

A PURPLE SANDPIPER IN OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN S. SHACKFORD

In mid-afternoon on 9 December 1977, at the north end of Lake Overholser in Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma, I happened upon a dark, medium-sized sandpiper that puzzled me. It was feeding with several Killdeers (*Charadrius vociferus*) and Least Sandpipers (*Calidris minutilla*) among low sandy islets well out from the shore. The lake was being filled by the Oklahoma City Water Resources Department at the time, so the sandy islands were gradually disappearing. The puzzling sandpiper was a bit smaller and shorter-legged than the Killdeers and noticeably larger than the Least Sandpipers. In shape and actions it reminded me strongly of a Red Knot (*C. canutus*), though it seemed small for that species. The air temperature was about 25°F. at the time of the sighting, but it had dropped to 8°F. during the preceding night. The lake as



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Photographed on 11 December 1977 by John S. Shackford at the north end of Lake Overholser in Oklahoma City. The impoundment's coffer dam shows at lower right.

a whole had not frozen over, but ice was forming along the shore. Since I was not dressed for wading, I did not get close to the bird, though I had fair looks at it through my binocular.

Returning an hour later with waterproof footgear and camera, I was able to observe the sandpiper much more closely. It was dark ashy gray on the head, neck, breast, and upperparts and white on the belly. Its orange legs and incomplete white eye-ring were noticeable. Orange at the base of its bill was less bright than that of its legs. The gray of its upperparts had a purple tone at times. When it flew it uttered callnotes that sounded like *whit* and *whit-whit*. Its spread wings showed much white, but its rump, upper tail coverts, and tail were all dark. After following the bird about and photographing it several times, I decided that it could be no other species than a Purple Sandpiper (*C. maritima*), a bird that had never been recorded in Oklahoma.

Later that afternoon (1700), Henry Walter and I returned to the stretch of shore along which I had seen the sandpiper, this time with a 15-60X telescope, found the bird without difficulty, and checked all fieldmarks carefully.

On 10 December, John G. Newell and Hubert Harris became the third and fourth persons to see the unfamiliar bird. Later that day several other members of the Oklahoma City Audubon Society as well as Deloris Isted of Cushing, Oklahoma, and Gary M. Lee and his wife, Ellen, of Tulsa, Oklahoma, all saw it. By this time the rising water level had greatly reduced the size of the sandy islets, and the sandpiper was feeding along the shore proper. To everyone's surprise it was quite approachable. Observers were able at times to get to within 8 or 10 feet. Occasionally it stood in water so deep that its legs were not visible, but I did not see it swim. Several color photographs that W. S. Isaacs and I took turned out well.

On 11 December several enthusiastic bird students from Tulsa, including Eleanor Sieg, Kenneth Hayes, and his wife Elizabeth, saw it. The sandy islets had disappeared. But now, after several days of cold weather, a broad rim of ice extended well out from shore in most places. The sandpiper spent much time upon the frozen rim picking at organic debris that it found there. Jack S. Roberts made color photographs and motion pictures of this activity. Later, when the bird had flown to the shore, I took several more photographs, this time in black-and-white. Roberts and I were often within 10 yards of the bird.

On 12 December the lake was so full that water was no longer being released into it. Also the ice was quickly disappearing. Warmer weather was melting it and waves created by a strong south wind were breaking it up. About 1100 I peered over the edge of a retaining wall and saw, almost directly below me, the Purple Sandpiper. It was standing upon the mass of floating driftwood that had accumulated in a corner formed by the retaining wall and coffer dam. I retreated almost immediately, fearful that further harassment might drive the bird completely away from Lake Overholser.

On 13 and 14 December I was unable to look for the bird, and so far as I know no one saw it on those dates. On 15 December I failed to find it. I also failed to find any Least Sandpipers, though scattered Killdeers were feeding among debris and at muddy spots near the coffer dam.

