

Identifying Winter Sandpipers

Audubon Coastal Bird Survey
Training Webinar – 29 Jan 2013

Erik I. Johnson

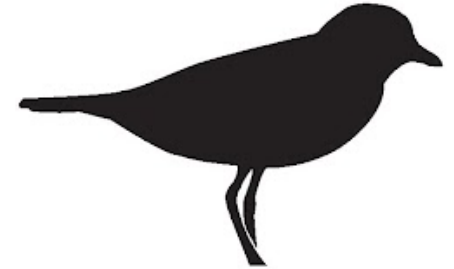
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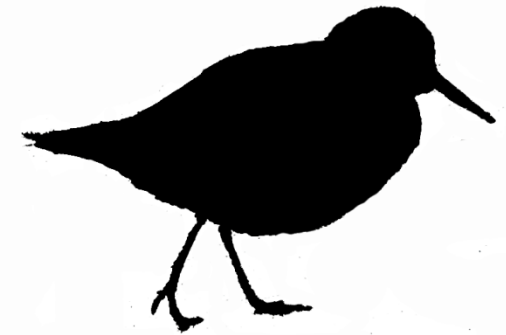
What is a Sandpiper?

- Scolopacidae
 - excludes
 - Charadriidae: plovers
 - Haematopodidae: oystercatchers
 - Recurvirostridae: stilts and avocets
 - 40 species in North America!!
 - Highly specialized carnivores that forage on invertebrates in wet fields, mudflats and along beaches.

A plover



A generalized sandpiper



Breeding



Winter



Plumage transitions (molt)

Breeding



Winter



Why so Drab?



Reduced predation risk

Shorebird Predators

Peregrine Falcon

Merlin



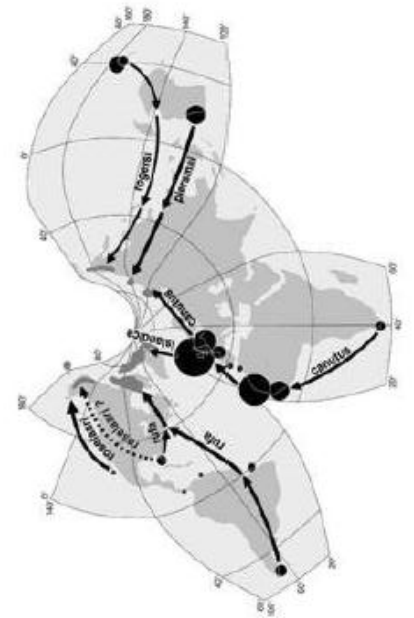
Safety in Numbers



How Birders Benefit:

- Clusters of birds (easier to spot)
- Compare sizes

Epic Migrations



Gone for Winter

Solitary Sandpiper
Upland Sandpiper
Hudsonian Godwit
Semipalmated Sandpiper
White-rumped Sandpiper
Baird's Sandpiper
Pectoral Sandpiper
Buff-breasted Sandpiper
Wilson's Phalarope



Shorebirds Made Easy

1) Large

2) Medium

3) Small



Limosa (godwits) and *Arenaria* (turnstones)



Large (size > Willet)



Medium-sized

Genus *Numenius* (the “curlews”)

Both are somewhat hard to find in winter

LONG-BILLED CURLEW



Lacks striping in face
Buffy underneath
Very long bill



WHIMBREL

Dark striping in face
Brownish underneath
Longish bill

Large

Genus *Tringa* (the “tattlers”)



Large, vocal

Size \approx Black-necked Stilt

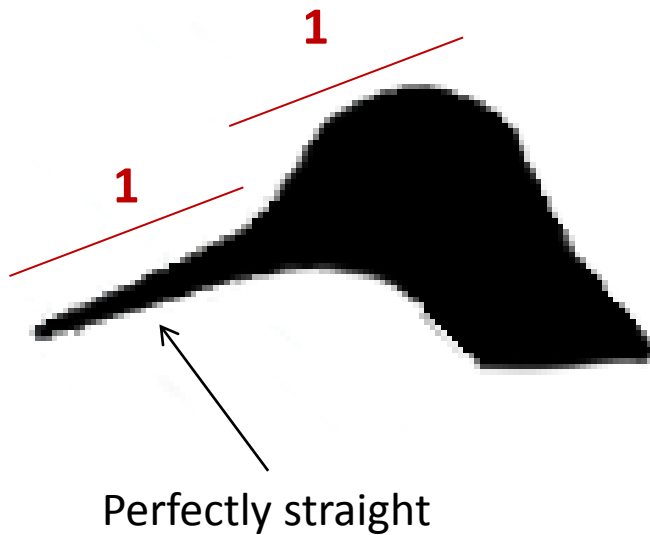
Unmistakable in flight



[Reference Species](#)

