



Photo: Maria Kemmer

IDENTIFYING SHOREBIRDS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

OVERVIEW

Like gulls, identifying shorebirds is a daunting task for inexperienced birders. These little balls of stripes, streaks, and smudges always seem to be on the move, and there are so many different species to look through in the field guide! But like gulls, knowing what to expect in certain habitats and certain times of year can help you narrow down what species you might be dealing with. Combine this with observations of relative size, shape, feeding behavior, and plumage characteristics, and you will be well on your way to being a shorebird-expert!

OCCURRENCE TABLE

Most shorebirds breed in northern areas and the Arctic, except for Spotted Sandpiper, which breeds throughout BC. We see shorebirds primarily when they stop over during migration in spring and fall, although some species also overwinter in good numbers in several coastal BC locations. This table outlines the timing of spring and fall migrations and key habitats within which the common shorebirds are found along the **south coast** of BC.

Species	Migration Peaks	Overwintering	Habitats
Dunlin	Peaks in early April, scarce by mid-May; October	Common in mixed species flocks	Coastal mudflats, creek-mouths, and gravel/sand spits for foraging; high tide roosts include rocky islets and flooded farm-fields (near coast)
Sanderling	April-May; early September	Common in mixed species flocks	Feeds mostly along sandy beaches
Western Sandpiper	Mid-April to mid-May; mid-July to early September	Rare flocks	Coastal mudflats, creek-mouths, and gravel/sand spits for foraging; high tide roosts include rocky islets and flooded farm-fields (near coast)
Semipalmated Sandpiper	Relatively rare in spring; mid-July to mid-August	Rare individuals (few)	Prefers freshwater habitats but can also be seen consorting with WESAs on coastal mudflats, etc.
Least Sandpiper	Peaks in early May; mid-July to mid-August	Rare individuals (few)	Can be found in a variety of habitats in spring, but tends to stay away from deeper water, preferring wet mud and grassy areas
Black-bellied Plover	Peaks in April; August to September	Common individuals	Forages in mudflats and other coastal habitats; sometimes roosts in fields (with Dunlin)
Spotted Sandpiper	Late April-early May; August to September	Rare individuals (few)	Protected gravelly and sandy beaches
Black Turnstone	Peaks April; September-November	Common in mixed species flocks	Wave-washed rocky shorelines of coastal BC
Surfbird	April; late summer to fall	Rare individuals (few)	Associates with turnstones in similar habitats

SPRING PEEPS

Out of all the shorebirds that pass through British Columbia each year, the group of small sandpipers known as “peeps” can be the trickiest to identify. The most common species include Dunlin, Sanderling, Western Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper, and Least Sandpiper.

Dunlin (DUNL)

- Larger and longer-legged than similar WESA
- Relatively long, droopy black bill
- Combo of distinctive, russet back and black belly breeding plumage
- Black legs

Dunlin in breeding plumage (Photo: Mike Yip)



Sanderling (SAND)

- Distinctive rufous breeding plumage, but most birds pass through southern BC while still molting from their pale gray winter plumage
- Feeds mostly along sandy beaches
- Distinctive running behavior - will probe for food once or twice, then dash 2 or 3 m away to try again
- Black bill is relatively short and straight

Pale gray winter plumage of a Sanderling (Photo: Mike Yip)



Western Sandpiper (WESA)

- Most numerous sandpiper on the coast between mid-April and mid-May, with flocks numbering in the tens of thousands around Tofino and the Fraser Delta
- Spring adults have distinctive rufous colouration on crown, auriculars, and scapulars
- Smaller than Dunlin, and with arrow-shaped spots on flanks/breast
- Black legs
- Droopy black bill

Western Sandpiper (Photo: Mike Yip)



Dunlin (left) Western Sandpiper (right) comparison (Photo: Mike Yip)



SPRING PEEPS

Semipalmated Sandpiper (SESA)

- Relatively rare on the coast in spring (compared to DUNL, SAND, WESA and LESA)
- Short, blunt bill compared to WESA
- Plain gray-brown overall but can show a bit of warm-rufous colouring
- Black legs

Semipalmated Sandpiper (Photo: Mike Yip) ▶



Least Sandpiper (LESA)

- Smallest of the peeps, and a common sight in spring (peaking in early May)
- Yellow legs (may look dark if muddy)
- Short, droopy bill
- Golden-brown overall, brown chest, hunched posture
- Trilling call when flushed