Calidris maritima breeds northward to high latitudes in eastern North America and western Eurasia and does not, as a rule, move far south of its breeding grounds in winter. In the North American continental interior it is decidedly uncommon. There are scattered records for the Great Lakes, a very few for the Great Plains, and none, so far as I know, for New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. For Missouri there are two, both doubtful: according to Widmann (1907, A preliminary catalog of the birds of Missouri, St. Louis, p. 67), the Purple Sandpiper was on P. R. Hoy's "list of birds taken in western Missouri in the spring of 1854"; the "between April 16 and May 31, 1854" record for Boonville, north-central Missouri mentioned by Bent (1927, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 142: 152) may well be of the same bird. The only record for Arkansas is of a single bird seen along the Mississippi River in Crittenden County, northeastern Arkansas, on 29 and 30 November 1976 (1977, Amer. Birds, 31: 341). Of the dozen or so Texas records, most are for jetties or sea-walls in the vicinity of Galveston and Freeport, but two "unsubstantiated sightings" are for areas well inland: on 23 April 1954, B. B. Watson saw a Purple Sandpiper at Lake Tyler in Smith County, northeastern Texas, and on 29 March 1955, Violet Hamilton saw one at Lake Dallas in Denton County, north-central Texas (Overholser, 1974, The birdlife of Texas, Univ. Texas Press, Austin, 1: 345). These lakes are about 70 and 90 miles, respectively, south of Oklahoma.

The Purple Sandpiper is not entirely the saltwater bird that its scientific name, *maritima* (=maritime), implies. Its breeding habitat, as described by Godfrey (1966, Natl. Mus. Canada Bull. 203: 150), is "moss and lichen tundra, often at considerable elevations and sometimes far inland . . ." In the six-volume work, "Birds of the Soviet Union" (Dement'ev *et al.*, 1969, 3: 187-88), are references to the species' freshwater breeding habitat in the Old World: in 1934 Demme reported populations that nested on Hooker Island, in the Franz Josef Archipelago on "plateau . . . amid large stone fragments near streams and small coastal brooks"; an unnamed source stated that "birds nesting far from sea" apparently were feeding on aquatic annelids (worms) and midge larvae; in 1938 Antipin reported that young birds observed on Novaya Zemlya, although hatched in the "shore zone," moved to "coastal heights, where they keep near brooks." Thus for breeding populations a freshwater habitat appears to be the norm.

After the breeding season the norm for virtually all populations is a salt-water habitat. There are, however, many freshwater records for the non-breeding season, some extending over several weeks. For example, at Niagara Falls, along the U.S.-Canadian border, during the winter of 1974-75, eight

Purple Sandpipers were seen in December and four in January (1975, Amer. Birds, 29: 689).

A significant winter problem is, of course, ice, for ice makes animal food virtually unobtainable. Partly because freshwater freezes at a higher temperature than saltwater, ice usually forms more readily inland than along ocean coasts. During recent winters in the Great Lakes region small, but recurring, numbers of Purple Sandpipers have been reported from points along the 700-mile stretch of freshwater between the south end of Lake Erie and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. If winter and ice force these birds to leave this stretch, they are obliged to fly southward across the great land mass. Under conditions of extreme privation such as these, some birds reach areas that are far indeed from the ocean.

Other species that irregularly appear in Oklahoma may also be victimized by what I have come to think of as the *St. Lawrence shunt*. Among these are the Oldsquaw (*Clangula hyemalis*), Red Knot, Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*), Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*), Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*), Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), and Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*).

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A BALD EAGLE NEST ON THE R. S. KERR RESERVOIR

BY JOHN CARMICHAEL

Considerable attention has recently been paid to the ecology of Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) that winter in Oklahoma (Lish and Lewis, 1975, Proc. 29th Ann. Confer. Southeastern Assn. Game & Fish Commissioners, pp. 415-23). Data filed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range make clear that the species' stay in the state is from early October through the first half of April as a rule, though there are many late-April sightings for northern Oklahoma; an adult bird was seen near Oklahoma City, central Oklahoma, on 8 May 1967; and Lish (1973, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc., 6: 30) has reported seven sightings, each of an immature bird, in Ottawa County, northeastern Oklahoma, during the 1-11 May period 1969-1971. According to Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 117), two adult Bald Eagles summered at Upper Spavinaw Lake in Delaware County, northeastern Oklahoma, in 1950, and that same (or possibly an earlier) year a pair built a nest in the top of a huge sycamore on the west side of Fort Gibson Reservoir in Wagoner County, northeastern Oklahoma, "but no young were reared." As a Park Ranger assigned to the Robert S. Kerr Reservoir, in east-central Oklahoma, I have become accustomed to seeing Bald Eagles about the big impoundment in winter, but in the spring of 1976 one pair surprised me by lingering at least until 10 May. This pair had a nest along Sans Bois Creek in east-central Haskell County about 2 miles west of the town of Keota.