

# FIRST ARIZONA STATE RECORD OF THE CURLEW SANDPIPER

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On the morning of 20 July 2024, I discovered a Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*) at the Arizona Dairy Company farm (N 32.898254, W 112.911029) on the Paloma Ranch near Gila Bend, Maricopa County. If accepted by the Arizona Bird Committee (ABC), this observation will provide the first confirmed record of the species for Arizona.

While watching shorebirds at a sludge pond belonging to the farm (Figure 1a), I noticed a sandpiper with rufous head and underparts, a relatively thin and decurved bill, dark longish legs, a slender body, and in flight, a conspicuous white rump (Figure 2). The bird was clearly larger than nearby Least and Western Sandpipers (*C. minutilla* and *C. mauri*; Figure 3), but smaller than Stilt Sandpipers (*C. himantopus*) and even more so than nearby Long-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*; Figure 4). Having seen Curlew Sandpipers on numerous previous occasions – although for the most part birds in nonbreeding plumage – along the coasts of Western Europe during fall migration and of southeast Australia during the austral spring and early summer, I readily recognized that it belonged to this species. Its plumage and size indicated that it was an adult in worn alternate plumage and excluded potential contenders: Red Knot (*C. canutus*), Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*), and Dunlin (*C. alpina*). The Red Knot is substantially larger (average body mass: 135 g vs. 60 g; Sibley 2014); the Red Phalarope in breeding plumage has a shorter, straight, and mostly yellow bill; and the Dunlin, while of similar size, has a different alternate plumage pattern.

I continued to observe and photograph the bird for the next hour, during which time it leisurely foraged, apparently for small invertebrates, or slept at the sludge pond or in an adjacent flat and open area consisting of dry gravel and rain puddles (Figure 1b). The sandpiper appeared healthy. Its feathers, particularly the coverts, scapulars, and tertials, showed significant abrasion, as would be expected at this time of the year, but no newly grown or growing feathers were visible (Figure 5). Curlew Sandpipers molt from alternate to basic plumage primarily between July and October-November

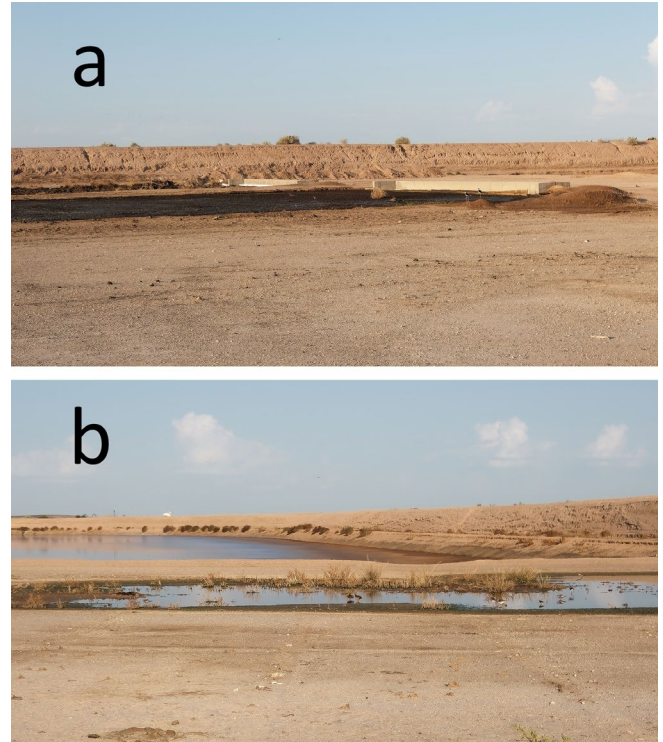


Figure 1. a. Sludge pond at the Arizona Dairy Company farm where the first Arizona Curlew Sandpiper was discovered. b. Rain puddles (foreground) where the bird often spent time in loose association with other shorebirds. Photos by Pierre Deviche



Figure 2. Curlew Sandpiper at the Arizona Dairy Company farm, 24 July 2024. Photo by Pierre Deviche

(Cramp 1983, O'Brien et al. 2006, Mlodinow and Medrano 2023). Molt can begin while birds are still on their breeding grounds and continue during southbound migration. Thus, molt in the Paloma Ranch bird either had not yet started, was ongoing but had only recently begun, or had begun and was suspended, as can be the case during migration (Mlodinow and Medrano 2023).



Figure 3. Curlew Sandpiper at the Arizona Dairy Company farm, 24 July 2024. Note size difference with Least Sandpiper. Photo by Pierre Deviche



Figure 4. Curlew Sandpiper at the Arizona Dairy Company farm, 24 July 2024. Note size difference with Long-billed Dowitcher. Photo by Pierre Deviche

In the days after its discovery and until no longer observed, the sandpiper remained for most of the time at the above location. It was also seen foraging in shallow water in flooded alfalfa fields a short distance from the sludge pond, where it often provided unobstructed views and ample opportunities for observation and photography. It loosely associated, but did not appear to interact, with other sandpipers (Least, Western, Spotted (*Actitis macularius*), Baird's (*C. bairdii*), Semipalmated (*C. pusilla*), and Stilt Sandpipers) or other shorebirds present at the time (Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*), Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*), Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*), Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*), Long-billed Dowitcher, Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*), and Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes* and *T. melanoleuca*)).



