



NATIONAL
WILDLIFE
REFUGE SYSTEM

Module 2b

Coastal Bird ID



Coastal Bird ID

This module includes information on the Northeast region's most common shorebirds for coastal Stewards:

- Sandpipers
- Plovers
- Oystercatchers
- Terns
- Skimmers

Indicates a migrant species: 

Indicates a nesting species: 



PHOTO: MICHAEL CARLO/USFWS
PRIME HOOK NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Sandpipers

Small head

Relatively small eyes

Bill as long as head or longer

Feed by continuously probing into sand or mud



PHOTO: RED KNOT WITH GREEN FLAG
GREG BREESE/USFWS

RED KNOT

Medium-sized, heavy-looking sandpiper with black legs and bill

Breeding



Non-breeding



PEEPS

Leg color and size differentiate these two similar, small sandpipers.

Semi-palmated 



PHOTO: SEMI-PALMATED SANDPIPER
BILL THOMPSON/USFWS

Least 



PHOTO: LEAST SANDPIPER
STEVE ARENA/USFWS
GREAT MEADOWS NWR

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SANDERLING

Plump and thick-billed with black legs. Lacks supercilium (eyebrow stripe) in breeding plumage.

Breeding



Non-breeding



RUDDY TURNSTONE

Medium-sized with mottled plumage, short orange legs, and slightly upturned bill.

Breeding



Non-breeding



LARGE SANDPIPERS

Whimbrels are rusty-colored with a long, curved bill. Willets have a stark wing pattern.

Whimbrel 



Willet 



Plovers

Large, rounded head

Relatively large eyes

Bill shorter than head

Feed using a hunt-and-peck method



PHOTO: PIPING PLOVER WITH COLOR BANDS
JIM HUDGINS/USFWS

PIPING PLOVER

Small tan plover with black collar and headband, orange legs, and an orange-black bill.

Breeding



*PHOTO: PIPING PLOVER IN BREEDING PLUMAGE
DON FREIDAY/USFWS*

Non-breeding



*PHOTO: PIPING PLOVER IN NON-BREEDING PLUMAGE
MIKE MOREL*

SEMI-PALMATED PLOVER

Small brown plover with black collar and mask, orange legs, and an orange-black bill.

Breeding



PHOTO: SEMI-PALMATED PLOVER IN BREEDING PLUMAGE
B MORFORD/NPS

Non-breeding



PHOTO: SEMI-PALMATED PLOVER IN NON-BREEDING PLUMAGE
INGRID V TAYLAR

WILSON'S PLOVER

Medium plover with brown upperparts, black collar, thick black bill, and pink legs.

Breeding



PHOTO: WILSON'S PLOVER IN BREEDING PLUMAGE
GREG SCHECHTER

Non-breeding



PHOTO: WILSON'S PLOVER IN NON-BREEDING PLUMAGE
ANDY MORFFEY

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER

Large plover with black underparts, black wingpits, and mottled upperparts.

Breeding



*PHOTO: BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER IN BREEDING PLUMAGE
MICK THOMPSON*

Non-breeding



*PHOTO: BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER IN BREEDING PLUMAGE
JASON CROTTY*

KILLDEER

Large brown plover with two black collars and rufous tail.

Profile View



Broken-wing Display



Oystercatchers

Large size

Long, orange-red bill

Feed on small to medium size marine invertebrates such as bivalves, crustaceans, or worms



PHOTO: AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER
MATT TILLET

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER

Note dark eye and bill and fresh-looking feathers on the younger adult.

Breeding Adult



Juvenile



Terns

Extremely short legs

Long wings

Sharp bill

Adults lose some of cap in winter

Juveniles have scalloping on upperparts

Feed by diving into open water to catch fish



PHOTO: COMMON TERN FLEDGE AND ADULT
MICHELE LAMBERTI

LEAST TERN

Gray and white, black cap with white triangular forehead, yellow legs and bill.

Breeding Adult



*PHOTO: LEAST TERN BREEDING ADULTS IN COURTSHIP
KAITI TITHERINGTON/USFWS
RACHEL CARSON NWR*

Juvenile



*PHOTO: LEAST TERN JUVENILE
GREG SCHECHTER*

COMMON TERN

Red-black bill, gray upperparts, many black primaries, dark underwing tips.

Breeding Adult



In Flight



ROSEATE TERN

Red-black to black bill, whitish upperparts, tail longer than wings, few black primaries.

Breeding Adult



In Flight



FORSTER'S TERN 🐣

Whitish tern, black cap, orange-black bill, non-breeding plumage with black eyepatches.

Breeding



Non-breeding



ROYAL TERN

Large tern with a small crest and an orange bill.

Breeding Adult



Juvenile



SANDWICH TERN

Large, sleek tern with a medium crest and a black bill with a yellow tip.

