This call was reminiscent of the flight call of the Sanderling but higher-pitched.

While feeding and defending territory along the shoreline, the Little Stint regularly gave a series of 7 or 8 high-pitched "twee" notes, run together in a series of approximately 1.5 seconds duration. This call was reminiscent of similar calls given by Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers and also recalled the begging call of a juvenile Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*).

Behavior. During our 90-minute observation, the Little Stint spent about 1/3 of its time roosting and 2/3 of its time feeding. When roosting, it associated more closely with a flock of approximately 30 Dunlins than with nearby groups of Western Sandpipers. It typically flew in to join the roosting Dunlins, positioned itself along the periphery of the flock, and rested on one leg with head tucked. At times, the bird seemed unsettled and periodically ran around the perimeter of the roosting birds. Typically, after 5 to 10 minutes resting it returned to feeding.

While feeding, it vigorously defended 15 m of shoreline against Western Sandpipers. It chased Least Sandpipers on several occasions but only once showed aggression toward Dunlins. Aggressive encounters usually involved the Little Stint flying directly at the intruder and calling ("tsit") repeatedly while chasing it. The Little Stint usually abandoned the chase approximately 10–15 m outside its favored stretch of shoreline, then returned to the defended area and resumed feeding. Often these chases involved an unusual flight, in which the Little Stint approached an invading *Calidris* with slow, labored wingbeats. Leukering likened the wing action to that of a displaying Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperi*), and Gibbons found it reminiscent of breeding display flights of other species of *Calidris* that he had observed on the north slope of Alaska at Prudhoe Bay. The unique defensive behavior of this individual set it apart from the other small *Calidris* sandpipers.

When feeding, the Little Stint walked hurriedly along the shoreline, intermittently picking at the water's surface. It rarely paused, and its head was in nearly constant motion (Figure 5). This behavior was consistent with the active, darting feeding behavior described in several field guides (Zimmerman et al. 1996, Grimmitt et al. 1999, Sibley 2000). The stint spent most of its time walking in the shallows about 20 cm to 1 m offshore, often wading to

FIRST RECORD OF THE LITTLE STINT FOR MEXICO



Figure 4. Juvenile Little Stint, Estero Punta Banda, Baja California, Mexico, 22 October 2002. Side view accentuating the rufous spotting on the sides of the upper breast, dark auriculars, rufous patch on the rear crown, and pale hind neck.

Photo by Brian L. Sullivan



Figure 5. Juvenile Little Stint, Estero Punta Banda, Baja California, Mexico, 22 October 2002. During active feeding, the bird looked rather slim overall, long-necked and long-winged.

Photo by Brian L. Sullivan

FIRST RECORD OF THE LITTLE STINT FOR MEXICO

above the ankle. It rarely fed in the wet mud above the water line, for less than 1 minute at a time.

ELIMINATION OF SIMILAR SPECIES

In the field we quickly realized that the Little Stint was one of the paler, grayer, black-legged species rather than one of the browner species of *Calidris* with yellowish or greenish legs (i.e., Least Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint, or Long-toed Stint). The distinctive call and lack of vestigial webbing between the toes eliminated the Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers. Those species were also ruled out by plumage characters, notably by the combination of the split supercilium, the white mantle stripes, the rich, spotted color on the chest contrasting with a white throat, and the extensive orange fringing on the coverts and tertials. Additionally, the long-legged look and slender, straight, fine-tipped bill was unlike the shape of Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers.

A juvenile Red-necked Stint was considerably more difficult to eliminate. The stint we observed showed a pattern on the breast recalling that of an adult Little Stint in breeding plumage: the white throat contrasted strongly with a lobe of orangish color, with blackish internal spotting, extending onto the sides of the breast. The juvenile Red-necked Stint has a grayish breastband with faint streaks on the sides. The split supercilium is another feature shown by the Little but not the Red-necked Stint. The well-marked upperparts were distinctive as well, with pale mantle stripes setting off extensive orange fringes on the coverts and tertials. The Red-necked Stint tends to be duller above, lacking prominent white stripes on the mantle and having pale greater coverts and tertials that show an obvious shaft streak and lack the colorful edges. The call note, a high "tsit," was unlike calls given by the Red-necked Stint: a raspy "quiiit" (Sibley 2000) or "chriit" (Mullarney et al. 1999) or a dry, flat "chut" without the piercing quality of a Little Stint's call (Veit and Jonsson 1983). Structural features provided a final clue. The long-legged look and long slender bill gave an appearance unlike the squat, shorter-legged, and shorter-billed look of the Red-necked Stint.