Least Sandpiper (Photo: Mike Yip) ▶



Black-bellied Plover

- Common along coastal BC between fall and spring
- Run & stop behaviour typical of plovers
- Medium sized shorebird, small head, plump body
- Short, thick black bill
- Black axillars (armpits) visible in flight
- Whistled, mournful call
- Distinctive breeding plumage with black face, breast and belly

Rather thin Black-bellied Plover in breeding plumage (Photo: Wildlife Shoots) ▶



ADULT SANDPIPERS IN LATE SUMMER/FALL AND WINTER

After wrapping up their parenting duties, adult “peeps” are first to depart their northern breeding grounds. Adult Western, Semipalmated, and Least return south around mid-July, and most are gone by mid-August when the bulk of juveniles start arriving. Sanderlings and Dunlins on the other hand, don’t get back until later in the fall (Sanderling by early September, Dunlin in October). By this time, the breeding plumage of the adults will be fairly worn-looking, and some will already be molting into their drabber winter-plumage.

Dunlin (DUNL)

- The juvenile plumage of Dunlin is rarely seen south of the breeding grounds
- By the time adult/first-fall Dunlin reach southern BC, they will mostly look like the birds pictured
- Note the structural characteristics mentioned for spring birds
- When most Dunlin arrive, most other “peeps,” like the similar WESA, will have already departed BC

Adult/first fall Dunlin in ‘winter’ plumage (Photo: Mike Yip)



Sanderling (SAND)

- Usually in non-breeding plumage by early August
- Pale brown and grey; white below
- Dark eye, bill and legs
- In full non-breeding plumage, black mark at wrist (lesser wing coverts) is noticeable from a distance

Sanderling in non-breeding plumage with black mark at wrist (Photo: Jaceme)



Western Sandpiper (WESA)

- Numbers peak in early August; most Westerns are gone from BC by early October
- Some may linger into early winter with flocks of Dunlin
- Both breeding adults and juveniles have rufous (red) scapulars (shoulders) and some rufous on head
- Non breeding adults are very pale, grey above and white below
- Black droopy bill
- Black legs

Juvenile Western Sandpiper (Photo: Mike Yip)



An example of a Western Sandpiper in transition molt (note the gray feathers on the back) (Photo: Mike Yip)



ADULT SANDPIPERS IN LATE SUMMER/FALL AND WINTER

Semipalmated Sandpiper (SESA)

- Numbers peak in mid-July to mid-August but this species is almost always outnumbered by WESA/LESAs
- Adults in the fall have worn plumage, grey-brown above, pale below, some streaking on breast
- Like WESA, juvenile SESA is buffier overall
- Note short black bill—often with small “nob” at end
- Black legs

Semipalmated Sandpiper (Photo: Don Cecile)



Least Sandpiper (LESA)

- LESA numbers peak in mid-August but small flocks or individuals often linger into December
- Darker brown than WESA and SESA in all plumages, with a brown breast
- Breeding plumage lasts until mid-August; non-breeding plumage is dull brown and mottled on upperparts and breast
- Juvenile is brighter with reddish tones
- Yellow legs
- Crouching stance can be distinctive
- Feeds higher up the beach than WESA

Least Sandpiper (front) and juvenile Western Sandpiper (behind) (Photo: Mike Yip)



Black-bellied Plover (BBPL)

- Common along coastal BC between fall and spring
- Larger with longer legs than other peeps
- Relatively short, thick black bill
- Juveniles are dull gray overall
- Winter plumage adults dull gray above, whitish below

Juvenile or transition Black-bellied Plover (Photo: Mike Yip)



ADULT SANDPIPERS IN LATE SUMMER/FALL AND WINTER

Spotted Sandpiper (SPSA)

- Solitary or in small family groups
- Found sporadically post-breeding along the coast
- Spring/summer breeding plumage is distinctive with large dark spots on white belly
- Winter adult/juv (pictured) is more subtle
- Note white eye-ring, and dark eye-stripe
- Greenish-yellow-legs
- Bobs tail frequently while foraging; flies on stiff wings
- Rare in winter in coastal BC

Spotted Sandpiper in winter plumage (Photo: Mike Yip) ▶



Black Turnstone (BLTU)

- Often in flocks from 10-200 individuals
- Dark blackish-brown above with white underparts
- Brownish legs
- In flight: tail, rump, and wing pattern are distinctive
- Well-camouflaged when feeding

Black Turnstone (Photo: Jason Crotty) ▶



Surfbird (SURF)

- Similar-looking to a turnstone but larger and grayer with short, robust, yellow legs
- Yellow-orange base to lower mandible

Surfbird (Photo: Mike Yip) ▶

