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The identification of certain small *calidris* sandpipers has confounded birders for many years. In North America, we typically refer to five of these small sandpipers as “peeps”: Least, Semipalmated, Western, Baird’s, and White-rumped Sandpipers. In Britain and elsewhere, the terminology and classifications are a little different, but we will here refer to these five species as “peeps.”

One reason for continued confusion with “peep” sandpipers is that birders concentrate on continually changing plumage field marks for their answers to identification dilemmas. On a given day from late July to early October, most of these small sandpipers can show a number of variable plumage characters, depending upon age and molt. Differences in plumage may be dramatic, with all of the following possibilities: (1) fresh juvenal plumage, (2) transition from juvenal to first-winter (formative) plumage, (3) first-winter (formative) plumage, (4) worn adult breeding (alternate) plumage, (5) transition from breeding (alternate) to nonbreeding (basic) plumage, (6) adult nonbreeding (basic) plumage, and (7) first-summer (first-alternate) plumage. All in one species!

This may sound very confusing—and it is. A helpful alternative to just looking at feathers and plumage patterns is to learn and understand body shapes and structural features of each species, and combine those impressions with specific “body language” that each species shows due to its structural features. Such impressions rarely change with a bird’s age or with time of year, and they are very helpful with field identification.

Cameron Cox has taken this approach to another level in his article on feeding styles and body language of these small sandpipers. Anyone with an open mind and discerning observation skills can find additional helpful ID clues, whether behavioral or related to body language and structural features. All it takes is patience and dedicated observation and study of similar species. Many hypotheses will turn out to be helpful in certain situations, but not others, due to variations within the species, but some will hold true in virtually all conditions. Photos can be particularly misleading because they capture only a split second of structure and behavior, but field observation will give a total picture of body shape, structural features, and body language.

Front Cover Photo

Semipalmated Sandpipers are particularly aggressive during spring and fall migration, frequently engaging in squabbles with neighboring small sandpipers for preferred feeding space. Although they typically confront conspecifics, other species—especially Least and Western Sandpipers—are sometimes recipients of this aggressive behavior. Aggressive body language includes raising the back feathers and tertials, crouching menacingly with the head bowed and tail raised, and even leaping above the enemy and landing on its back, all the while pecking and stabbing the foe. *New York, August.*

Flap Photo 1

This juvenile **Least Sandpiper** is feeding on a mat of algae in shallow water, using its wings to keep from sinking. Because of its light weight and small size (Least Sandpiper is the smallest shorebird in the world), it can feed in marginal habitats that larger shorebirds cannot. The brownish secondaries and dusky flight feathers are good field marks for Least Sandpiper at all ages. This dark underwing pattern differs from that of the four other peeps, and is surprisingly obvious on flying birds.

New York, August.

Flap Photo 2

This photo of a juvenile **Baird’s Sandpiper** shows the distinctive attenuated (long and tapered) body shape and long wings of the species. Compared to White-rumped Sandpiper, which is similar in juvenile plumage, Baird’s has slightly longer wings, a steeper forehead, a straighter and more fine-tipped bill, a more slender body shape, and often a more upright body posture. Baird’s also retains its juvenal plumage later than White-rumped, waiting until it reaches the wintering grounds in South America to molt.

New Jersey, October.

Flap Photo 3

This bird is showing the characteristic body language of a feeding **White-rumped Sandpiper**, with its body tilted upward to the rear and its tail raised. This posture alone enables birders to pick a White-rumped out in a crowd of feeding small shorebirds. Typical White-rumped structure is evident: the bulky chest, the tapered body shape, and the long wings projecting slightly past the tail. First-summer plumage shown here includes a mixture of plumages

(feathers of different generations) on the upperparts, including: nonbreeding-plumage (basic) feathers (for example, the scapulars); scattered breeding-plumage (alternate) feathers; some intermediate feathers (showing features of both breeding and nonbreeding feathers) from the spring molt; and worn retained juvenal wing coverts, tertials, and rectrices. The atypical pale leg color probably reflects low sexual hormone levels.

New York, September.

Flap Photo 4

This breeding-plumage (alternate) **Western Sandpiper** shows characteristic territorial feeding behavior exhibited by migrating birds with elevated hormone levels. When feeding in close proximity to other Westerns, birds will often crouch on bent legs, tilt their bodies forward, and raise their tails in an aggressive posture. They will also raise their tertials and some scapulars to further accentuate their dominance for feeding space. While occasional squabbles might

take place, this behavior may be exhibited by numerous birds feeding in the same location without incident.

Texas, April.

Flap Photo 5

This juvenile **Semipalmated Sandpiper** is also showing typical territorial feeding behavior, similar to the breeding Western in Flap Photo 4. Semipalmateds are particularly aggressive toward each other at feeding locations during migration, with even juveniles, as depicted here, showing aggressive behavior. Body language includes the following: the rear of the bird tilted upward; bent legs with a crouched posture overall; and raised tertials and scapulars. Frequent squabbles result when birds encounter each other, resulting in short fights to establish dominance for a particular feeding space. Typical juvenal plumage is shown here, with neatly arranged, uniform, crisp, pale, fringed upperparts that impart a scaly appearance.

New York, August.



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