Birders fear groups like *Empidonax* flycatchers for difficulty of identification but I've discovered that for a variety of reasons, birders really crash on wintering plovers and especially small sandpipers. By far, the most important two field marks are the bill and legs (not unlike white egrets!). Each bill is surgically made to perfectly match the specific niche in which they feed. Notice how much larger the head and eyes are in plovers, and normally how much shorter their bill is. These are the species which winter here and don't expect bright colors and patterns. Note that plovers feed on the surface and most pipers probe.

We'll begin with plovers and the big one (in more ways than one) is Black-bellied Plover. From Fall through late spring they have no black belly but I selected this March picture because you can see the black juuuust beginning to come in. All year they have black wingpits and a thick bill.

American Golden-Plovers are virtually absent all months except the first half of the spring migration, mid March to mid April. Still, at the end of a winter, we get Goldens while the bird population is basically still winter birds, and a very low amount of breeding plumage is seen. So…look for the absence of a black wingpit (axillaries) and a thinner bill with a light supercilium.

Often seen flying around in the winter & saying its whistles name is the mid-sized Killdeer. They're larger than the other ringed plovers to come but a tad smaller than a black-bellied. They also have two rings & a beige rump patch. These are common on beaches in winter, more often occupying grasslands & lawns in spring and summer.

Semipalmated Plovers are normally the most common small, ringed plover a beach will have. They are also normally the only one with a darkish back, if there are none of the next, rare-in-winter species around. The orange legs are roughly the same color as the Piping's, which are much lighter on back.

This is that Piping Plover, listed as a threatened species by the Government. You can see how well it blends in on sandy beaches, if this was a normally-colored beach. Remember how plovers have big eyes, short bills and the big head. Most also make a *churree* whistle reminiscent of our wood-pewee.

With a cold wind blowing up his, um, from behind, this Snowy Plover races along the San Luis Pass beach for tiny marine life. The bill is slightly longer and thinner than the Piping and Semipalmated but their dark legs are gray in Texas and nearly black in Florida (the endangered Cuban Snowy Plover). In Florida their back is very whitish, as the beaches are whiter because the Miss River brings all its sediments this way (west). Amazing, huh?

Occasionally we see a Wilson's Plover here in winter & it won't hurt you to see one in this PDF. They are basically a summer resident, nesting in dunes away from the high surge zone. Note the long, thick, black beak, flesh-color on their legs and a larger size than the last three.

Folks, this is important. In spring and summer, **STAY AWAY** from areas marked as breeding sites for our plovers. You can cost them their lives, their chicks and eggs. Photographers; don't force yourself on them – especially in the breeding season. Let's keep a few of these around for our grandkids!

Our largest sandpiper is the Long-billed Curlew, with this winter plumage a bit less buffy than we see in spring. The bill is extremely long, indicating a female. These usually feed in either grassy areas like pastures and fields or along the seashore – even well out in the shallows. They nest in shortgrass prairies (mostly) east of the Rockies, but definitely “out West.”

Another picture depicting their real winter plumage is this Marbled Godwit, obviously paler than we see them in spring (or fall, for that matter). It probes mudflats for polycheate worms, etc., using its upturned (recurved) beak for their worm extraction. These are slightly smaller than the curlew.

Western Willets are also large birds, more ungainly than the chunky Eastern Willets of spring and summer that breed here. Their shape could be mistaken for a godwit but the color is dead gray from when they arrive in August to a time in March when they begin to molt into breeding plumage. They'll also nest with the curlew and godwit in the shortgrass prairies out West.

