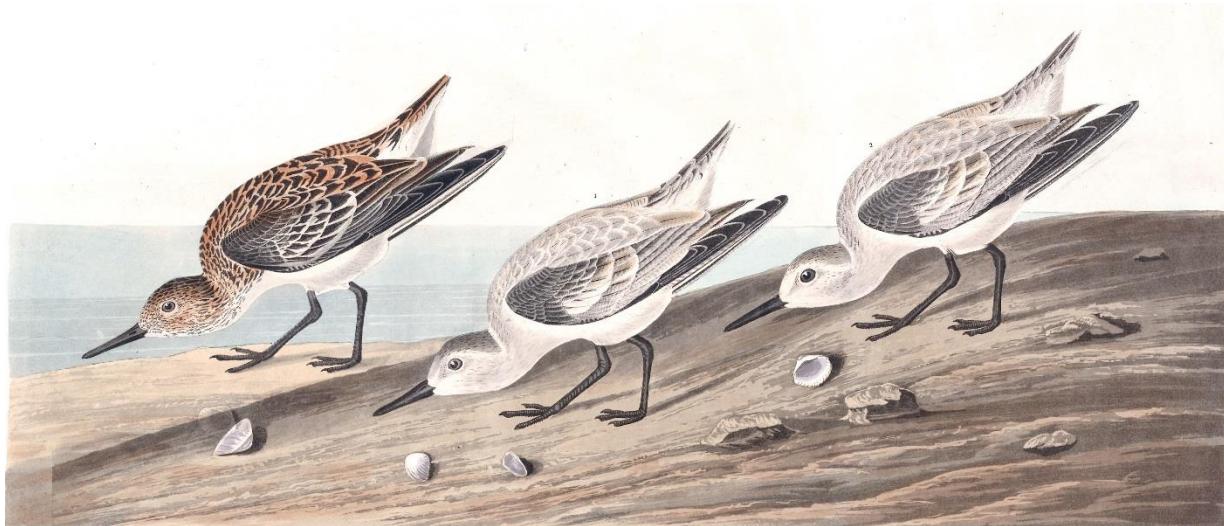


## **BIRD NOTES by Rick Pyeritz**

The little flock {Sanderlings} wheeled out over the bay in a wide circle, flashing white wing bars; they returned crying loudly as they passed over the flats where the young were still running and probing at the edge of the curling wavelets; they turned their heads to the south and were gone.

**Rachel Carson**  
*Under the Sea Wind*



Rachel Carson described Sanderlings as running "with a twinkle of black feet." She depicted them foraging along the beach as "keeping in the thin film at the edge of the ebbing surf.... where puffs of blown spume or sea froth rolled like thistledown." The natives of the Hawaiian Islands, one of the many wintering homes of Sanderlings, know them as *hunakai*, or sea foam. I know them, from my first trip to the Outer Banks of North Carolina many years ago, as incessant bundles of energy that seemed to enjoy playing tag with the waves, never wanting to be "it". On a return trip to Hatteras years later, I learned the name of this pale "dancer with waves". But long before I knew its name, the Sanderling would always be associated with the smell of the ocean from my autumnal fishing trips to the thin ribbon of sand known as the Outer Banks.

Audubon was familiar with the Sanderling, observing it often along the coastal regions of North America from Labrador to Key West, but seldom seeing it during the months of June and July. He was never able to locate a Sanderling nest. We know now he was searching too far south as the Sanderling is one of the most northerly breeders; mostly nesting above the Arctic Circle.

Arthur Cleveland Bent says of the Sanderling....

*"few species if any, equal it in world-wide wanderings. Nesting in the Arctic regions of both hemispheres, it migrates through all the continents and most of the islands, to the southernmost limits of South America and Africa, and even to Australia."*

The destination of the Sanderling's migration qualifies it to be one of the few cosmopolitan species in the avian world. Sanderlings arrive at their breeding territory in early June and begin the task of replacing the fat they lost on the long journey north. This must be done by the end of July when they will leave on their fall migration. This is crucial as some Sanderlings travel as far south as Tierra del Fuego.

Breeding activity begins soon after arrival, usually at the same site as the preceding year. The Sanderling utilizes a mating behavior known as sequential polyandry. The mating of one female with more than one male, while each male mates with only one female, is known as polyandry. It is an unusual type of breeding occurring most often in shorebirds. The female is the dominant gender, which is usually exhibited by its larger size, more colorful plumage, and competition for mates. The male builds the nest, often nothing more than a scrape in the rocky tundra lined with lichen. He also incubates the eggs, with usually a clutch size of four. The reversal of sexual roles was confusing to early ornithologists and perhaps led Audubon to label the phalarope species incorrectly.

Time is short in the tundra for the Sanderling to raise two broods. Often the male will incubate the initial clutch of eggs and the female, after mating with another male, will incubate a second brood. The young birds are termed as precocial since they hatch from the egg in an advanced state, largely capable of leading an independent existence. The rapid development of the fledglings contributes to the ability of this species to accomplish the incredible journey south in just a few months. Altricial species, on the other hand, hatch as very dependent young, born blind, with little or no down, and without the ability to walk or regulate their own body temperature. They, therefore, need prolonged parental care before they become capable of independent existence outside the nest.

A comment on the scientific behavior of the early ornithologists----they tended to eat their specimens as well as painting and writing about them. I have included Audubon's notes on the subject.

*"The Sanderling affords good eating, especially the young, and the sportsman may occasionally kill six or seven at a shot, provided he fires the moment the flock has alighted, for immediately after the birds spread abroad in search of food."*

John James Audubon  
*Birds of America*

### **Taxonomy of the Sanderling**

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| Order      | Charadriformes   |
| Family     | Scolopacidae ( <i>Sandpipers/Snipes/Phalaropes</i> )     |
| Sub-Family | Caladrinae   |
| Tribe      | Caladrini  |
| Genus      | Caladrus   |
| Species    | Alba <i>from Latin albus, "white" after winter color</i> |

Comments/suggestions email me [eapyeritz@gmail.com](mailto:eapyeritz@gmail.com)