Genus *Tringa* (the “tattlers”)

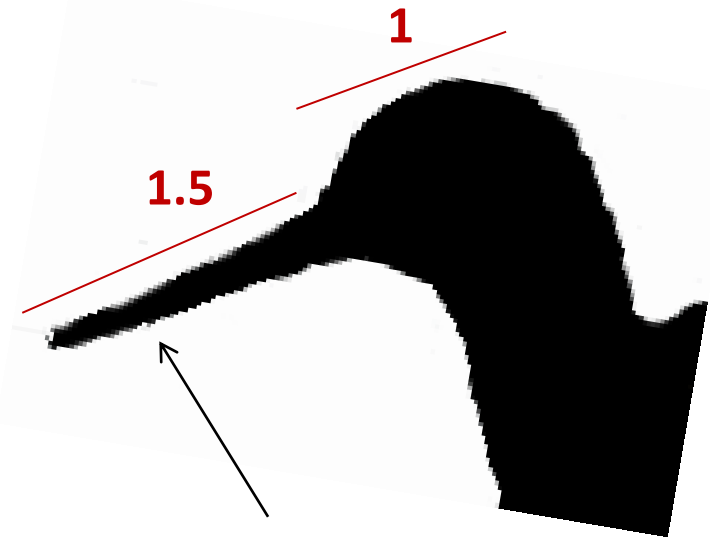
LESSER YELLOWLEGS



Size \approx dowitcher

“tu-tu” (x1 or 2 tu) calls

GREATER YELLOWLEGS



Size $>$ dowitcher
 \approx Black-necked Stilt

“tu-tu-tu” (x3 tu) calls

Genus *Tringa* (the “tattlers”)

large



Medium-sized

Dave Patton

Genus *Tringa* (the “tattlers”)

large



GREATER YELLOWLEGS

LESSER YELLOWLEGS

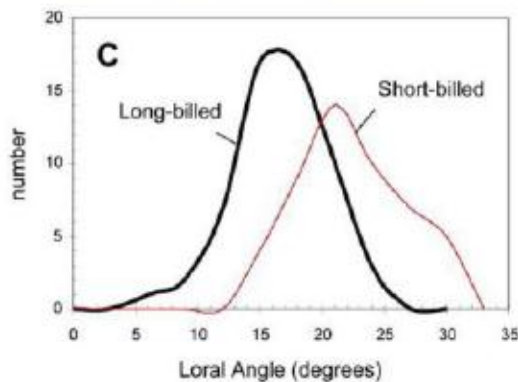
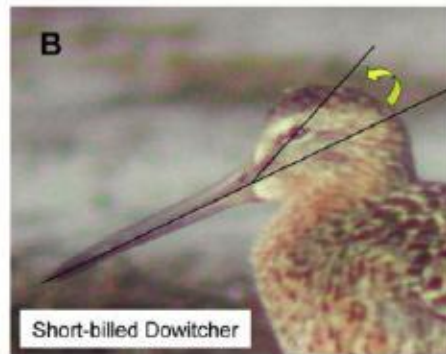
Medium-sized

Genus *Limnodromus* (the “dowitchers”)

Dowitchers are chunky and very long-billed. Olive legs. “Sewing machine” foraging style. Medium-sized.

Perhaps the most difficult species pair to ID in winter

Virtually indistinguishable by plumage and shape (Long-billed Dowitcher averages longer billed and longer legged, but overlaps Short-billed Dowitcher)



Lee & Birch, Birding 2006

Short-billed Dowitcher averages:

- Slight curve to bill tip
- Base of bill thickens
- Base of bill with more olive tones

[Reference Species](#)

Genus *Limnodromus* (the “dowitchers”)

Perhaps the most difficult species pair to ID in winter...**BUT there’s hope!!**

Use context

- Freshwater: 99.9% Long-billed Dowitcher
- Saltwater: 99.9% Short-billed Dowitcher
- (less accurate during migration – i.e., more mixing)

Use vocalizations

- Long-billed Dowitcher: almost constantly “chattering” with “kik” notes
- Short-billed Dowitcher: usually silent, with occasional yellowlegs-like “tu tu” notes

Don’t be shy to report “dowitcher sp.”