DISCUSSION

The Little Stint at Estero Punta Banda represents the first record for Middle America and the southernmost record on the North American mainland; in the New World only records from Barbados, Montserrat, and South Georgia Island are more southerly (Iliff and Sullivan 2004). Other than a specimen collected 21 November 1988 at Harper Dry Lake, California, a bird that may have been attempting to winter (Heindel and Garrett 1995), the Little Stint at Estero Punta Banda is the latest recorded in North America. Since the shorebird numbers and species present on 22 October 2002 at Estero Punta Banda were typical of midwinter, we considered the possibility that the Little Stint might attempt to winter locally. A midwinter visit, however, failed to locate the bird, although relocating it would prove difficult if the bird moved away from the small ponds where it was first discovered. The estero

FIRST RECORD OF THE LITTLE STINT FOR MEXICO

encompasses several square kilometers of suitable mudflat and marsh that harbors several thousand wintering peeps; a winter-plumaged Little Stint would be exceedingly difficult to detect at any distance.

LITERATURE CITED

- American Ornithologists' Union (AOU). 1998. Check-List of North American Birds, 7th ed. Am. Ornithol. Union, Washington, D.C.
- Boertmann, D. 1994. An annotated checklist to the birds of Greenland. *Meddelelser om Grønland. Bioscience* 38:2-63.
- Brazil, M. A. 1991. *The Birds of Japan*. Smithsonian Inst. Press, Washington, D.C.
- Byrd, G. V., and Day, R. H. 1986. The avifauna of Buldir Island, Aleutian Islands, Alaska. *Arctic* 39:109-118.
- Carey, G. C., Chalmers, M. L., Diskui, D. A., Kennerley, P. R., Leader, P. J., Leven, M. R., Lewthwaite, R. W., Melville, D. S., Turnbull, M., and Young, L. 2001. *The Avifauna of Hong Kong*. Hong Kong Birdwatching Soc., Hong Kong.
- Del Hoyo, J., Elliot, A., and Sargatal, J., eds. 1996. *Handbook of the Birds of the World. Hoatzin to Auks*. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.
- Erickson, R. A., and Hamilton, R. A. 2001. Report of the California Records Committee: 1998 records. *W. Birds* 32:13-49.
- Gibson, D. D., and Kessel, B. 1992. Seventy-four new avian taxa documented in Alaska 1976-1991. *Condor* 94:454-467.
- Grimmett, R., Inskipp, C., and Inskipp, T. 1999. *A Guide to the Birds of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives*. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J.
- Hayman, P., Marchant, J., and Prater, T. 1986. *Shorebirds: An Identification Guide to the Waders of the World*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Heindel, M. T., and Garrett, K.L. 1995. Sixteenth annual report of the California Bird Records Committee. *W. Birds* 26: 1-33.
- Ilf, M. J., and Sullivan, B. L. 2004. Little Stint in North America and the Hawaiian Islands: A review of status and distribution. *N. Am. Birds* 58:316-323.
- Jonsson, L. 1993. *Birds of Europe, with North Africa and the Middle East*. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J.
- Jonsson, L., and Grant, P. J. 1984. Identification of stints and peeps. *Br. Birds* 77:293-315.
- McCaskie, G. 1975. A Rufous-necked Sandpiper in southern California. *W. Birds* 6:111-113.
- Mullarney, K., Svensson, L., Zetterström, D., and Grant, P. J. 1999. *Birds of Europe*. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J.
- Pellow, K. 1976. A Little Stint in Bermuda. *Am. Birds* 30:918.
- Phillips, A. R. 1975. Semipalmated Sandpiper: Identification, migrations, summer and winter ranges. *Am. Birds* 29:799-806.
- Sibley, D. A. 2000. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. Knopf, New York.
- Veit, R. R. 1988. Identification of the Salton Sea Rufous-necked Sandpiper. *W. Birds* 19:165-169.

FIRST RECORD OF THE LITTLE STINT FOR MEXICO

- Veit, R. R., and Jonsson, L. 1984. Field identification of smaller sandpipers within the genus *Calidris*. *Am. Birds* 38:853-876.
- Wallace, D. I. M. 1974. Field identification of small species within the genus *Calidris*. *Br. Birds* 67:1-17.
- Zimmerman, D. A., Turner, D.A., and Pearson, D.J. 1996. *Birds of Kenya and Northern Tanzania*. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J.

Accepted 22 August 2004