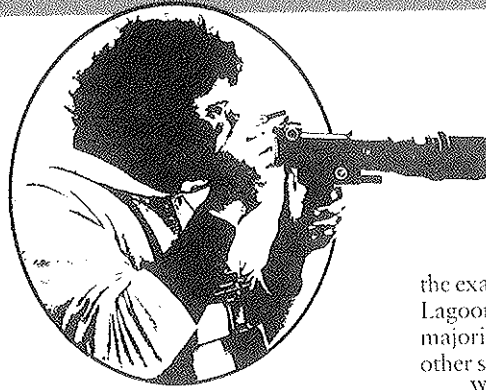


F O C U S

Peeps



Rich Stallcup

PEEPS" IS A GENERIC WORD, SYNONYMOUS with sandpipers, the tiniest shorebirds. They are the little vacuum cleaners that roll across the mudflats by the thousands, and they are the many that become one, a single energy, a single organism as they twist and wind in flocking-flight. Through much of the year, peeps are what gives obvious life to our precious wetlands.

The common ones — Western and Least sandpipers and Dunlin (barely within the definition of peep) — are much easier to differentiate, especially here in the west, than gulls, say, or small flycatchers. Still, they are often thought of as "impossible" by beginning and sometimes more advanced field ornithologists. It is a mistake to avoid them, though, as mastery of the peeps will lead to a deep interest in all shorebirds, one of the most amazing avian groups. Persons could easily find themselves part of a rapidly growing subculture in birding — wader fanatics!

Timing: Peeps are almost always with us, both along the shores and at wet spots in the lowland interior. Western and Least sandpipers begin to appear here in mid-summer — the end of June and early July — when the first post-breeding adults arrive. These species grow steadily more common here through July, and in August and September when the juvenile birds (only several weeks old) follow their elders, they become abundant. Large numbers are with us until early May (many more just pass through central California to winter farther south), leaving only late May to late June with almost none present.

Given the broadly protracted (north to south) geographical range and long breeding season for Least, it is hypothetically possible that in late June a northbound adult, still intending to breed, could pass a southbound adult that already left its chicks! Westerns are similar in timing, Dunlin quite different. Dunlin molt their juvenile and alternate (breeding) plumages on the breeding ground, and the first basic- (winter-) plumaged birds, young or old, do not normally arrive south of Canada until the second week of September.

Habitat: While Westerns and Dunlin form the huge winter flocks on tidal flats along the coast, Least, though present there, are more often on higher and drier ground. When there is a choice, the Least (like Semipalmated) Sandpiper prefers

not to wade. Though individuals or small flocks of all three species may set down at any wetland during migration, Least Sandpiper has a real affinity for upland puddles and marshes. In winter it is the most commonly found peep of the Central Valley and Great Basin regions of the state; relatively few Dunlin and almost no Westerns are found there at that time. All three of these species nest in the Canadian Arctic and Alaska, and rarely do they spend the summer on their winter range (probably only unhealthy individuals do).

Groups: On occasion, Least and Western sandpipers and Dunlin (as well as Sanderlings on the outer coast and inside large estuaries) will be found in the same flock, especially at non-tidal areas and during migration. On tidal mud flats, however, the large flocks — 175,000 at one area on south San Francisco Bay this past spring — are mostly Westerns, with varying percentages of Dunlin depending on the substrate and on

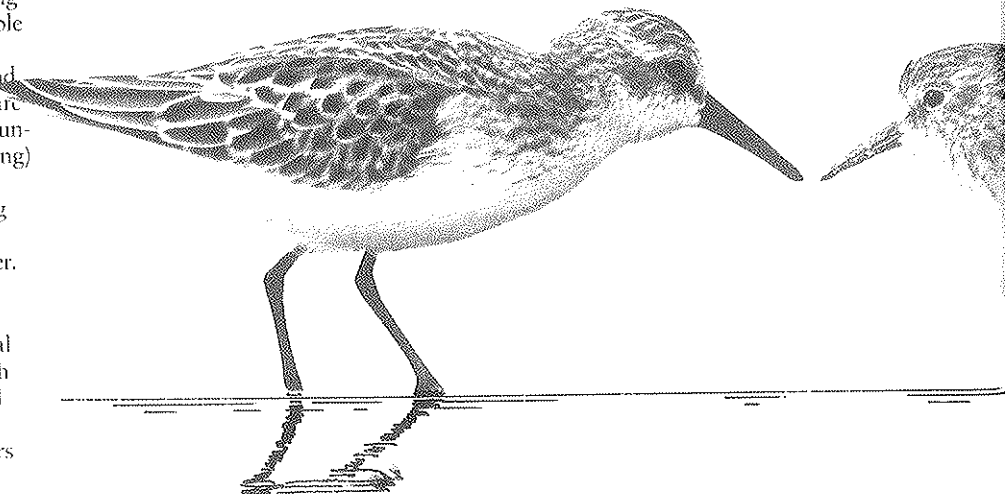
Western Sandpiper. When this juvenile bird completes its molt into basic plumage, its back color will be unpatterned light gray.

the exact timing. At some places (Bolinas Lagoon and Tomales Bay), Dunlin are in the majority; there are few, if any, Least or any other species in these huge groups.