Reference Species





DOWITCHERS SP.



DOWITCHERS SP.



Often foraging with dowitchers, but probes and pecks
Long, slightly curved bill (like Dunlin)
Yellow legs (like yellowlegs)
BOLD WHITE SUPERCILIUM



GREATER YELLOWLEGS

Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)



DOWITCHERS SP.



STILT SANDPIPERS



Often foraging with dowitchers, but probes and pecks
Long, slightly curved bill (like Dunlin)
Yellow legs (like yellowlegs)
BOLD WHITE SUPERCILIUM
Medium-sized



GREATER YELLOWLEGS

Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

SANDERLING: The wave chaser

- Sand-colored back.
- Black legs.
- Very common, but declining!
- Note standard “peep” bill shape for comparison against others.
- Larger than Western & Least Sandpiper.
- A little smaller than Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot, and dowitchers.



[Reference Species](#)

Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)



Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)



With Willet



With Piping Plover



With Semipalmated Sandpiper in spring



Beware of strong, angled lighting making the upperparts appear dark

Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

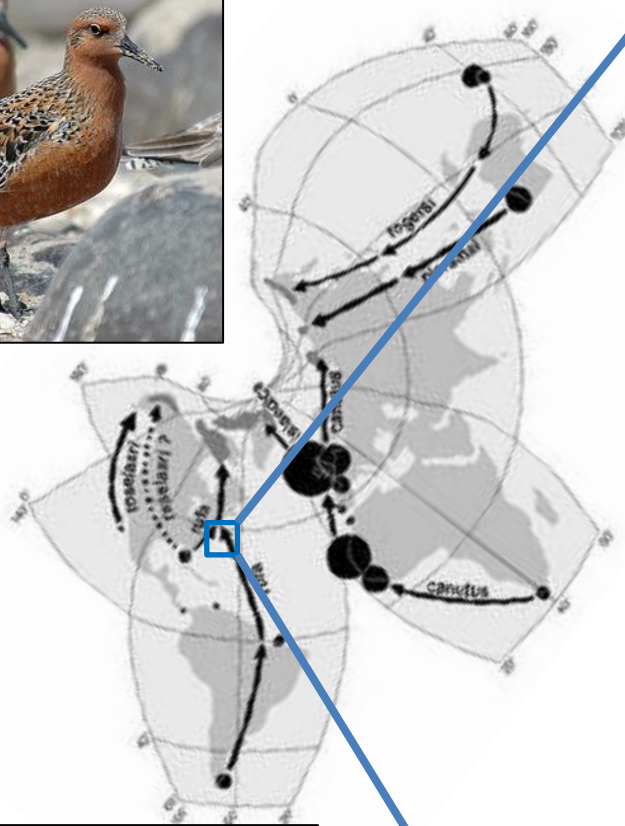
Fastest declining shorebird
in North America!