Breeding



Non-breeding



CASPIAN TERN

Large, robust tern with a small crest and a thick red bill.

Breeding



Non-breeding



Skimmers

Disproportionately
short legs

Razor thin bill

Lower mandible longer
than upper mandible

Feed by skimming
shallow water with bill
and grabbing fish that
jump



PHOTO: BLACK SKIMMER SKIMMING IN FLIGHT
DAN PANCAMO

BLACK SKIMMER

Black and white, tern-like bird with long, orange-black bill and orange legs.

Breeding Adult



*PHOTO: BLACK SKIMMERS IN BREEDING PLUMAGE
MATT TILLET*

Juvenile



*PHOTO: BLACK SKIMMER JUVENILE
ANDY MORFFEY*

Common Caribbean Shorebirds: ID Guide



Large 14"-18" 35 - 46 cm Medium 8.5"-12" 22 - 31 cm Small 6"- 8" 15 - 20 cm

Large Shorebirds

Whimbrel 17.5" 44.5 cm
 American Oystercatcher 17.5" 44.5 cm
 Willet 15" 38 cm
 Greater Yellowlegs 14" 35.5 cm
 American Avocet* 18" 46 cm
 Black-necked Stilt* 14" 35.5 cm

Medium Shorebirds

Lesser Yellowlegs 9.5" 24 cm
 Black-bellied Plover 11.5" 29 cm
 Short-billed Dowitcher 11" 28 cm
 Ruddy Turnstone 9.5" 24 cm
 Red Knot 10.5" 26.5 cm
 Pectoral Sandpiper 8.5" 21.5 cm
 Killdeer* 10.5" 26.5 cm
 Stilt Sandpiper* 8.5" 21.5 cm
 Solitary Sandpiper* 8.5" 21.5 cm

Small Shorebirds

Wilson's Plover 7.75" 19.5 cm Spotted Sandpiper 7.5" 19 cm
 Sanderling 7.75" 19.5 cm Western Sandpiper 6.5" 16.5 cm
 White-rumped Sandpiper 6" 15 cm Semipalmated Sandpiper 6.25" 16 cm
 Snowy Plover 6.25" 16 cm Least Sandpiper 6" 15 cm
 Semipalmated Plover 7.25" 18.5 cm
 Piping Plover 7.25" 18.5 cm

Lesser Yellowlegs & Ruddy Turnstone: Brad Winn; Red Knot: Anthony Levesque; Pectoral Sandpiper & White-rumped Sandpiper: Nick Danson; All other photos: Walker Golder

*not pictured

Clues to help identify shorebirds



Size & Shape	Bill Length & Shape	Foraging Behavior
<p>Size How big is it compared to other birds?</p> <p>Small Medium Large</p>	<p>Length</p> <p>Short Medium As long as head Longer than head</p> <p>Plowers, Turnstone Sandpipers Yellowlegs</p>	<p>Sandpipers Peeps (Semipalmated, Western, Least) Walk or run with the head down, picking and probing</p> <p>Spotted Sandpiper Bobs tail up and down when walking or standing</p> <p>White-rumped Sandpiper Tail tips up while probing</p> <p>Stilt Sandpiper Probes mud like "oil derrick," rear end tips up</p>
<p>Overall Body Shape</p> <p>Elongate Compact</p>	<p>Curvature</p> <p>Straight Tip slightly downcurved Upturned Downcurved</p> <p>Whimbrel, Oystercatcher, Willet, Dowitcher, Stilt, Avocet</p>	<p>Plovers Run & stop, pick, hiccup, run & stop</p> <p>Yellowlegs Stroll and pick</p> <p>Dowitchers Probe mud with "sewing machine" bill, body stays horizontal</p>
<p>Specific Body Parts Bill & leg color Eye size: Plovers = larger, sandpipers = smaller Leg & neck length</p>		

Coastal Bird ID

Additional Resources

Birds Caribbean has several quick identification guides as well as longer video guides to assist with difficult shorebird identifications.

For more info click here:

[Shorebird Resources – Birds Caribbean](#)

Welcome to Our Bird Guide

ID help and life history info for 600+ North American species

Or Browse Bird Guide by [Family](#) or [Shape](#)

Not sure of a bird's name?

[Get Instant ID Help](#)

Popular Species



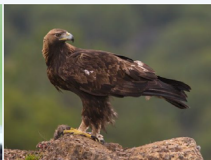
Northern Flicker



Eastern Screech-Owl



Northern Cardinal



Golden Eagle

Red-tailed Hawk
Great Blue Heron
House Finch
Mourning Dove
Peregrine Falcon

Coastal Bird ID continued

Additional Resources

For more information about individual species, visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at [All About Birds - Bird Guide](#).

This training only includes the most common coastal birds found in the Northeast and is not an exhaustive guide to coastal birds in your area.