

Spotted Sandpiper

Actitis macularius

The dapper Spotted Sandpiper makes a great ambassador for the notoriously difficult-to-identify shorebirds. They occur all across North America, they are distinctive in both looks and actions, and they're handsome. They also have intriguing social lives in which females take the lead and males raise the young. With their richly spotted breeding plumage, teetering gait, stuttering wingbeats, and showy courtship dances, this bird is among the most notable and memorable shorebirds in North America.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

The Spotted Sandpiper is a medium-sized shorebird with a bill slightly shorter than its head and a body that tapers to a longish tail. They have a rounded breast and usually appear as though they are leaning forward.

Color Pattern

In breeding season Spotted Sandpipers have bold dark spots on their bright white breast and an orange bill. The back is dark brown. In winter, a Spotted Sandpiper's breast is not spotted; it's plain white, while the back is grayish brown and the bill is pale yellow. In flight, Spotted Sandpipers have a thin white stripe along the wing.

Behavior

Spotted Sandpipers are often solitary and walk with a distinctive teeter, bobbing their tails up and down constantly. When foraging they walk quickly, crouching low, occasionally darting toward prey, all the while bobbing the tail. In flight, Spotted Sandpipers have quick, snappy wingbeats interspersed with glides, keeping their wings below horizontal. Listen for a few high whistled notes as they take off from the shoreline.

Habitat

Look for Spotted Sandpipers nearly anywhere near water—along streambanks, rivers, ponds, lakes, and beaches, particularly on rocky shores. This species is one of the most widespread breeding shorebirds in the United States and is commonly seen near freshwater, even in otherwise arid or forested regions.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 7.1 - 7.9 inches
- Wingspan - 14.6 - 15.7 inches
- Weight - 1.2 - 1.8 ounces