- Larger than Sanderling
- Note “chevrons” along flanks and streaking in throat

Important Red Knot Wintering Locations
in the Western Hemisphere



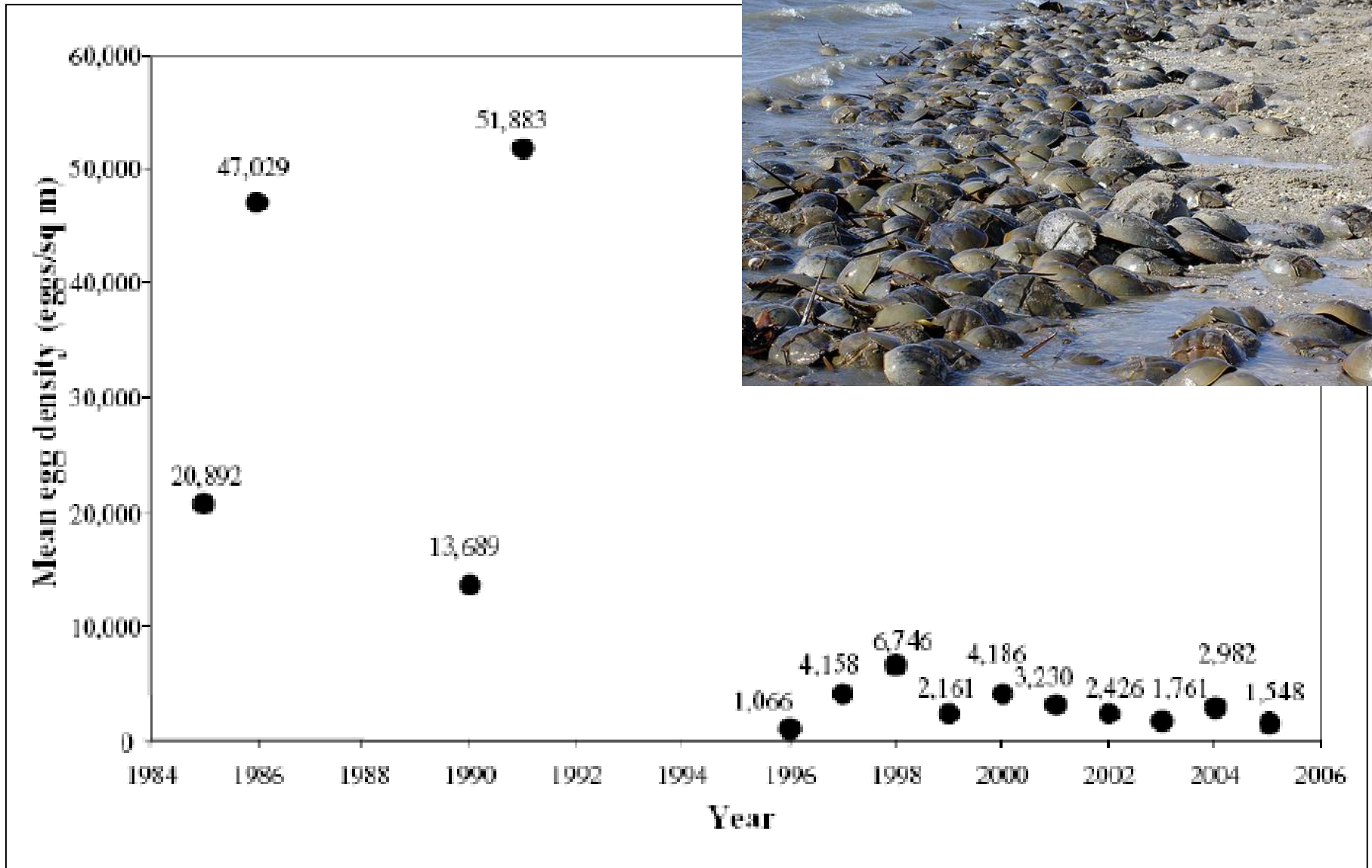
Gregory Breese/U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



