

Ruddy Turnstone

Arenaria interpres

A shorebird that looks almost like a calico cat, the Ruddy Turnstone's orange legs and uniquely patterned black-and-white head and chest make them easy to pick out of a crowd. These long-distance migrants breed in the arctic tundra, but spend the off seasons on rocky shorelines and sandy beaches on both North American coasts (as well as South America, Eurasia, Africa, and Australia). They use their stout, slightly upturned bill to flip debris on the beach to uncover insects and small crustaceans.



Keys to Identification

The Ruddy Turnstone is a short, stocky, and oval-shaped shorebird. They have a stout and slightly upturned bill.

Color Pattern

Breeding males have unique black-and-white markings on the head and throat and a chestnut and black variegated (calico catlike) pattern on the back. Breeding females are paler than males. Nonbreeding adults have brown ghosting of the breeding plumage pattern. Juveniles look similar to nonbreeding birds, but have rusty edges to the feathers. All Ruddy Turnstones have orange legs, but they are brighter during the breeding season. In flight, Ruddy Turnstones show a unique color pattern: white stripe down the back, black tail stripe, white rump, and white stripe down the wings.

Behavior

Ruddy Turnstones flip rocks, pebbles, and seaweed along shorelines in search of food. They rarely wade in waters more than a few inches deep, generally foraging out of the water where the surf deposits shells, rocks, and seaweed. During migration and on the wintering grounds they gather in groups of 10 to over 1,000.

Habitat

Ruddy Turnstones breed in the tundra of northern North America. But many nonbreeding birds also hang around the coastal shores in the lower 48 even in the summer. During migration they use freshwater shorelines, mudflats, rocky shorelines, and sandy beaches. On the wintering grounds they occur along coastal areas with mudflats, sandy beaches, and rocky shores.

Cool Facts

- Young turnstones need to grow up and learn to fly quickly. They take their first flight when they are around 19 days old and fly thousands of miles to the nonbreeding grounds 2 days later. To make things harder, their parents will have departed by this time, leaving the youngsters to make their first migration on their own.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 6.3 - 8.3 inches
- Wingspan - 19.7 - 22.4 inches
- Weight - 3.0 - 6.7 ounces