

## Buff-breasted Sandpiper in Yolo County: first record for the Central Valley

Jon R. King, Point Reyes Bird Observatory, 4990 Shoreline Highway, Stinson Beach, CA 94970

For the last couple of years, my local summer birding has focused on shorebirds, especially at the City of Davis Wetlands in Yolo County, which often has the premier shorebird habitat in the region during this season. In 2002, I was able to cover this site even more frequently than in the previous two summers, and from late June I was making more-or-less daily visits to survey shorebirds. This intense coverage resulted in a series of local record high counts, early arrival dates, and observations of locally scarce species, such as a Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*), two Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*), at least five Snowy Plovers (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), about seven Baird's Sandpipers (*Calidris bairdii*), a Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*), a Stilt Sandpiper (*Calidris himantopus*), two Solitary Sandpipers (*Tringa solitaria*), over twenty Semipalmated Sandpipers (*Calidris pusilla*), and hundreds of Short-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus griseus*). The frequency of my surveys declined slightly in late August as suitable ponds at the Wetlands progressively dried, and my visit on 2 September 2002 was mainly to see if any shorebird habitat even remained.

As I arrived at Tract 5 around 0730, it was clear that the small pool remaining held hundreds of shorebirds. One of the last birds I found on mud at the southern fringe of the pool was a juvenile Baird's Sandpiper, and knowing that Joan Humphrey needed this species for her Yolo County year list, I gave her a quick cell phone call. Looking back in the spotting scope at 0749, I noted the Baird's was still there, then panning only slightly to the right (north) I came across a juvenile Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*).

Whether the bird had just arrived was unclear, though I strongly suspect so. I watched it, at up to 60x magnification, feeding steadily for about a minute at a distance of roughly 150m, then started a series of phone calls. Joan sounded very surprised when I called her again only three minutes after my previous call! After a few calls I looked back in the scope, and the bird had gone. Fortunately, a quick scan with binoculars found the bird had moved much closer to me, onto a patch of mud only 40m away where it was feeding with Semipalmated Plovers (*Charadrius semipalmatus*). I enjoyed scope-filling views for a few minutes, then made more calls.

At 0800, I heard both Long- (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) and Short-billed dowitchers calling strongly, and looked up from the phone to see all the shorebirds flushing from the tract as an American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) flew low over the water. I heard the Buff-breasted Sandpiper calling, presumably in flight, but never located it among the flocks of

swirling shorebirds. Most birds returned to the tract, but the Buff-breasted Sandpiper was not among them. Joan arrived about five minutes later. Over the next half-hour about a dozen local birders arrived, but despite intensive searching of the Wetlands and nearby sites over the following hours and the next day, the Buff-breasted Sandpiper was never seen again.

Identification of this bird was straightforward. I had studied several vagrant individuals in Britain in the same plumage in great detail, and had seen and heard dozens in various locations in North America in recent years, especially on migration over and around the Gulf of Mexico. Twelve other shorebird species present on Tract 5 the same morning provided ample opportunity for direct comparisons. The following description is based on my field notes (see Figure 1).

**Structure:** Very characteristic, delicate appearance, with small bill and head, medium length neck, and proportionately large, rounded body with potbelly, and fairly long primary extension (though not as elongated as Baird's). Two or three primaries extend beyond the tertials, and the tip of the longest primary roughly falls level with tail tip. Legs medium-long, similar to nearby Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*). Bill short, becoming fine at tip. **Size:** Unlike other nearby species; much larger than Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*), much smaller than Short-billed Dowitcher (both species nearby). Overall body size a little larger than nearby Baird's, but shape very different, so appearing overall significantly larger. **Head:** Entirely washed with rich orange-buff. Delicate black streaking on the crown gives slight capped effect. Subtle black spotting on hindneck to mantle. Almost completely plain orange-buff face punctuated by very pale buff eye ring. **Underparts:** Washed with rich buff, nearly as dark on upper breast as on face, becoming progressively paler through breast and belly, diffusing to off-white on vent. Black streaking from hindneck becomes delicate spotting that wraps onto breast sides. **Upperparts:** Feathers essentially all blackish centrally with narrow whitish fringes, forming a beautiful, frosty scalloped pattern. Visible primary tips dark brown. **Bare parts:** Legs rich yellow, bill blackish, eye dark. **Call:** A rattling "tr-r-r-r", somewhat similar to Baird's (also heard that morning) but slightly harsher and slower. **Behavior:** Fed like a large plover, with slow walks punctuated by picking at the surface, never probing; clearly favored dry and slightly damp mud, did not go into water or softer muddy areas.