Critical Red Knot Habitat: Spring Stop-Over



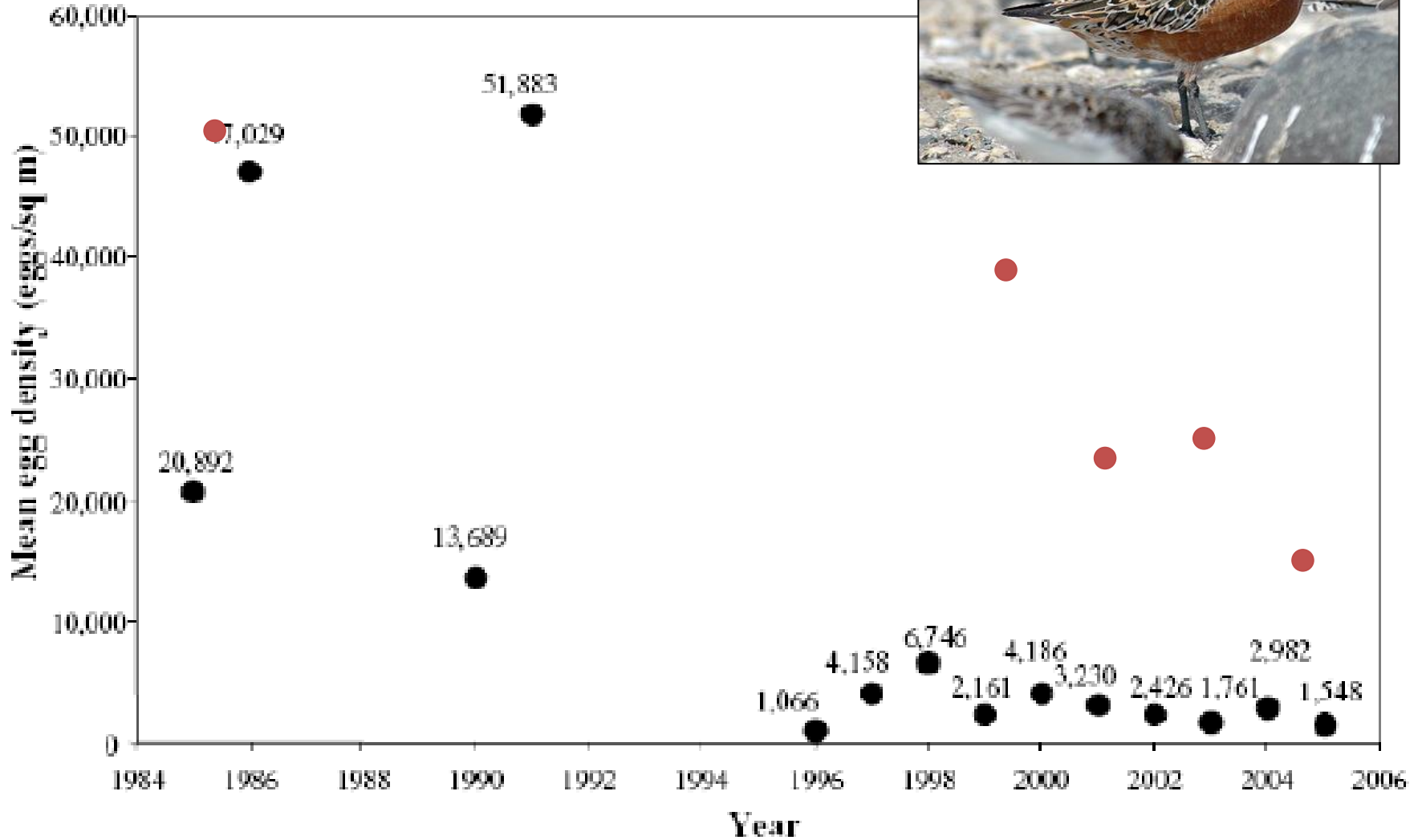
Horseshoe Crab Egg Density



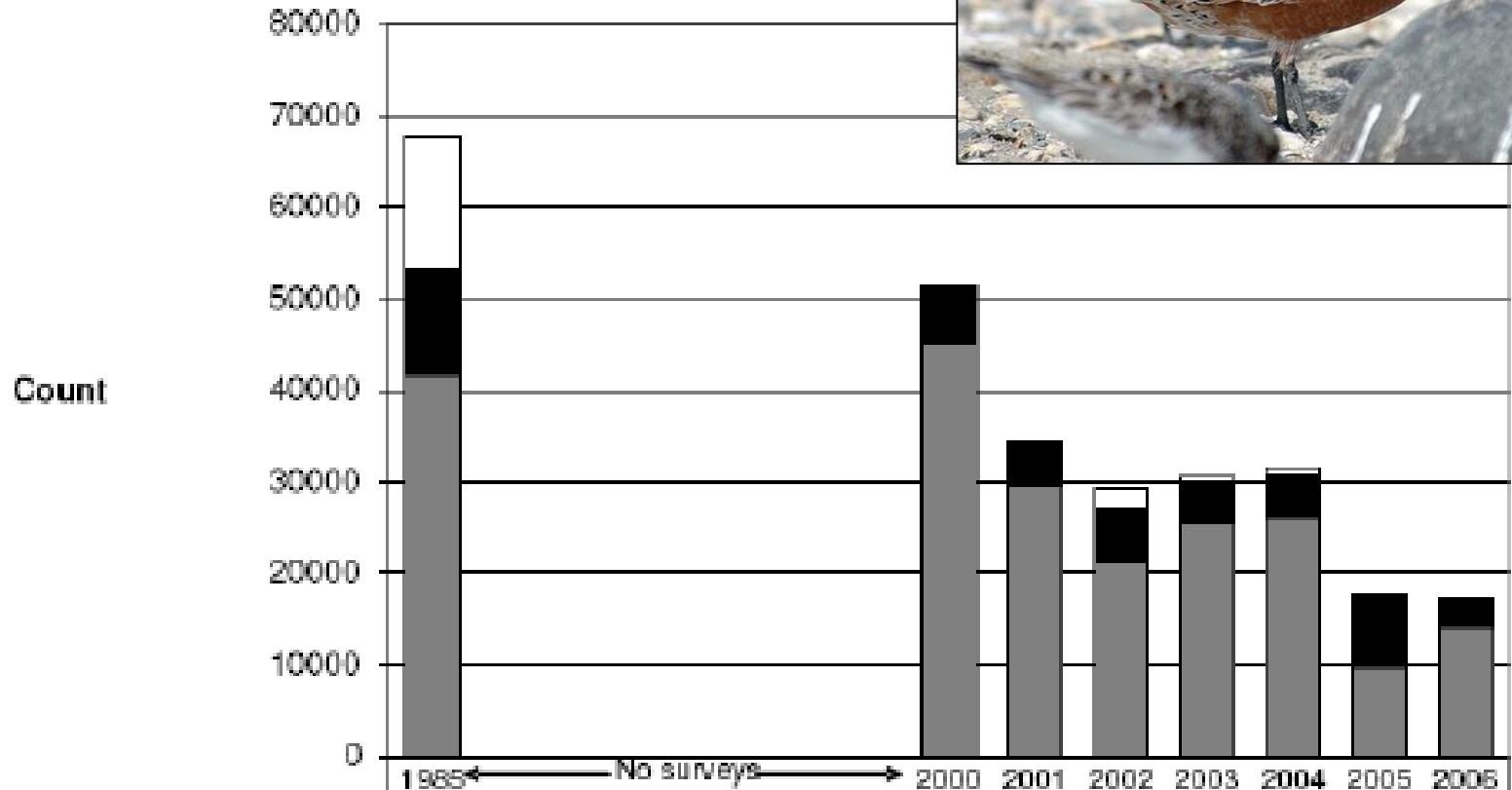
Horseshoe Crab Egg Density



Red Knot Density



Wintering Ground Trends



| | | | | | | | | |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|
| Other Argentina | 14314 | - | - | 2029 | 560 | 790 | - | - |
| Other Tierra del Fuego & S Chilean Patagonia | 11532 | 6105 | 5000 | 6086 | 4415 | 4608 | 7826 | 3081 |
| Bahia Lomas | 41700 | 45150 | 29355 | 21156 | 25500 | 26170 | 9827 | 14130 |

Year

Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

DUNLIN

- Long curved bill (recall Stilt Sandpiper)
- Black legs
- Buffy around eye (hard to see sometimes)
