

Least Sandpiper - new to Norfolk

Steve Gantlett

At about 9.30am on 7th July 2016 I was in Teal Hide at Cley when I noticed a stint creeping about on some wet mud amongst some long grass out on Pat's Pool. Unfortunately it was some 200 yards away and looking towards Bishop's Hide opposite, so south-east and straight into the light. It was fiercely sunny and there was already a heat-haze, so viewing conditions were horrendous. On top of this, the bird was creeping about slowly over a very small area and spent more than 90% of its time hiding in the grass. Unfortunately, in this position it would not have been viewable from Bishop's Hide (from which direction the morning light would have been much better).

With my 25-50x65 Leica scope, the bird did look interesting. It was creeping about like a Temminck's Stint, but it seemed it might be a little bit dark and rather neatly patterned on the back for a typical adult Temminck's, and it seemed rather boldly and darkly streaked on the breast too. But the viewing conditions really were so horrendous that it was difficult to be sure of anything. If it was something more interesting than a Temminck's, I needed even more optical fire-power and some help. I hurried home for my 50-80x Questar scope and informed Richard Millington that I had a possibly interesting stint. Within 10 minutes I was back again in Teal Hide, and RM joined me with his 20-60x80 Swarovski scope.

The views were a little larger with the higher-powered scopes, but the bird spent even more time hiding and the heat-haze became worse and worse. Nevertheless, the bird continued to look somewhat interesting, so we persevered. I notified other local birders that we had a potentially interesting stint and Trevor Davies soon joined us. Despite watching till nearly 1.00pm, however, the bird came no closer and we obtained no more detail. The bird was behaving like a Temminck's, however, and we gathered that some worn adult Temminck's can be surprisingly dark-plumaged while, importantly, we established that the bird's tail projected beyond its wing-tips. We discussed Long-toed Stint and Least Sandpiper, the only other pale-legged candidates, but Long-toed was eliminated on shape alone; there was no uprightness to its stance. There is a large format Collins Bird Guide in the hide so we consulted that and it confirmed what we thought we knew about Least Sandpiper; a species characterised by its very short tail-end. The rear end of our bird was clearly attenuated, as would be normal for Temminck's Stint. Also, in the glare, its legs looked just pale yellowish, not the quite bright yellow we associated with Least Sandpiper. And then there was its feeding habit: it had a very slow and deliberate, creeping gait, which we associated with Temminck's, and not the more lively picking action we expected of Least.

It was impossible to ascertain the exact pattern of the upperparts but, even so, we seemed to have established that the bird really had to be just an unusually dark-plumaged Temminck's, so I phoned out that identification just before 1.00pm. We still had some lingering doubts, however, and I planned to come back again for another look later in the afternoon, when the sun had come round to a more favourable angle, the heat-haze had died down and the views

would surely be much better. Unfortunately, however, the bird had gone when I returned at about 4.00pm and it was not seen again, despite birders looking for it from then and right through the evening. It seemed to have moved on.

That seemed to be that, but then I visited Daukes Hide with Sue at about 11.00am the next day, and there it was again: mostly hiding in the grass again exactly where it had been the previous morning. James McCallum was already in Daukes Hide, but had not yet seen the bird (hardly surprising as it was hiding in a distant patch of grass most of the time), so I pointed it out to him and phoned it out as 'the Temminck's Stint again on Pat's Pool'.

Unfortunately it was bright and sunny again and the light and viewing conditions were just as appalling as on the previous morning. I was using my 25-50x65 Leica scope again and could ascertain nothing additional to my previous views, so I left James watching and videoing it, while I planned to return later, once again hoping that it would be viewable in the afternoon when the sun had gone round.

There was no more news on the bird after my update, but I returned to Teal Hide in the mid afternoon and there was no sign of the bird. Nor did it come out of hiding in the evening and it was not seen again. That really did seem to be that.

I looked at my photos, blown up to the maximum and they really did not seem to show much detail but, actually, they did not show the bird being all that dark, and they certainly did not show the typically bright yellow legs of Least Sandpiper.