Given excellent views, no other wader can be seriously confused with this species. Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) is similar, but differs in many structural characters, having a rather misshapen appearance quite distinct from the plover-like feel of Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Ruff has a longer, thicker based, slightly decurved bill, a less rounded head, and little or no extension of the primaries beyond the tertials giving a more blunt-ended appearance. Juvenile Ruffs often show a prominent pale supercilium and obviously whitish chin and throat, and they lack the orange tone to the buffy head and breast. Juvenile Ruffs also tend to show brown or even rusty

(not gray or whitish) fringes to the upperparts, resulting in a less boldly scalloped appearance, and there is more interior patterning to the scapulars. Ruffs rarely show truly yellow legs, usually having an orange, brown or green tone to the legs. Finally, Ruff averages larger (males often much larger) than Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Other possibly confusing species in a Central Valley context, such as Pectoral and Baird's sandpipers, differ markedly from Buff-breasted in structure, head, breast and upperparts patterns, and in the case of Baird's, leg color.

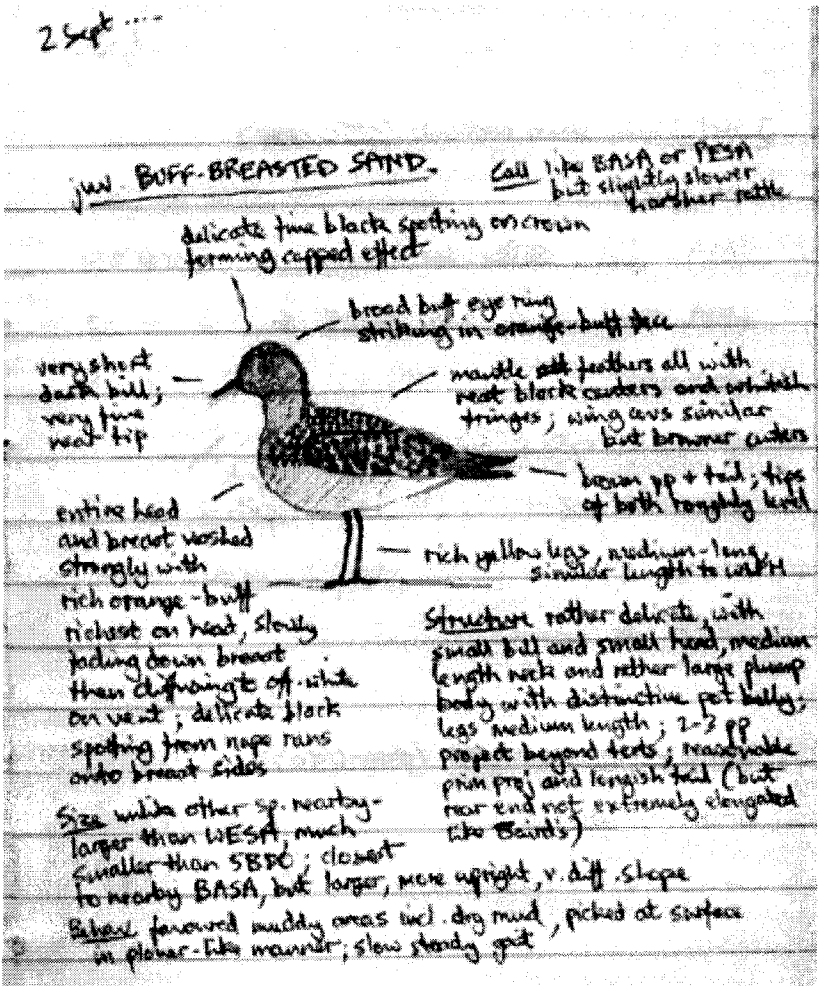


Figure 1. Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*) at the City of Davis Wetlands, Yolo County, on 2 September 2002.

sketch by Jon R. King

This is the first record of Buff-breasted Sandpiper for the Central Valley. Overall, this is a very rare species in interior California, with fewer than 20 records away from coastal locations (California Bird Records Committee files; J. Sterling pers. comm.). The timing of this record is typical however, with almost all California autumn records occurring from late August through September, with a peak in early September (Roberson 1980). Immediately after the Yolo record, the second record for San Clemente Island, Los Angeles County, occurred on 4 September 2002 (Brian Sullivan pers. comm.), and single individuals were found at Point Reyes, Marin County, also on 4 September, and in Del Norte County on 8 September (*vide* postings to the CalBirds listserv).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the City of Davis and especially John McNerney (Wildlife Resources Specialist, City of Davis), for facilitating birder access to the Wetlands, and for their shorebird-friendly habitat management. Local birding colleagues, notably Cliff Hawley, Joan Humphrey, and Steve Hampton, responded quickly to my phone calls, helped to rapidly disseminate the information, and accompanied me many times at the Wetlands this summer; unfortunately this bird didn't stick for them. John Sterling provided information on other California Buff-breasted Sandpiper records. This is PRBO contribution number 832.

#### LITERATURE CITED

Roberson, D. 1980. Rare Birds of the West Coast. Woodstock Publications, Pacific Grove, CA.