- Brown back, smudgy brown face and chest
- Size \approx Sanderling
 - > Western & Least Sandpiper



Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

LEAST SANDPIPER

- “hooded” look
- Yellow legs
- Hunched foraging style, head stays lower than back
- Size < Western Sandpiper



WESTERN SANDPIPER

- Clean white throat and chest
- Black legs
- Often lifts head above shoulders when foraging
- Size < Dunlin



Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)



Genus *Calidris* (the “peeps”)

DUNLIN

WESTERN SANDPIPER





Photo: Diane Lafferty

DUNLIN



Mud-brown back
Black legs
Pale markings around eyes
Smudgy chest



Find your reference bird!

SANDERLINGS

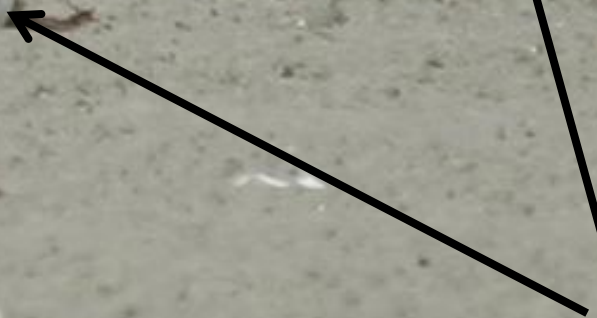


Find your reference bird!

