

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Article and Photos by Jeannie Marcure

A MONTANA SANDPIPER

Now that spring is officially here, it seems appropriate to write about one of my favorite spring arrivals—the Spotted Sandpiper. Before I became serious about birding, the word sandpiper evoked an image of sunny tropical beaches filled with small unidentifiable birds playing happily in the surf. However, as I became more knowledgeable, I learned that one of these fascinating little birds actually spends the summer and raises young in the Flathead. Also, as the most widespread breeding sandpiper in North America, the Spotted Sandpiper is easy to find and also easy to identify. No wonder that I'm so fond of "Spotty!"

Spotty is a medium-sized shorebird (7-8 inches) with a moderately long neck and legs. In breeding plumage, the under parts are white with distinct brown spots. The habit of constantly bobbing its tail up and down as it walks makes it easy to see in its shoreline habitat. Spotted Sandpipers are most easily confused with Solitary Sandpipers, but the breeding plumage of the Solitary lacks the spotted chest. The Solitary is also slightly larger and has a more upright posture. Here in the Flathead, separation of these 2 can be aided by the time of year, as Solitary only passes through as it travels to its nesting area in the far north. A Solitary would typically be found here only during migration in May and early August. Because juvenile Spotted Sandpipers lack the distinctive brown spots that typify the adults, the most difficult time for identification probably comes in early August when both species are present in the Flathead. At that time you should check carefully for the tail bobbing and also for the more crouched posture of the Spotty. Flight patterns may also aid in identification as Spotted Sandpipers fly close to the water in a straight line with stiff, shallow wing beats, while the Solitary often zigzags on takeoff.

Arriving in the Flathead as the ice leaves, Spotty prefers a habitat that borders water, with open vegetation and a few elevated roosting sites such as fallen trees or stumps. Interestingly, Spotted Sandpipers, along with a few other kinds of shorebirds, have

reversed sex roles. This means that the female is larger than the male and typically arrives at the breeding ground first, staking out her territory and attempting to attract a male. She is also more aggressive in the courtship and may mate with several males, while the male takes the primary parental role of incubating the eggs and caring for the chicks. Because the female can store sperm for up to a month, the eggs she lays for one male may have been fathered by a different male in a previous mating.

The nest is built on the ground in a grass-lined depression concealed by tall grass. The four eggs are buff with brown spots and hatch after 21 days of incubation. The precocial chicks literally "hit the ground running," and are out of the nest foraging within hours of hatching. They will occasionally spend their first night in the nest with an adult and in the case of inclement weather, may remain in the nest, brooded by one of the adults until conditions improve. The characteristic tail bobbing begins as soon as the chicks begin to walk; first flight occurs 13 to 21 days after the hatch. Spotted Sandpipers are usually seen only in small family groups of 2 to 5 and not in the large flocks that typify some of the other sandpipers.

As the ice leaves your favorite lakes and rivers this spring, I hope you'll get a chance to see the Spotted Sandpipers. They are most easily found if you canoe or kayak quietly along the shoreline of any of our smaller lakes. Listen for their distinctive "WEET" and watch for a small bird flying near the water or teetering on a shoreline log as they search for a meal of insects or larvae. Last summer I saw Spotted Sandpipers on Foy's Lake, Blanchard Lake and also along the Stillwater and Flathead Rivers.

Given the economic challenges of the past year, isn't it nice to know that you can add a sandpiper to your life birding list without taking an expensive trip to some faraway beach? Enjoy our Montana spring—it won't last long and remember that Spotted Sandpipers are only here from late April until mid July! Their stay is brief—just like our beautiful summers!