

Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus* in South West Africa

by

P. Becker

Hildesheim, West Germany

R. A. C. Jensen

Nature Conservation and Tourism Division,
South West Africa Administration, Windhoek

H. H. Berry

Nature Conservation and Tourism Division,
South West Africa Administration, Windhoek

ABSTRACT

A number of records of *Limicola falcinellus* (Pontopp.) are reported from the South West African coast. The first records date from November 1964. Two specimens have been collected, both apparently of the nominate race from northern Europe. Mensural data are given, and identification, habitat, habits and moult in winter quarters are discussed.

I OCCURRENCE

The Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus* (Pontoppidan) is an enigmatic species breeding in the extreme northern Palaearctic Region and migrating south to largely unknown wintering grounds presumed to lie mainly in Asia Minor and northern Africa (Gooders 1969). It was first recorded in the Southern African Sub-region by H. von Schwind (pers. comm.) and colleagues in November 1964 at the Swakopmund sewage ponds on the South West African coast (22°38'S 14°32'E). One of us (P.B.) subsequently observed and photographed several examples in the Swakopmund area during the same summer, and collected one of these on 2 January 1965. This specimen appeared then to be in full winter plumage. Its race was not determined, and it has been deposited at the Landesmuseum Hannover, West Germany.

These records were accepted by Winterbottom (1971) but not by Clancey (1969) who apparently misunderstood the supporting evidence.

J. Bierberg (*in litt.*) reported a sighting at Swakopmund on 6 February 1966, but no others were observed until 1973, when R.J. saw a Broad-billed Sandpiper on 2 January, in winter plumage, at Swakopmund Salt Works evaporation pans 15 km north of the town. Shortly thereafter, H.B. mist-netted a specimen on 26 January at night, at Sandwich Harbour 72 km south of Swakopmund. This bird was photographed, preserved and sent to P. A. Clancey for confirmation and racial determination. Clancey (*in litt.*) found that the bird was apparently in "first winter dress, with traces of juvenal plumage still present". Furthermore, although comparative material was not available, he considered it to be probably nominate *falcinellus* (the western race) on the basis of measurements and plumage colour. This specimen is now in the State Museum, Windhoek.

Yet another example, in almost full breeding plumage, was observed on 28 September 1973 at a well-vegetated small pool at Swakopmund sewage works. This bird was seen and photographed by about 10 members of an ornithological symposium excursion, including Messrs P. G. H. Frost, P. F. Woodall, Prof. D. A. Zimmerman and the two junior authors.

Details of measurements and moult for the above two specimens appear in Tables 1 and 2. These specimens and sight records are the only ones of which we are aware from southern Africa, except for a

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very recent specimen collected in Rhodesia by A. J. Tree (in press). The specimens are apparently all first-year birds (see Section V), a situation not unexpected since immatures of many Palaearctic migrants have a greater tendency to "overshoot" on the southward migration than adults (e.g. Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*, vide Brooke *et al.* 1972).

II IDENTIFICATION

The Broad-billed Sandpiper does not appear to have been illustrated in its full winter dress previously, and indeed many descriptions of this dress are inadequate (e.g. Bruun and Singer 1970). Plates 1-6 illustrate most of the identifying features adequately. The broad superciliary stripe is a conspicuous character, but the smaller upper fork of this mark, conspicuous in breeding dress, may often be quite indistinct in full winter plumage (Plates 1, 5). This species is then most likely to be confused with the Dunlin *Calidris alpina* which has a similar tail pattern, and is also a grey and white bird in winter dress. However, the Dunlin has a relatively shorter, more smoothly, slightly decurved bill while the

Broad-billed Sandpiper's is mostly straight, longer, and decurved only near the tip ("kinked"). The latter bird is slightly smaller and has shorter legs. A further good distinguishing feature in non-breeding dress is a dark carpal (shoulder) patch in the Broad-billed Sandpiper, rather like that of a Sanderling *Calidris alba*. The winter dress of *Limicola* is greyer than in Curlew Sandpipers *Calidris ferruginea* or Little Stints *C. minuta* with which they may associate. Breast marking is also more distinct in *Limicola*.

