



A Hybrid Sandpiper in Newfoundland

Bruce Mactavish and Ken Knowles

On November 8, 2003 Ken Knowles and I were birding Bear Cove on the southeast corner of the Avalon Peninsula. Renowned for vagrant passerines, this site also has a short gravel beach where a build-up of rotting kelp attracts small numbers of shorebirds. Ken had reported seeing a Buff-breasted Sandpiper on the beach and, realizing how late such a record would be in North America, I had to see the bird.

We hastened to the beach and easily located a flock of 35 White-rumped Sandpipers probing busily in the kelp pile. All we could see was White-rumped Sandpipers until the flock flew off the beach and collectively swirled around the cove before settling again on the kelp. Ken picked out the bird in flight. Looking for a bird bigger than the White-rumped Sandpipers I couldn't see it until the flock landed. There in front of us was indeed a Buff-breasted Sandpiper,

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Hybrid Sandpiper, Bear Cove, Newfoundland, November 8, 2003 (*Bruce Mactavish*).

Note the yellow legs and the buff extending from breast to belly as in Buff-breasted Sandpiper; also note the fine breast streaking extending to the flanks and the long primary projection as in a White-rumped Sandpiper.

complete with buff breast and yellow legs. But wait a minute, something wasn't right. It was too small, and what about the band of breast streaking? We began to think of hybrids.

The overall buff colour and scaly upperparts led us to think at first that it was a hybrid Buff-breasted Sandpiper x Baird's Sandpiper. We watched and photographed it for the next 45 minutes. The hybrid and all the White-rumped Sandpipers were exceptionally tame. They seemed totally oblivious to our presence, with some of the White-rumped Sandpipers actually probing around the legs of our tripods. Lighting conditions were dull and the birds were continually moving, so many of the photographs we took were blurred, but a number of adequate digital and slide film shots were acquired. After examination of these photographs by ourselves and others, our opinion of the probable parents of this bird changed to Buff-breasted Sandpiper and White-rumped Sandpiper.



Hybrid Sandpiper, Bear Cove, Newfoundland, November 8, 2003 (*Bruce Mactavish*).

Note the bland facial expression created by the weak supercilium and the lack of a line behind the eye, and also the high domed head suggestive of a Buff-breasted Sandpiper.



Hybrid Sandpiper, Bear Cove, Newfoundland, November 8, 2003 (*Ken Knowles*).

Note the fine streaking crossing the breast like a White-rumped Sandpiper, and the buff breast and belly like a Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Also note the dark toes, contrasting with the yellow tarsus.



Hybrid Sandpiper, Bear Cove, Newfoundland, November 8, 2003 (*Bruce Mactavish*).

Note the small but distinct white patch in the centre of the rump. White-rumped Sandpiper is one of the few small shorebirds with white in the centre of the rump; Buff-breasted Sandpiper and most *Calidris* shorebirds show a dark line in the centre of the rump.

The bird was slightly bigger than a White-rumped Sandpiper. Its shape appeared similar to that of a White-rumped Sandpiper while it was walking about and probing in the kelp, but when it was alert it would raise its head high, revealing a longer, tapered neck with a little rounded head, very like the jizz of a Buff-breasted Sandpiper. The tarsi and joints were straw yellow but the feet were gray. The tibia was pale gray above the joint, which was yellow like the tarsus. The bill was uniformly dark and similar in length and shape to that of a White-rumped Sandpiper. No calls were heard.

Supporting evidence for a Buff-breasted Sandpiper parent:

- 1) The underparts were buff, a little paler but similar in tone to a Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and extended in the same pattern to just beyond the legs before fading to off-white.
- 2) The legs (tarsi) were straw yellow. The feet and parts of the tibia were gray, indicating hybridization.
- 3) The bird's face had a bland, wide-eyed look. There was darkness in the lores, but the broad, arcing pale area above the eye and the open paleness behind the eye gave the overall impression of a Buff-breasted Sandpiper.

Supporting evidence for a White-rumped Sandpiper parent:

- 1) Fine streaking extended onto the flanks.
- 2) There was a small white patch in the middle of the lower rump visible on all the photographs of that area.
- 3) The folded primaries extended well beyond the tail.

Similar species eliminated

Without getting lost in a myriad of potential parent combinations, we summarise the most obvious reasons why similar species are probably not the parents.

Baird's Sandpiper and White-rumped Sandpiper are the only two shorebirds of this size to share the long primary projection of the hybrid. Baird's Sandpiper does not have streaking on the flanks as did the White-rumped Sandpipers and the hybrid. The small white patch in the lower rump may also be an indication of White-rumped Sandpiper genes.

The yellow legs are features of Pectoral Sandpiper, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Only Buff-breasted Sandpiper has a buff colour extending below the breast to the legs. The plain face exhibited by the hybrid is not a likely consequence of a Pectoral Sandpiper or a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper interbreeding with a White-rumped Sandpiper.

What about a Pectoral Sandpiper x Buff-breasted Sandpiper? This is where the flood-gates of possibilities open. The dark feet should mean that one of the parents lacked yellow legs. There is no way to know for sure.

Conclusion

The bird occurred during a strong wave of migrating White-rumped Sandpipers. In Newfoundland and Labrador there is a major migration of juvenile White-rumped Sandpipers from mid-October to mid-November. Buff-breasted Sandpiper is a rare fall migrant from August 20 to late September, with stragglers to mid-October. Baird's Sandpiper is a rare migrant from August 15 to early October, with stragglers to October 25. Pectoral Sandpiper is an uncommon migrant from late July to late October, with stragglers to the first week of November.

Buff-breasted Sandpiper courtship involves leks. One might wonder how a White-rumped Sandpiper could get mixed up in such an arena of foreign display. As pointed out by Alvaro Jaramillo (pers. comm.), however, a male Buff-breasted Sandpiper, which has nothing to do with the female after mating occurs, would have little to lose by mating with a female White-rumped Sandpiper that happened to walk into the display arena.

The true parents of this bird can never be known. The most obvious physical features suggest that this bird is most likely to be a hybrid Buff-breasted Sandpiper x White-rumped Sandpiper.

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Reference: Mactavish B. and K. Knowles. A Hybrid Sandpiper in Newfoundland. *Birders Journal* Volume 75, February, March and April 2004. p32 - 35. © Birders Journal Publishing. www.birdersjournal.ca

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