

letters to the editor

First Alternate Red-necked Stints

I AM WRITING IN REGARD TO Robert Hamilton's answer to the December Quiz Photo C (Semipalmated Sandpiper), which appeared in the February 1996 *Birding*. I am not questioning the identity of the bird, but I want to point out that the lack of color on the "upper breast, throat, or head, and the upper edges of retained scapulars" is not enough to eliminate Red-necked Stint.

The majority of Red-necked Stints in first alternate plumage lack nearly all the color shown by adults, while still showing bold black centers to the dorsal feathers and black spots across the lower breast, like those of an adult. Most such birds show a little reddish color around the smallest, most anterior scapulars, but they lack it elsewhere and could be expected to look very similar to the quiz bird while in their second prebasic molt. A Red-necked Stint would probably show more primary projection than the quiz bird, and it would usually have a more tapered, finer-tipped bill, but in plumage it could be very close.

Although most Red-necked Stints in first alternate appear as I have described, as with most things biological, there is variation. Some birds show a lot more color, sometimes looking nearly as bright as adults. Ironically, the brightest Red-necked Stint I have ever seen turned out to be a first-year bird on the basis of its distinctive primary molt and retained juvenal, inner median-coverts.

In general, the first alternate plumage of shorebirds seems poorly known. I have read indications that first alternate Little Stints resemble adults, but I have seen distinctive, dull, first alternate plumages in a number of *Calidris* sandpipers in Australia, and in both Western and White-rumped Sandpipers in North America. It is something to be aware of.

Chris Corben
Olema, California

Kirtland's versus Yellow-throated Warblers

I WOULD LIKE TO ADD some comments to Harold Mayfield's article "Kirtland's Warblers in Winter" (*Birding* 1995, 28: 35-39). His summary of historical records is excellent, and his conclusions on the difficulty of finding Kirtland's Warbler in the Bahamas are borne out by my own experience, having birded there on and off for nearly twenty years and having never seen one.

Unfortunately Mayfield does not go into some of the identification difficulties

unwary birders will face. Magnolia Warblers in the Bahamas have been mistaken for Kirtland's. More important, there is an endemic subspecies of Yellow-throated Warbler (*Dendroica dominica flavescens*) on Grand Bahama and Abaco. This race has yellow extending down through the belly, and the white markings behind the auriculars can be obscure. This bird feeds on the

trunks and large branches of pine trees, like a Black-and-white Warbler. It is seldom found in low brush and does not wag its tail like a Kirtland's Warbler. Many of the recent reports of Kirtland's Warbler from Grand Bahama and Abaco mention the supposed Kirtland's Warbler feeding on tree trunks and are undoubtedly

misidentifications of the local Yellow-throated Warbler. These Yellow-throated Warblers are common on Grand Bahama and Abaco, but they are not found on any other islands. The birders who visit the Bahamas are not the only ones to blame for these misidentifications. Neither Bond's *Birds of the West Indies* nor Brudenell-Bruce's *Birds of*



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Yellow-throated Warbler (*Dendroica dominica flavescens*) from the Bahamas, Abaco, October 1995 (left); Grand Bahama, April 1993 (top).

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New Providence and the Bahama Islands even mention this race or its unusual appearance. Furthermore, I cannot find a single picture of this race anywhere in the literature. It would be helpful if you could print one or two photographs of this bird. One glance will show readers how under normal field conditions it can be mistaken for a Kirtland's Warbler.

Tony White
Bethesda, Maryland

Angled-Eyepiece Scopes and Window Mounts

I DISAGREE WITH A POINT made by Robert Fisher in his letter to the editor (*Birding* 1995, 27: 347-348). He states, "offset scopes . . . are more difficult to use with car window mounts than are straight-through models, even though you can rotate the offset eyepiece 90 degrees."

I have used a Kowa TSN-1 scope for several years, and I have found that the reverse

is true. As shown in the accompanying photograph, the ability to rotate the scope body in its mounting ring makes the TSN-1 more versatile than a "straight-through" scope, such as the Bushnell SpaceMaster scope that I also own. To rotate the scope it is necessary to loosen the knurled locking knob on the mounting ring; however, I leave the knob loose so I can easily twist the scope to quickly follow the bird if it moves.

By rotating the scope in the mounting ring you can view a much wider field of view without crouching down or otherwise contorting your body. In order to take advantage of the offset eyepiece, it may sometimes be necessary to move the window mount forward or backward along the window or to raise or lower the window to align the scope to a comfortable viewing position, but I find this necessary with my "straight-through" as well.

Note that although the scope can rotate 360° in its mount, the mounting platform on both my window mounts is larger than the scope's mounting ring base, which prevents the scope from being rotated more than about 270°. I have not found this to be a problem, but if this is a problem for someone, it can be easily solved by shortening the mount platform with a hacksaw or grinder.

It is my experience that the ability to rotate my angled-eyepiece scope allows me to look down ravines, up hills and power poles, and at birds on the roadside far in front of me with much greater ease than with my "straight-through" scope. Although I have not used them, I understand the Leica and Optolyth angled-eyepiece scopes can be rotated in their mounting rings similar to the ones on the Kowa TSN-1 and TSN-3.

Phillip J. Crabill
Highland Village, Texas

Abnormal Laughing Gull

ON 21 JANUARY 1996 at Sanibel Island, Florida, a gull with a bright orange bill and legs stood with 200 or more Laughing Gulls. Compared to the Laughing Gulls, it had the same dark gray back and wings, the same size and shape of head, the same pale gray wash over the head, and the same white crescents above and below the eye. The neck and breast were white. Discounting the color of the bill and legs, it certainly looked like an adult Laughing Gull in winter plumage. The bird was photographed (right) alone and with a Laughing Gull for comparison.

Our general bird-guides and resource books did not help much in the identification at the time. After our slides were returned, we turned to the information provided by P.J. Grant in his *Gulls, a Guide to Identification* and found the following: "Abnormal bare parts coloration occurs very rarely: two or three cases of adult Black-headed Gull (one also leucistic) and one of adult Laughing Gull, all with bright orange-red or bright crimson bill and legs instead of the normal . . . are known to the author . . ." We conclude that we saw a Laughing Gull with this abnormal coloration. It is possible, however, that a novice gull-watcher might identify this bird as a Black-headed Gull on the basis of the coloration of the bill and legs.

We hope this information will be useful to readers.

Bev and Clair Postmus
Sanibel, Florida



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