

## Bird Notes

# A Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri* in Gulf St Vincent, South Australia

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### INTRODUCTION

The Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri* breeds in Alaska and eastern Siberia, and winters in coastal United States, Central America, the Caribbean, and northern South America (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996: 521). It is one of the most abundant shorebirds in North America. Vagrant birds have occurred in Japan, Taiwan and Hawaii (Higgins and Davies 1996), and New Zealand has six accepted records (Jamieson 2013). There have been six reports to the BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) of Western Sandpiper in Australia (all in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, 1969–2015), but none of these have been accepted. This note details a recent sighting I made of a Western Sandpiper in South Australia.

### THE SIGHTING

I was birdwatching at Bald Hill Beach, northern Gulf St Vincent, South Australia, on the afternoon of 19 April 2022. At about 1530 hours, I noticed a shorebird among a small flock of Red-necked Stints *Calidris ruficollis* (Figure 1). About the same size as the stints, perhaps marginally larger, it had a longer bill and plainer back. The flock was roosting at high tide, and allowed quite a close approach of 10 to 20 metres. The weather was fine with good visibility and I took several photographs.

The long bill was noticeable, and the fairly plain grey-brown upperparts had fine dark shaft streaks on the feathers, while the shaft streaks on the stints were much broader (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The Western Sandpiper (bird nearest centre) in a group of Red-necked Stints, at Bald Hill Beach, 19 April 2022. Note its longer bill and plainer back than the stints. Image P. Taylor



**Figure 2.** The Western Sandpiper, showing the high base of the culmen and a few fresh outer scapular feathers.  
Image P. Taylor



**Figure 3.** Comparison of Western Sandpiper (at front) and Red-necked Stint (behind), showing the shorter tail and shorter projection of primary feathers compared with the stint. Image P. Taylor

My photos also showed a rather high base to the culmen of the bill (Figure 2), and the bird appeared to have a shorter tail and shorter projection of the primary feathers (Figure 3) and a longer hind toe than Red-necked Stints.

As the tide continued to come in, the flock had little space to roost on the beach, and all flew off in a north-westerly direction.

Despite several return visits to Bald Hill Beach following this sighting (including by other birdwatchers), the bird could not be located again. I also searched at Port Clinton, Clinton Conservation Park at the head of the gulf, and further south at Thompson Beach.

Unsure of the identification of this bird, I posted my photos on the Australian Twitchers Facebook site (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/718576241555767/posts/5002536423159706>), resulting in much discussion and debate. There was a suggestion of an aberrant Red-necked Stint, but the general consensus was of a Western Sandpiper. A characteristic of this species is partial webbing between the toes; unfortunately, none of the photos I obtained showed the bird's feet.

A joint submission with David James was sent to BARC (case number 1245). David, a former BARC committee member who has had experience with Western Sandpipers, added detailed notes based on my photos. My sighting was accepted by BARC on 17 September 2022; this represents the first confirmed record of Western Sandpiper for Australia.

## DISCUSSION

On acceptance of our submission, BARC provided a report. The main points that confirmed the bird as a Western Sandpiper were:

1. The long bill, which was slightly decurved at the tip.

2. It was aged as a first winter bird, with thin dark shaft streaks on the dorsal contour feathers. The report noted that 'a few fresh outer scapulars (first alternate feathers) showed broader black centres, a feature typical of first alternate Western Sandpiper in northern South America in May to July' (see Figure 2). Red-necked Stints have much broader black shaft streaks at this stage of moult.

3. The high base of the culmen of the bill extending onto the forehead.

The small size and some similarity of Western Sandpipers in non-breeding plumage to other shorebirds makes this species one that could be easily overlooked. This particular bird may well have been in Gulf St Vincent for some time over summer before my sighting.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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