

First record of Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla* for Buenos Aires province and review of its status in Argentina

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Keywords: Least Sandpiper, *Calidris minutilla*, distribution, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla* is a Nearctic migrant shorebird that breeds in the North American taiga and subarctic tundra biomes and mainly spends the non-breeding season in the southern United States, Central America, the Caribbean, and northern South America. The southern parts of its main non-breeding areas are recorded as extending to Peru on the Pacific coast and to central Brazil on the Atlantic coast (Piersma *et al.* 1996, Nebel & Cooper 2008, BirdLife International 2017). The species also occurs to a lesser extent in southern South America. There are several records for northern and central Chile, and for Bolivia and Paraguay (e.g. Pearson 1975, Hayes *et al.* 1990, Maceda *et al.* 2008, eBird 2017), and there are reports of Least Sandpipers in Uruguay, but with no photographic evidence to support them (Heinonen & Chebez 1988). There are only two extralimital records for Argentina with photographic evidence: one came from La Pampa province, where a single bird was seen in February 2007 (Maceda *et al.* 2008), and one from Córdoba province of a bird observed by D. Vergara and M. Toledo in November 2015 (eBird 2017).

There is also a record of a small *Calidris* sandpiper with straw-coloured legs, pale bill, and dark rump that was recorded between December 1981 and February 1982 in the South Orkney Islands (60°43'S, 45°38'W) by Hemmings (1985). This author was not able to determine whether the bird was a Least Sandpiper or a Long-toed Stint *C. subminuta* which is Palearctic migrant with its main non-breeding area in the region between SE China and the Phillipines to E India and south through Indonesia to the Celebes (Cramp & Simmons 1983). Given that there are no previous records of Long-toed Stint for the Americas, Hemmings (1985) consider his observation as most likely to relate to Least Sandpiper. If so, it might have been the southernmost and the only Antarctic record of the species (Rootes 1988); however it remains unconfirmed and therefore considered as hypothetical by some authors (e.g. Mazar Barnett & Pearman 2001).

Least Sandpipers do not usually form large flocks, but rather tend to occur in groups of dozens or hundreds and join flocks of other small and more gregarious shorebirds (Nebel & Cooper 2008, Schulenberg 2017). It is the smallest



Fig. 1. Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla* (in front) and White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis* (behind) observed on the banks of Arroyo Chico, in Medaland Ranch, Buenos Aires province, Argentina on 15 December 2017. The Least Sandpiper can be easily distinguished by its small size, as well as by its yellowish-green legs (photo: N.S. Martínez-Curci).



Fig. 2. Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla* on the banks of Arroyo Chico, in Medaland Ranch, Buenos Aires province, Argentina on 15 December 2017; note its compact structure, small head, relatively short bill with downward curve, and wings that do not extend beyond tail (photo: N.S. Martínez-Curci).

species of the genus *Calidris* (130–150 mm in length, 17–33 g body mass) and is the only ‘peep’ (i.e. small *Calidris* species) that occurs in South America that has yellowish-green legs; all the other peep species have dark or black legs (Piersma *et al.* 1996, Nebel & Cooper 2008, Schulenberg 2017). It is compact in structure and has a crouched posture, short tail, short wings, distinctively long toes, small head and fine, slightly-drooped bill. Non-breeding adults have brown-grey upperparts with pale fringes and a streaked grey-brown throat and breast (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Piersma *et al.* 1996, O’Brien *et al.* 2006).

On 15 Dec 2017, we visited the coastal grasslands of Medaland Ranch (37°26'S, 57°11'W), an Important Bird Area located in the flooding pampas of Buenos Aires province, Argentina (IBA-AR208; BirdLife International 2018). The ranch comprises four major vegetative communities: 1) ‘salt prairies’ dominated by *Distichlis* spp. and *Stenotaphrum secundatum*; 2) ‘humid prairies’ dominated by *Cyperus*, *Eleocharis* sp., and *Phyla canescens*; 3) ‘upland prairies’ dominated by *Stipa* spp.; and 4) ‘salt marshes’ dominated by *Spartina densiflora* (Vervoort 1967). There are many ponds and streams in these communities. The main activity at Medaland is cattle ranching on natural grasslands (Isacch & Martínez 2003a,b), and the site supports important numbers of grassland shorebirds such as the Nearctic migrants Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Calidris subruficollis* and American Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*, and the Neotropical migrants Rufous-chested Dotterel *Charadrius modestus* and Tawny-throated Dotterel *Oreopholus ruficollis* (Myers & Myers 1979, Isacch & Martínez 2003a,b).

At 15:00 hrs on 15 Dec 2017, a single Least Sandpiper was observed in the banks of Arroyo Chico (37°26'8"S, 57°11'43.49"W), a small stream that crosses Medaland Ranch. A White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis* accompanied the Least. Approximately 50 meters from them, also on the banks of Arroyo Chico, there was a mixed flock of resting shorebirds comprising 63 Hudsonian Godwits *Limosa haemastica*, 11 American Golden Plovers, six Black-necked Stilts *Himantopus mexicanus*, two Stilt Sandpipers *Calidris himantopus*, two White-rumped Sandpipers, and two Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*; there were also three Neotropic Cormorants *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*. The Least Sandpiper was feeding by probing in the mud, but quickly flew as we approached to take a photograph. It was easily identified by its smaller size compared to the White-rumped and by its yellowish-green short legs with longish toes (Fig. 1). In the field, the leg colour was not clear as they were muddy and in shadow, but it was more evident in the photographs. Other key features, such as its relatively short bill (compared with other peeps) with a distinct downward curve, short neck, and wings that barely extend beyond tail (Nebel & Cooper 2008) were also confirmed by the photographs (Fig. 2).

The three records of Least Sandpipers in Argentina over the last ten years indicate that the species is likely to be of regular but rare occurrence in the country. Since Least

Sandpipers frequently associate with similar species such as White-rumped and Baird's *Calidris bairdii* Sandpipers, they probably go unnoticed in mixed flocks so their abundance and frequency of occurrence might be underestimated. The current increase in the number of bird-watchers interested in shorebirds may contribute to a better understanding of the abundance and distribution of Least Sandpipers in Argentina.

We are grateful to the family Arbelaiz for allowing us to work on Medaland, and to Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences and the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network for funding our fieldwork. Thanks also to Germán García and Nicolás Chiaradia for their support in field activities. Claudio Rodríguez gave us valuable help with editing the photographs. We also thank Patricia González for comments on our draft text.

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