Figure 5. Side view of the Paloma Ranch Curlew Sandpiper illustrating flight and contour feather abrasion, 20 July 2024. Photo by Pierre Deviche

Other birders started arriving at the site within hours of my announcing the sandpiper's discovery on Discord's Arizona Rare Birds and Discussion channel. The bird was last seen on 27 July 2024, by which time it had been reported on eBird by at least 132 individuals. This turnout was due, in part, to the Paloma Ranch's short driving distance from the Phoenix and Tucson metropolitan areas, and to how long the sandpiper remained on location. Curlew Sandpipers found in neighboring states, excluding California, remained on site from 1 day to almost 1 month (Utah 2005) although it is not established in the latter case that a single bird was involved.

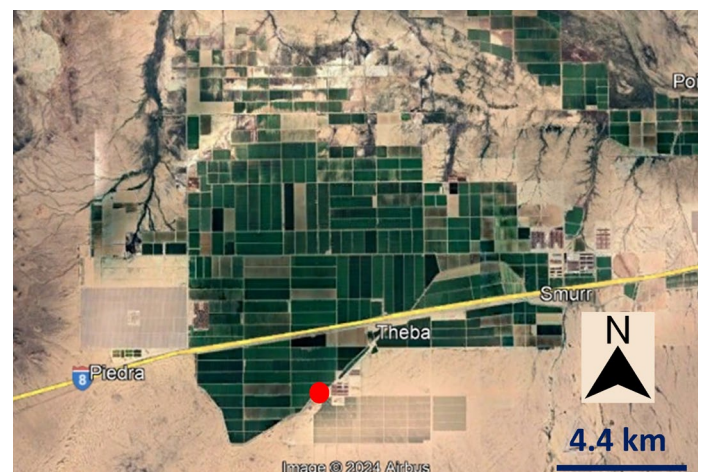


Figure 6. Google Earth screenshot showing the Paloma Ranch agricultural area. The red dot signals the location where the Curlew Sandpiper was discovered. Map Data ©2024 Google.

The Paloma Ranch (220 m above sea level) is an approximately 9,000-ha flat agricultural area surrounded by native Sonoran Desert (Figures 6 and 7). It includes a small residential area, large cattle operations, and several small artificial ponds. The ranch is crisscrossed by a network of dirt roads that provide access to the fields. It has long been a site of interest to birders, who, over the years, have recorded no fewer than 272 bird species including multiple rarities (eBird 2024), e.g., Yellow-green Vireo (*Vireo flavoviridis*; 1980), Pomarine Jaeger (*Stercorarius pomarinus*; 1999), Barrow's Goldeneye (*Bucephala islandica*; 2023), and Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maximus*; 2024), pending acceptance by the ABC. The ponds and the fields, when flooded, attract Ardeidae, Laridae, and migratory shorebirds. They have served as stopover sites for the following rare/casual species (eBird 2024): Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*C. subruficollis*; 2002), Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*C. acuminata*; 2003), Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*; 2016), Pacific Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*; 2021), Red Knot (2021), and Whimbrel (semiannual).



Figure 7. View of a portion of the Paloma Ranch, Maricopa, Arizona. Note foreground flooded field. Photo by Pierre Deviche

The Curlew Sandpiper's breeding range consists of a large region of Siberia (Russia) located north of the Arctic Circle (Cramp 1983, Mlodinow and Medrano 2023), east rarely and irregularly to Alaska's North Slope (primarily the Utqiagvik, Barrow region). It is a long-distance migrant that winters for the most part in relatively low latitude (approximately 30°N to 35°S) parts of Africa, Asia (India to Papua New Guinea), as well as New Zealand and Australia, where it can be locally abundant (Figure 8). Birds migrate from and to their breeding sites using several routes and stopovers, which may account for their pattern of worldwide vagrancy. In the continental United States, it is a rare but regular vagrant along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. Away from these regions, it is a casual vagrant as indicated, for example, by few records for states bordering Arizona: Colorado, 4 (Lisowsky 2000, Semo 2006, Faulkner 2013, 2015);



Figure 8. Curlew Sandpipers in basic plumage with a few Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (red outlines) and one Red-necked Stint, (*C. ruficollis*) (yellow outline) along the southeastern Australian coast, 18 October 2015. Photo by Pierre Deviche

Utah, 3 (eBird 2024); New Mexico, 1 (Williams 1997); and Nevada, 1 (NBRC 2024). The Curlew Sandpiper in California has been encountered during most months, although only twice in March to June (eBird 2024). All the records for the 4 other states bordering Arizona are from May to September. The sandpiper has apparently been found just twice in Mexico but more than 10 times in South America (Wilson et al. 1997, eBird 2024). The Mexican and most South American records are from September to January and so some presumably pertain to overwintering birds.

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