# *The first Semipalmated Sandpiper for Estonia*

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The Story

Winter-listing is something that helps to keep our birding community sane during the darkest months of the year. The idea is simple - if you nail a species between December and February then you've got your winter-tick. It is a good way to motivate birders to gather phenological data in the bleakest season, and to convince yourself that you are actually seeing something good when bumping into a Common Snipe in mid-December!


Plate 1. Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla.* Rahuste, Estonia December 2011 (below) compared with an individual from Paracas, Peru, November 2014. Note the head pattern, bill structure and shaft-streaks of scapular and mantle feathers. This and some other photos were published on the web for seven years without any feedback.

The late autumn of 2011 looked perfect to get some lingering migrants, as the warm weather was going strong well into January. In the first few days of December, I usually try to get to the west coast in the hope of some lost migrants, and so I packed myself off with Mari and Margus and headed to Saaremaa. Coastal meadows here often hold a good selection of birds...

We start at Türju lighthouse on the 3rd of December with a seawatching session. Nothing shocking this time with the usual Red-throated Divers, Razorbills, and a lone Red-necked Grebe passing. Rahuste coastal meadow is obviously the next site – a well-known place for getting some late birds. The situation looks exceptionally good. After trampling the area for couple of hours we manage to find White Wagtail, Skylark, five Common Snipe, two Pintail, 15 Lapwing, two Common Redshank, Grey Plover and Brant Goose among many other birds. I somehow manage to miss Common Ringed Plover (second winter-record for Estonia!) and two Greenshanks (first winter-record for Estonia!). Despite lots of effort, the best birds of the day have disappeared and I lose two valuable winter-ticks. Not good! The seventh wader of the day (!) is a distant *Calidris* sandpiper. We can't get any closer to the bird and decide to come back tomorrow. It definitely looks like a good candidate for a Sanderling. This would be another winter-mega.

We head out to Rahuste first thing in the next morning. Margus picks up a super-distant Oystercatcher (fourth winter-record for Estonia and a new winter bird for all of us). Three Greater White-fronted Goose is another unexpected find and so is the flock of Shovelers. But the sought-after Greenshanks and Common Ringed Plover have gone for good. Luckily, yesterday's *Calidris* is still around and I manage to creep fairly close to shoot some frames to confirm its (wrong!) ID. After some initial confusion and dice rolling we are happy to turn the fat-billed pale thing into a Sanderling. The species is the most expected new sandpiper for the Estonian winter-list which makes ID even easier – mass psychosis works out just fine in this case. A first winter-record for the country – life is good again! Our success doesn't end here. While passing Jämaja beach I ask my companions for just a one-minute stop to check the shoreline. I run to the sandstrip in ten seconds and immediately see a large pale wader flying among a party of Black-headed Gulls. Another Sanderling or what? The wader drops on the water surface – it's a Grey Phalarope! A one-minute stop just produced another new winter record for Estonia! Amazing – we have found three new winter species for the country just in two days and seen nine species of waders! Climate change is really tightening its grip. We finish the day with eight Wood Larks at Sõrve säär - another good find.

Most of the quality birds are still around at Rahuste meadows on the 5th of December including the dodgy-looking sandpiper. We head back to the mainland and pick up Golden Plover as a new winter bird for us. It has been an amazing trip.

Although the identity of the Sanderling was still somewhat bothering me, I soon forgot about it after such a successful trip. The photos online do not stir up any discussions and even some Finnish birders came to twitch the bird and were happily brainwashed with our mis-ID.

The case took a sudden turn when I went through my photos in 2017. Three millimetres make a big difference when you discover a hind-toe on a Sanderling! A quick, no-brainer look reveals that this bird falls in the Little/Semipalmated/Red-necked group. In winter-plumage this means an identification nightmare when front-toes are not seen and calls are not heard. As expected, this bird didn't give a single call and I succeeded perfectly in hiding front-toes in all the photographs.


Plate 2. Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla.* Rahuste, Estonia December 2011 (right) compared with an individual from Paracas, Peru, November 2014. Note the head pattern, bill structure, build and breast markings.

## The Identification Process

The following discussion is largely based on the much appreciated comments received from Killian Mullarney and Kevin Karlson and are presented here in a shortened version.

The bill length and structure clearly exclude Western Sandpiper and the moult phase also supports that. As Kevin states:

*„The short bill (probably in the 18 mm range) is well below the smallest bill in Western Sandpiper, which would never show the broadened tip of your bird. Some Semipalmated Sandpipers that breed in the Ungava region of Quebec Province in Canada have bills that are finer tipped and more decurved and pointed than male Westerns, but your bird is certainly not one of these, and has a typical Semipalmated bill...„.*

At the first glimpse it looks like this bird is a 1cy bird showing unmoulted coverts, tertials and primaries. Killian adds many important details about identification and ageing of the bird:

*„With Little Stint being arguably by far the most likely species on geographical grounds we need to consider the extent of variation in this species, which includes some individuals that closely resemble Semipalmated Sandpiper in certain critical details. I was, of course, conscious of the fact that as there is no previous record of Semipalmated Sandpiper in Estonia, any case being made for identifying this bird as a Semipalmated will have to withstand considerable scrutiny. It is necessary to consider the possibility of it being a Red-necked Stint too, since in winter especially, these three species are very similar in appearance.*

*With no view of the forward-pointing toes visible, we cannot use one of the most reliable identification features when dealing with these three species in winter, the presence or absence of palmations between the toes...*

*Despite these difficulties, however, Little Stint, Red-necked Stint and Semipalmated Sandpiper do all have what might be described as a characteristic appearance, and with sufficient experience, it is often possible to recognise and correctly identify them within seconds, in the field or from photographs...*

Plate 3. Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla.* Rahuste, Estonia December 2011. The only photo showing the hind-toe helped to grab the attention and eliminate the initial confusion of the bird being Sanderling. Note the side-view of the bill profile.

