

**COMMONER WADERS
PART TWO
SANDPIPERS**



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The UK can boast of an impressive list of 78 species of wader, though only 18 breed. Of the remainder, more than 40 are very rare migrants and thus fall outside our scope here. Personally, I've seen 59 in UK and on a World basis, I'm actually only 'missing' two, which are both now considered extinct (Eskimo Curlew for certain and Slender-billed Curlew almost certainly, though one reported in France in 2020). Species such as **Oystercatcher** and **Avocet** are not included since they have absolutely no confusion species and 'commoner' equates to common hereabouts.

Whilst all the ID help anyone might need is widely available in books and the Internet, what follows is invariably written in 'plain', hopefully easy to understand language, with minimal use of any technical, possibly confusing body part terms.

Dunlin: Year-round resident with huge populations from elsewhere arriving to winter. About the size of a Starling and unquestionably the commonest UK wader in winter, when roosting/feeding flocks can number several thousand individuals. Mainly **maritime** hereabouts but regular in small numbers inland. Scanning through flocks of Dunlin for something more unusual is a safer bet than for other wader groups.

Birds in summer or partial summer plumage are regularly seen locally with the **black belly alone** being enough to separate it from all other species. Non-breeding plumage is essentially the same as individuals in their first winter, being white below with a **varying amount of streaking**. Upperparts vary between dull mottling to much more defined **dark-centred, pale-edged feathering**, often showing clear off-white 'braces' – though not as prominently as on the smaller **Little Stint**. **Bill black**, with a down turned tip females are longer billed than males which can bring about some confusion with the larger **Curlew Sandpiper**. **Three races** move through the UK, with much overlap between males and females in overall size, not just the bill. Feeding action has been likened to a sewing machine.

In flight, shows a complete **pale wing-bar** from body to wing-tip, with a **white rump that has a dark centre** (Curlew Sandpiper rump is **all white**). Flocks are somewhat similar to Starling as they perform their amazing, synchronised 'ordered chaos', appearing all white one moment and grey the next as they twist and turn as one.

Green Sandpiper: Though possible to see in every month of the year, its most regular during both passage periods. The first returning birds can show in the first week of July. Winters in **small to very small numbers**. Invariably **inland**. Said to be confused with the following species, the two are markedly different to one another.

Slightly larger than Common Sandpiper, appearing **black** above, **white** below. White **only between bill and eye**, not beyond; distinct **white eye-ring**. Juveniles **heavily spotted pale above**. If disturbed, usually calls, a high pitched triple noted "**tee-wee-wee**" and flies away high with the downbeat more pronounced. **White rumped**. Bobs head and wags tail up and down, as does Common Sandpiper but a good ID feature for separating the two from all other waders apart from the much scarcer Wood Sandpiper). Wings and tail meet at **the same point**.

Common Sandpiper: Year round resident though wintering birds are **very few (far fewer than Green Sandpiper)**. **Prefers freshwater** environments but can occur (particularly in winter) near or on the coast.

In essence, **smaller, pale brown** version of that species. Most of the upperparts show **darker barring** (as seen on the front cover). Feint, off-white line starts from the bill, passing over and **beyond the eye**,

which is also **ringed**. Tail extends **well beyond closed wings**. If disturbed, flight is **invariably low** over the water on horizontally held, flickering wings. **Full white wingbar**; tail **dark** with **dark centred rump**. Usually calls, a series of less highly pitched “**tsee-wee-wee**” notes. Non breeding adults plain above whereas juveniles **show barring** on some of the flight feathers. As with Green Sandpiper, first winters are difficult to separate out.

Ruff: Year round resident though only **breeds and winters in small numbers. Sexes radically different**, so much so **the significantly smaller females** have their own name, **Reeve**. Males are famous for their shockingly unique head gear, or ruff. Sadly we hardly get to see birds in such plumage though some ‘half-way’ individuals are known from time to time.

Ignoring adult males then, both sexes appear much the same, one a miniature version of the other. Upperparts comprise **dark-centred, pale-edged feathers** throughout, which is actually very smart looking. Underparts off-white in adults, more a suffused **pale fawn colour in juveniles**. Bill can appear **straight** or **slightly down-curving**, the base of which may show a **small pale area**. Long legs are unhelpful being anything between **dull red** through to **olive-green**. Appears **hunch-backed** when feeding. **Invariably silent**.

In flight, **narrow white wing-bar; white-sided rump** feathers form **complete U or V shape**, quite unlike any other wader.

Redshank: Year round resident; numbers swelled from elsewhere in winter. Predominantly a coastal species though does turn up inland regularly in small numbers.

Medium sized wader, brown above. **Bright orange-red legs** rule out everything else apart from Ruff (not Reeve) and the scarce but altogether **larger, more elegant** Spotted Redshank. Juveniles and non-breeding plumaged adults have **yellow-orange legs**. Bill dark with a **red base** – similar to Spotted Redshank but **shorter and thicker** than that species.

Adults vary in plumage, from summer plumage (where **nicely speckled** upperparts and **streaked** underparts) to non-breeding where the overall appearance is **more plain**, somewhat resembling juveniles. Regularly **boobs head**.

Usually the first species to flush, when it lets the entire world know about your presence, calling loudly as it departs. In flight, wings show a **broad, white trailing edge for much of the length**, readily visible from some distance. **V shaped, white back** (**oval-shaped** in Spotted Redshank).

Greenshank: Passage migrant that breeds (Scotland) in very small numbers. Some winter, including on the Dee Estuary, generally happier in freshwater environments outside of winter.

Somewhat **larger** than Redshank and more elegant as a result. Legs **yellow-green** in adults, **pale yellow** in juveniles. Bill **stout, grey** and, clearly **upturned**. Adults in breeding plumage show beautiful upperpart patterning caused by obvious **black streaking** and also **boldly streaked** upper breast; **white below** otherwise. In other plumages, including juvenile, upper breast shows **much reduced** streaking; the overall appearance is of a **dark above, white below** wader. In non-breeding plumages, and given close views juveniles can be distinguished from adults through their upperpart feather edges being **broken at the tips** (**solid** in adults).

In flight, wings are **wholly dark**, and the back has a long, **triangular white patch**. Call is an emphatic, far carrying “**chu-chu-chu**” oftentimes birds will go unseen as they are so far away!