SANDERLINGS

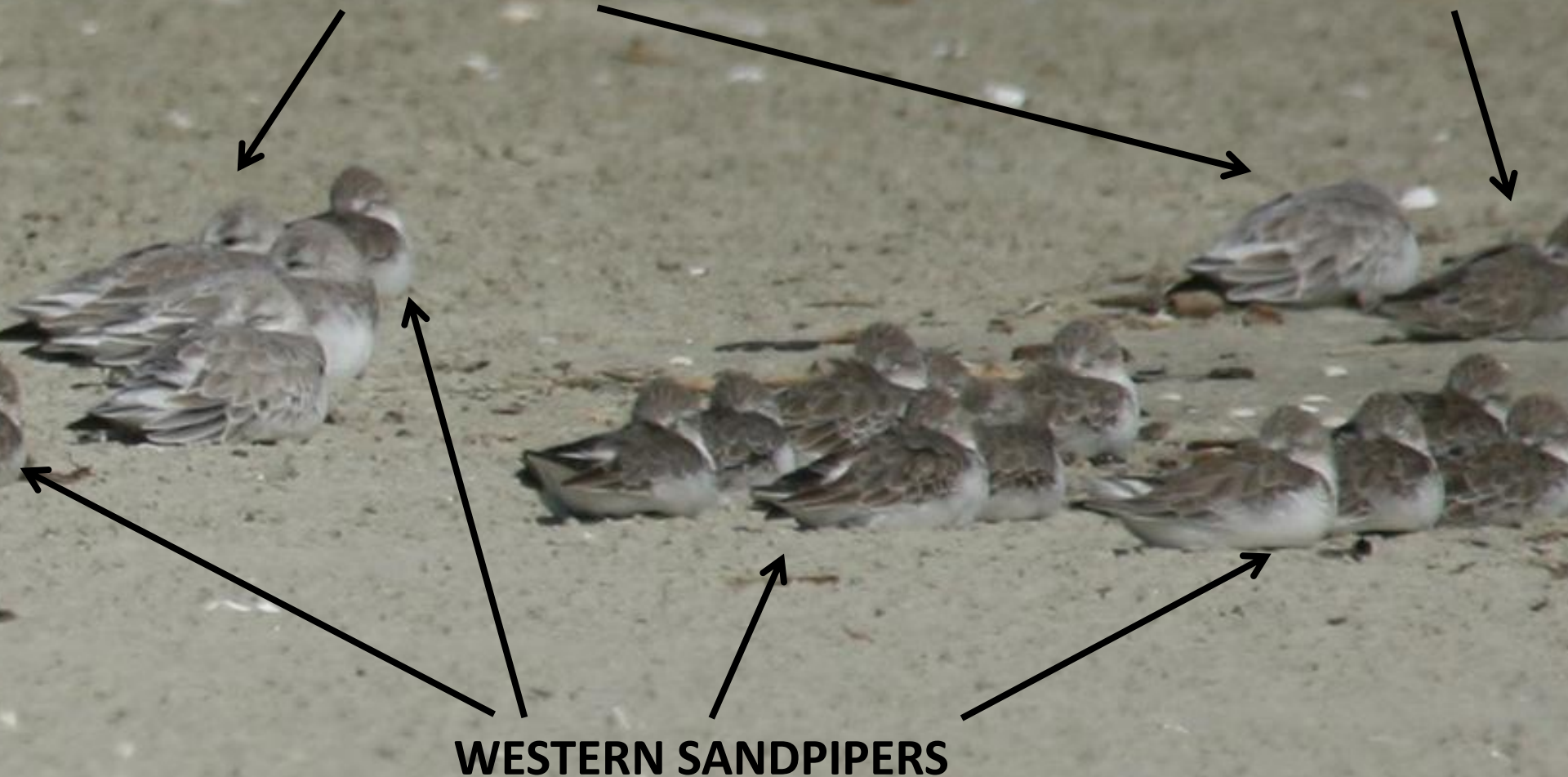


WESTERN SANDPIPERS



SANDERLINGS

??



WESTERN SANDPIPERS

(this was taken in fall)



(this was taken in fall)



DOWITCHER SP.
(Short-billed, juvenile,
by marked tert)

SANDERLINGS

LEAST SANDPIPER