

SANDPIPER AT SIGNY ISLAND, SOUTH ORKNEY ISLANDS, DECEMBER 1981–JANUARY 1982

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On 8 December 1981 a small sandpiper was seen briefly at Hillier Moss on the south-east side of Signy Island, South Orkney Islands (60° 43' S, 45° 38' W). A sandpiper, believed to have been the same bird, was seen again at the same site on 26 January 1982 and thereafter daily until 2 February.

During January the sandpiper was watched on a number of occasions for several hours at a time. It appeared to spend much of its time in feeding activities, wading through the glacial meltwater pools on Hillier Moss, stirring the sediments with its feet and delving with its bill. Since these pools support large numbers of the fairy shrimp *Branchinecta gaini* (Order Anostraca) it seems likely that the sandpiper was feeding on these. The only call heard was a monosyllabic 'pip' repeated during the short, direct and level flights made between pools.

A full field description of the bird was made on 26 January and specific features were checked on subsequent sightings after reference to de Schauensee and Phelps (1978). The key features of the original field description were the straw-coloured legs, the pale bill, darkening towards the tip and the dark rump and tail, including the outer tail feathers. The dark rump eliminates the white-rumped sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis* which is a common winter visitor to the Falkland Islands and has been recorded regularly at South Georgia (Prince and Croxall, 1983) and once at the South Shetland Islands (Gajardo and Yanez, 1982). Of the three species of small *Calidris* sandpipers with yellowish legs and pale bills, the lack of white outer tail feathers excludes Temminck's stint *C. Temminckii*. Distinguishing in the field between long-toed stint *C. subminuta* and least sandpiper *C. minutilla* is very difficult indeed and there is insufficient information (e.g. on toe length and the degree of definition of the breast band) to do so in this case. However long-toed stints breed in the north-east Palearctic and migrate in winter to the Malaysian region and Australia and there are no records for the Americas.

In contrast, least sandpipers migrate from their breeding grounds in Arctic Alaska and Canada southwards through the Americas, occasionally reaching northern Chile and central Brazil (Cramp and Simmons, 1982). This species would, therefore, appear by far the most likely to stray further south to Antarctic regions and this sighting would appear to be the most southerly hitherto reported for the species.

If the birds seen in December and January were the same, then the sandpiper remained on Signy for a minimum of 56 days. The bird's fate after 2 February is unknown, although it could (amongst several possibilities) have fallen prey to locally breeding skuas.

Only two sightings of sandpipers have been reported at Signy Island previously: an unidentified wader in November 1954 (Tickell, 1960) and two birds in December 1982–January 1983 (Holdgate, 1965) which may have been upland sandpipers *Bartramia longicauda*. The austral summer of 1981–82 was exceptionally mild and an

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unusually large number of vagrant birds were seen, including Wilson's phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor* and grey phalarope *P. fulicarius*.

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