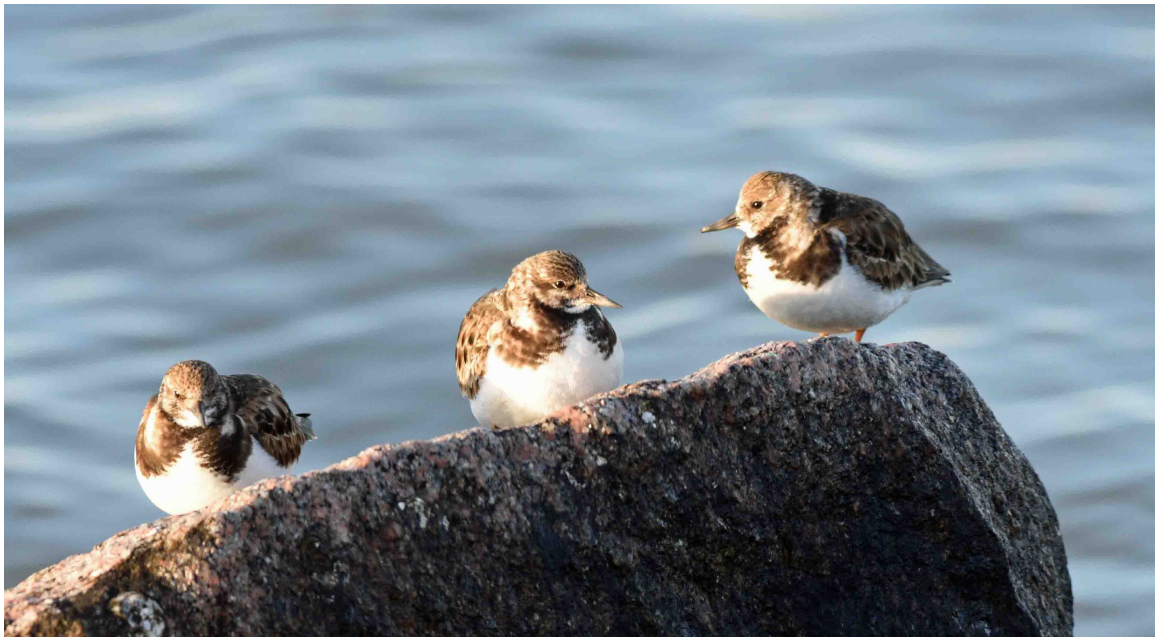
This is the Lesser (R) Yellowlegs and the Greater. Both are here fall through spring, but Greaters are normally alone while Lessers are usually in a flock. Greaters are more massive but don't have the long, spindly legs of Lessers, and usually are less pigmented on the breast in winter. Lessers have calls of little notice while Greaters are quite loud. Their bill is twice the length of the heads while Lessers more like 1.5 times the length. No sexual difference of size or plumage at any time of the year. The Man gave us a break. ☺

Here we go with the small to medium-sized sandpipers of winter. These are Long-billed Dowitchers, known by the hump in the back and suspected by being in a lake, rather than the Coast in winter. Notice also (unless you are using a cell phone) the absence of streaking on the face.

Below you can see the white back on (both) dowitchers, seen flying. Then, they call, with LBs peeping and short-bills saying *tu tu.* Best field mark! :0

Short-billed Dowitcher usually winter along the Coast, often in large flocks. They are larger and chunkier than the other small to medium-sized pipers & have the longest bill on the Coast of them as well. Snipe and long-bills will be mostly in fresh water.

If they aren't calling, look carefully for the streaked face (below) as their bill is almost as long as long-bills and females of both species are longer-billed.