*I believe the Estonian bird is, as you suspected, a* ***Semipalmated Sandpiper****. One important point that needs to be addressed at the outset is the age of the bird. While the combination of freshly moulted body feathers and obviously worn wing coverts and tertials is suggestive of first-winter plumage, I believe the bird is actually an adult. The entire wing, including the primaries, is very worn, with the condition of the wing coverts especially being much more worn than would usually be seen in a first-year bird on this date. Note that some of the outer greater and median secondary coverts, as well as median primary coverts, appear to be either worn to the shaft or have disappeared altogether, revealing what looks like extremely worn secondaries. As it appears to be quite usual for at least some adult Semipalmateds to retain worn breeding wing coverts and tertials into December, ageing needs to be based on critical examination of these feathers as well as some additional clues in the plumage. The features that, in my opinion, indicate your bird is an adult are:*

*1) the extremely worn condition of parts of the middle/outer wing.*
*2) the comparatively long (and apparently unevenly worn/bleached) tertials that almost reach the wing-tip (juvenile tertials are shorter, in all species); it may be that the apparently darker longest tertial was grown later than the adjacent second-innermost and outer tertials, as is commonly seen in breeding plumaged adults.*
*3) at least two scapulars have more extensive dark centres like feathers that are acquired early in the post-breeding moult; they are not retained juvenile feathers.*

*4) a few retained, somewhat chevron-shaped, faint markings in the centre of the breast (in first-year stints the breast markings are always simple spots or streaks rather than chevrons or arrowhead-like markings seen in breeding plumage).*

*With the bird being an adult, the very short projection of the primaries beyond the longest tertial is of less significance than if it were a first-year, since adult Little Stints have longer tertials than juveniles, and in winter especially there is often virtually no primary-projection...*

*I think it is significant that your field impression was of a Sanderling, as Semipalmated is significantly more Sanderling-like in appearance than is Little Stint.The bill of your bird looks perfect for Semipalmated, deep at the base and with a rather stout, blunt tip... The rather pale grey and clean-looking scapular and mantle feathers, with distinct dark shaft-streaks, are characteristic of Semipalmated.*

*In winter plumage Red-necked Stint is very similar to both Little Stint and Semipalmated Sandpiper and some are extremely difficult to identify in the field. Usually, the most practical means of identifying them is to look at the overall shape and structure, paying particular attention to the relative leg-length and the shape of the rear half of the body... In any case, the Estonian stint's rather long-legged and short-ended look does not suggest Red-necked Stint at all.*

*Up to this point in the assessment, the weight of evidence is clearly in favour of the bird being a Semipalmated Sandpiper, but I have to admit to being a little uncomfortable with the prospect of endorsing the identification as "100% certain" when so many of the features discussed above are subjective and somewhat open to interpretation. After all, this represents the potential first record for Estonia, so there cannot be much room for doubt! There is, however, one additional feature that I am not aware of ever having being applied to the task of identifying a winter-plumaged stint, but which I think adds considerable weight to the case for identifying the Estonian stint as a Semipalmated: the relative prominence of the hind-toe. In the one photograph that shows the bird's feet from the side, it can be seen that the hind-toes are particularly long and prominent. The more I look at photos of all three species the more I feel that this is a really consistent difference. In none of the literally hundreds of Little Stint and Red-necked Stint photos that I have checked is the hind-toe as prominent, but in virtually all of the Semipalmated photos where a hind-toe is visible, it is as prominent as in the Estonian bird.*

*Having noticed this interesting feature I checked the detailed text in BWP to see if there was any empirical data that might back up the impression, and to my surprise, there is! In the "Structure" text on Semipalmated Sandpiper (p296) it states: "Structure of foot different from other Calidris, except mauri: relative length of middle toe normal (c. 86% of tarsus), but other toes relatively long (outer c.91% of middle, inner c.89% and hind c.36%, instead of 84-89, 80-84, and 22-28%, respectively, in other Calidris)"...*

*Finally, I think it is significant that the autumn of 2011 was an extraordinarily good period for Nearctic shorebirds in Western Europe, so if ever there was a year for a Semipalmated Sandpiper to appear in Eastern Europe, 2011 was it! In Ireland, we recorded at least 252 Nearctic shorebirds of thirteen species. Of these, no less than 63 were Semipalmated Sandpipers, a number virtually equal to half the total number recorded prior to 2011 (110 individuals)."*

## The Conclusion

Despite being one of the most expected Nearctic waders on the British Isles, Semipalmated Sandpiper remains surprisingly rare around the Baltic Sea. There haven't been any records from Finland, Latvia and Lithuania yet, and Sweden has only one record so far. Presumably it will be a long wait before another one drops onto the Estonian coastline.

The moral of the story is, that always expect the unexpected, and in strange circumstances exclude all the wildest possibilities, although modesty remains a respected virtue among the birding community.

The Estonian Rarities Committee accepted the record in March 2018 and this is 388th bird species on the Estonian list.


Plate 4. Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla.* Rahuste, Estonia December 2011 (right) compared with an individual from Paracas, Peru, November 2014. Note the head pattern, bill structure and breast markings. The Estonian bird shows some arrowhead marks among breast streaking, a pointer that the bird is an adult.

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