In breeding dress the blackish back and rump form a conspicuous flight pattern character.

III HABITAT AND HABITS

The Broad-billed Sandpiper is said to be tame but secretive and to frequent well-vegetated waters both in summer (Gooders 1969, Peterson *et al.* 1966) and winter (Etchécopar and Hüe 1967). These facts coupled with its resemblance to other small sandpipers may have caused it to be overlooked in southern Africa in the past. Our own observations and

Table 1. Measurements of *Limicola falcinellus* from S.W.A.

Date	Sex	Total Length	Weight	Wing	Tail	Culmen	Tarsus
2/1/65	♂	177mm	37,5g	106mm	38mm	29,9mm	22,5mm
26/1/73	♂	167	26.0	106	39	30,8	21.0

Soft part colours: Legs: Olive, darker joints;
 Bill: Dark brown to black; olive or olive-yellow base to mandible;
 Iris: Dark brown.

Table 2. Moults of *Limicola falcinellus* from S.W.A.

Date	Primaries*	Secondaries*	Tail		Body	Neck-Head
			Left	Right		
2/1/65	Old	12 sheath, 13-14 new on both wings. Gr. Coverts moulting, left more advanced; descendant. Lesser & Marginal Coverts old.	1,6 growing, 2-5 old.	2,6 growing 1,3-5 old.	Scapulars new, dorsal and ventral contour feathers mostly new.	No moult, mostly new (winter dress)
26/1/73	1-6 new, 7 almost complete, 8 sheath, 9-10 old (both wings)	All new secondaries. Gr. Coverts new, Lesser Coverts moulting, Marginals old.	Appears all new		Few old (juv.) feathers; rump and lower back mostly old.	Mostly new (winter dress)

* Ascendant numbering for secondaries, descendant for primaries (i.e. from carpals)

those of von Schwind (pers. comm.) indicate that the species utilizes a rather wide range of habitat in South West Africa, and may often mix with other small waders, both its own and other species. The 1964-5 birds were observed on the beach at Swakopmund (at that time the bay had become a lagoon through formation of a sandspit), at a filtering tank and vegetation-fringed ponds at the sewage works, and on brackish pools in the Swakop River bed about 6 km from the coast. Some birds were seen to commute between beach and sewage works, about 4 km apart.

Sometimes the species was observed in company with Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints, as was the case with the 1975 sightings. Other individuals were alone. One bird observed in 1964-5 had a definite feeding territory along the beach, which it defended in interspecific encounters. Further notes appear in Becker (1974).

According to Gooders (1969) the Broad-billed Sandpiper feeds mainly on small molluscs in the non-breeding season (but cf. Tree, in press). The September 1975 bird at Swakopmund was observed probing rapidly in a mud ridge just above the waterline.

Contrary to statements in the literature, we did not find this species to be exceptionally tame, although some individuals allowed close approach in a vehicle.

IV MOULT

Moult patterns of the two specimens are not dissimilar, taking the time differential into account (Table 2). Tree (*in litt.*) informed us that his bird, also a first-year male, was not in moult when collected on 5 November. It would appear, therefore, that all three known specimens from Southern Africa are first-year birds, and that, as in other migrant sandpipers, this age class moults rather late.

The birds are already much duller in November with more washed-out markings, than is the case with the August passage birds in Europe. Birds observed by P.B. in November at Swakopmund rapidly assumed the pale grey dorsal colour of full winter dress. The specimen collected on 2 January 1965 was first observed on 12 November 1964, at which time it fitted the above description of November birds. On 22 November a second bird was seen on the beach, at which time the first bird appeared considerably paler than the new arrival, due to its more advanced contour-feather moult. An age-difference is possibly indicated here, since in at least some long-distance migrants of the Scolopacidae, adults begin their moult one or two months earlier than juveniles.