Much later I learned that James had remained watching and videoing the bird from Teal Hide until about 1.00pm on 8th when the bird moved from its chosen spot and went out of sight in the middle of the scrape, and that Nigel Rogers had arrived just as he was leaving. The bird obviously reappeared for Nigel before too long and he took some photographs of it. He later posted one of these on the Cley Bird Club website (captioned as a Temminck's Stint) but I was unaware of this.

Mark Golley (who was away from Cley and working in Paris at the time), however, apparently spotted Nigel's photo on the Cley Bird Club website and instantly realised that, although still very far from ideal, the bird looked more like a Least Sandpiper than a Temminck's Stint. It had clearly been a bit closer and in rather better light when Nigel photographed it.

Mark corresponded with JM who shared his video-grabs with him and analysis of these together with NR's photo fuelled the doubts. The evidence was shared with RM, who sent NR's photographs and JM's video-grabs to Killian Mullarney for his expert opinion.

Killian replied enthusiastically that, while thoroughly appreciating how perplexing it must have been trying to identify the bird in the field when the views were so poor, he believed that there was sufficient detail in NR's photo and the video-grabs to identify the bird with confidence as a Least Sandpiper.

Killian noted that a Temminck's exhibiting *one* anomalous feature is one thing, but as this bird showed *several* anomalous features for Temminck's, all of which were suggestive of Least, it clearly required very critical analysis, especially of any features that deemed to be an obstacle to it being a Least. As an aside, KM noted that the treatment of Least Sandpiper in the Collins Bird Guide reflected the understanding at the time, but did not extend to an appreciation of the real similarity between Least Sandpiper and some heavily-marked adult-breeding Temminck's Stints.

KM went on to say: “Early in the identification process, with so little plumage detail being visible, much weight was put on the fact that the bird clearly had a projection of the tail beyond the wing-tips and that this was considered to be a strong pro-Temminck's feature, but actually, having checked a lot of tail:wing-tip ratios, I think there is a good deal more variation in the two species than I believed at one time, with significant overlap; while I have yet to see a Least with as long a tail-projection as is typical in Temminck's, it seems not to be exceptional for Least to have a short tail-projection, similar to your bird. Furthermore, I do not see your bird as being quite as 'long-bodied' as Temminck's, though I accept that this is a very subjective evaluation, very much 'in the eye of the beholder'. The analogy I would make is that the shape of Temminck's often reminds me of Baird's Sandpiper, whereas even long-tailed Least seem to have a rather dumpy, compact appearance”.

“Since I don't have any difficulty reconciling the shape of your bird with a (long-tailed) Least, I perhaps more easily identify the plumage features with Least too. I don't think I have ever seen a Temminck's, either in life or in a photo, with such a strongly marked head, incorporating pale lateral crown-stripes (or ‘split supercilium’ if you prefer) and prominent supercilium behind the eye; in one or two of the grabs the markings are almost reminiscent of a Broad-billed Sandpiper! Similarly, the well-marked breastband with lines of arrowhead-like streaks, at least a suggestion of pale mantle-stripes and rather prominent pale scapular-stripes (on the third/fourth rows) are indicative of Least. Well-marked Temminck's (individuals with a lot of 'summer patterned' scapular and mantle feathers) often develop prominent, pale internal markings on the larger scapulars, but it seems to be very rare for them to show such a prominent pale scapular stripe, formed by the tips of the third row and bases of the fourth row, as is commonly seen in adult Least; usually the pale-based feathers are scattered more liberally throughout the scapulars. I have yet to find evidence that Temminck's can ever show distinct mantle-stripes.”

“One more feature that I think is indicative of Least is the shade of the outer tail feathers, though I would concede that in photos of this quality, interpretation of such detail is very tenuous indeed. In Temminck's, the outer tail feathers are white, and often eye-catchingly so, if the tail-sides are visible and the rectrices are slightly spread. There is usually no contrast between the outer tail feathers and the white lateral tail coverts. In Least, and other peeps there is often a detectable contrast between the lateral tail coverts and the outer tail feathers; I think I see a suggestion of this slight contrast in some of the images of the Norfolk peep.”

Editor's comment

This is the first record of Least Sandpiper for Norfolk. It occurred in an autumn which brought four other birds to Britain - two together in Devon and, in Ireland, singles in Clare and Wexford.