Wintering birds here often group as migrants do, but sometimes they segregate by species, and large flocks of Westerns or Dunlin might be seen separately on the flats or at roosts during high tide. Least are nearer the dry edges along channels and in the marsh where they roost; they are most often found on the outer edge of the bundled hundreds of other small shorebirds. Larger shorebird species join the company of peeps only incidentally or opportunistically — at a rich local feeding area or an insular roost. Peeps like to hang out together but usually exclude the big boys, like knots and dowitchers.

Plumage: The National Geographic Society field guide has reasonably good pictures of these birds in basic, alternate, and juvenile plumages. While they may be fun to look at, with all those cute little field marks, we might suggest a more holistic approach to their specific identity, with each one in basic plumage (which is what they wear for most of the time they are here): de-emphasize all the little detail things, and just take a look at the whole bird.

Least Sandpiper.





The tiny ones that have a *short, sharp bill*, a *blurry brown* wash across the breast, and a *patterned brown* back are Least Sandpipers. Though the legs and feet are yellow, they appear dark when muddy or shaded by the bird's body. It is much easier to deduce that a peep is a tiny brown one than it is to decide if the legs are yellowish, darkish, or blackish—especially at a distance.

The tiny ones that have a *slightly drooped bill*, are *bright white* below, and have *unpatterned, light gray* backs are Western Sandpipers. They have black legs and feet.

The slightly larger ones that have *definitely decurved bills*, are white below with a *half collar of tan*, and have *unpatterned brown* backs are Dunlins. They have black legs and feet.

Calls: The flight calls are very distinctive. You may be surprised, standing on the levee looking at Westerns and Dunlin on the flats, how many Leasts you can identify, with practice, by voice only as they fly over or behind you. Leasts give a high, shrill "breet"; Westerns a lower, more staccato "cheek"; and Dunlin a low, slightly grating "greer." Watch them make their noises. Maybe you will agree that they really are different and easy to remember.

Dunlin, showing traces of its alternate (breeding) plumage.

Rare Peeps: There are only seven species of true peeps in the world (Dunlin doesn't qualify): Western, Semipalmated, and Least sandpipers and Long-toed, Temminck's, Little, and Rufous-necked stints. (Stint is British for peep.) All breed in the Nearctic or Palearctic and are highly migratory, and all except Long-toed and Temminck's stints have been recorded in California. (Those last two will be recorded as soon as you go out and find them among the hordes of their cousins.) Little and Rufous-necked stints are accidental here, and Semipalmated sandpiper is a regular migrant in tiny numbers. Identification of these odd ones is a major challenge and is another story. The relatively easy task of learning Western and Least sandpipers and Dunlin is prerequisite to even thinking about the others.

In case anyone out there has not yet witnessed the unbelievable, no-crash, roller-coastering, big-flock flight performed by Western sandpipers and Dunlin, do get out to your nearest massive mudflat and see the spectacle next time the peep show is in town. You might also see the Merlin that made it happen.

Board News

AS OF THE 1988 Board elections, Alexander Calhoun has returned to our Board of Directors as Vice President and legal counsel. A long-time Life Member of PRBO, he is a partner in the law firm Graham and James and is a specialist in Asia Pacific Trade Law. Calhoun's support for our organization and his active participation on our Board are most appreciated.

Also joining the Board of Directors is A. R. Imlay, lifelong birder and former mayor of Sausalito. He was partner in the law firm Kerner, Colangelo, and Imlay, a member of Sausalito's City Council from 1964-1972, and Area Counsel for National Audubon for 15 years. A current member of Sierra Club and Marin Conservation League, Imlay brings great enthusiasm and valuable experience to his new post with PRBO.

Departing from the Board of Directors this spring were Henry Corning (who remains active as a Farallon Patrol skipper) and Daphne Greene. Both are committed friends of PRBO, and we are most grateful for their contributions as Board Members.

New Board officers elected at our Annual Meeting on April 10, 1988, are President Totton Heffelfinger, Vice President Alexander Calhoun, Treasurer John Dakin, and Secretary Joyce Schnobrich.

Challenge!

PRBO's Board of Directors has raised the ante this year in a challenge to you, the members, to match their contribution in our annual fund-raising drive. Last year you met their match neatly, sending in a total of \$14,972 in response to the Board's \$15,000 challenge. In 1988, the Board is reaching deeper into its collective pocket and offering PRBO as much as \$18,500—if you will match them dollar for dollar! Let's show the Board that 2,800 PRBO members are more than a match for 15 members of the Board. Remember that every dollar you send lends double support for our independent research and conservation efforts. Our goal in this year's Board-Member Match: \$37,000!

KENNETH W. GARDINER