By the end of December 1964, the first bird appeared to be in full winter dress, almost Sanderling-like in its paleness.

V PARASITES

Ectoparasites were collected from the 1975 specimen by H.B., and identified by Dr T. R. Clay of the British Museum (Natural History). They comprised three Mallophaga, a female probably of *Actornithophilus umbrinus* (Burmeister 1938) from the Menoponidae, and two Philopteridae, viz. *Carduiceps* sp. (one female only) and *Luniceps falcinellus* Timmermann 1954. Only the last-named has been previously recorded on this host (Clay, *in litt.*).

VI ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are most grateful to: P. A. Clancey, Director of the Durban Museum for checking a specimen for us and drawing our attention to Tree's record; J. E. W. Dixon for preparing a study skin; A. J. Tree and H. von Schwind for valuable information on their respective records, and R. Liversidge for commenting on the manuscript. Dr Theresa Clay kindly identified the parasites, which were referred to her by J. A. Ledger of the S.A. Institute for Medical Research.

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Plate 1. Broad-billed Sandpiper in non-breeding plumage, with Curlew Sandpiper at right, Swakopmund Jan. 1965. (Photo by P. Becker.)



Plate 2. Broad-billed Sandpiper in breeding plumage, Swakopmund Sept. 1973. (Photo by R. A. C. Jensen.)

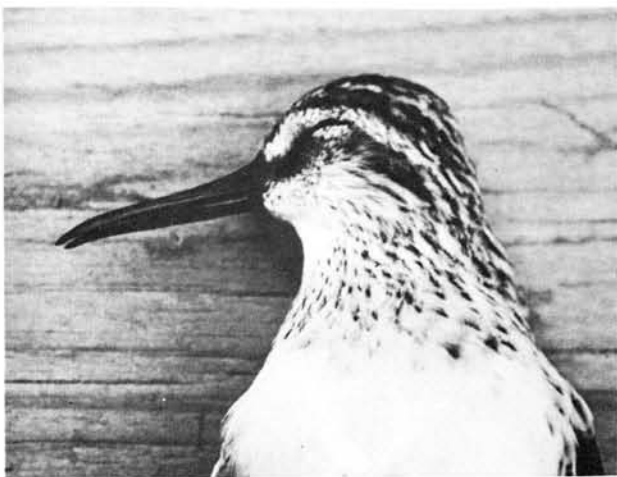


Plate 3. Head of Swakopmund specimen of *Limicola falcinellus*. Note "eyebrow" and breast markings as well as distinctive bill. (Photo by P. Becker.)

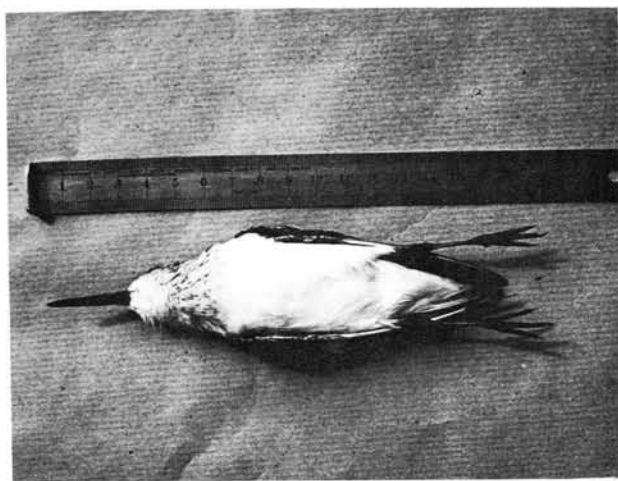


Plate 4. Ventral view of Sandwich Harbour specimen of *L. falcinellus*. (Photo by H. H. Berry.)



Plate 5. Dorsal view of Sandwich Harbour specimen of *L. falcinellus*, note dark rump and tail center. (Photo by H. H. Berry.)



Plate 6. Another dorsal view of Sandwich Harbour specimen, note head markings. (Photo by H. H. Berry.)