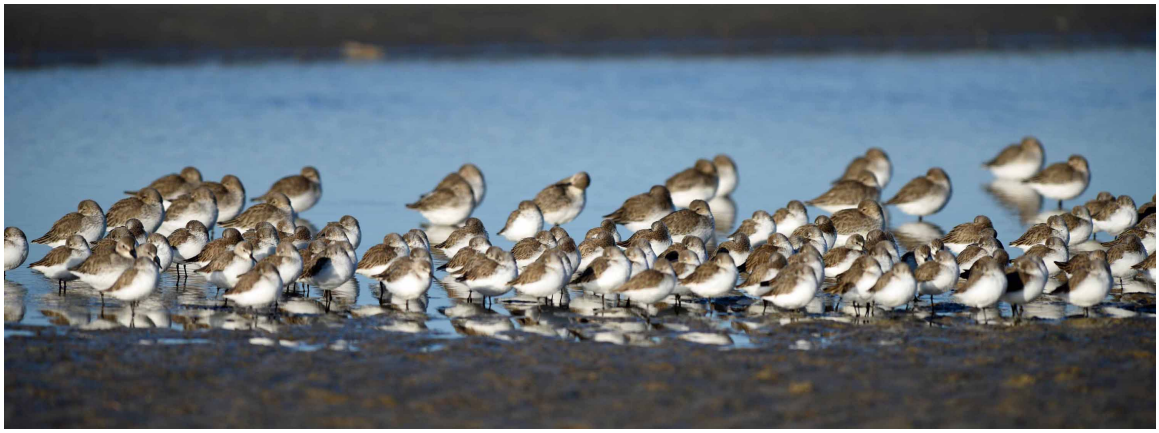
Ruddy Turnstones in winter plumage lack the “ruddy” (red) color breeding offers but still the huge, dark collar identifies them. Their legs remain red in winter, also a good field mark. Turnstones work rocks and docks for various arthropods like silverfish, etc. which crawl around, or encrusting organisms like barnacles. Their strong, wedge-shaped beak breaks right through those protective “doors” used by barnacles inside is the shrimp-like, soft-bodied crustaceans they love best, but only are exposed at lower tides.

Speaking of docks and rocks (don’t go there), Spotted Sandpipers have the longest winter range of any bird (I think!), being found from New England to the Southern Tip of South America. They are wary birds, flying out on a flap-sail flight pattern, stiff-winged like the Wandering Tattler of Alaska.

Our Common Snipe has been correctly renamed Wilson Snipe and is found in freshwater sites with shallow shores. They come and go, often for weeks, but always as winter residents. Note the long bill but their brown color will eliminate a dowitcher. Woodcocks, which aren't banded, live in swamps.

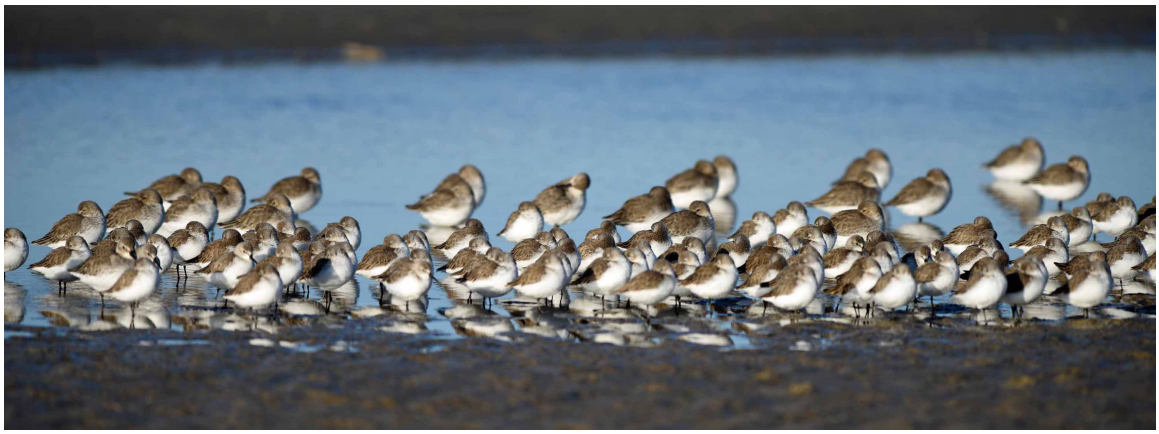
Smaller than the previous “medium-sized” sandpipers are Sanderlings, the most often-seen shorebird at the beach. Their whitish color could only be a problem with Snowy and Piping Plovers, both of whom have shorter bills and a hint of a ring. But don’t kid yourself; they get confused!

Dunlins are more brownish & darker gray than Sanderlings, maybe a smigit larger. Their bill is almost as long as a dowitcher's with a decided droop at the end. They have some gray chevrons (?) on the breast and black legs. In their flocks are often Western Sandpiper, 1/2 the size. [See mid front below.]

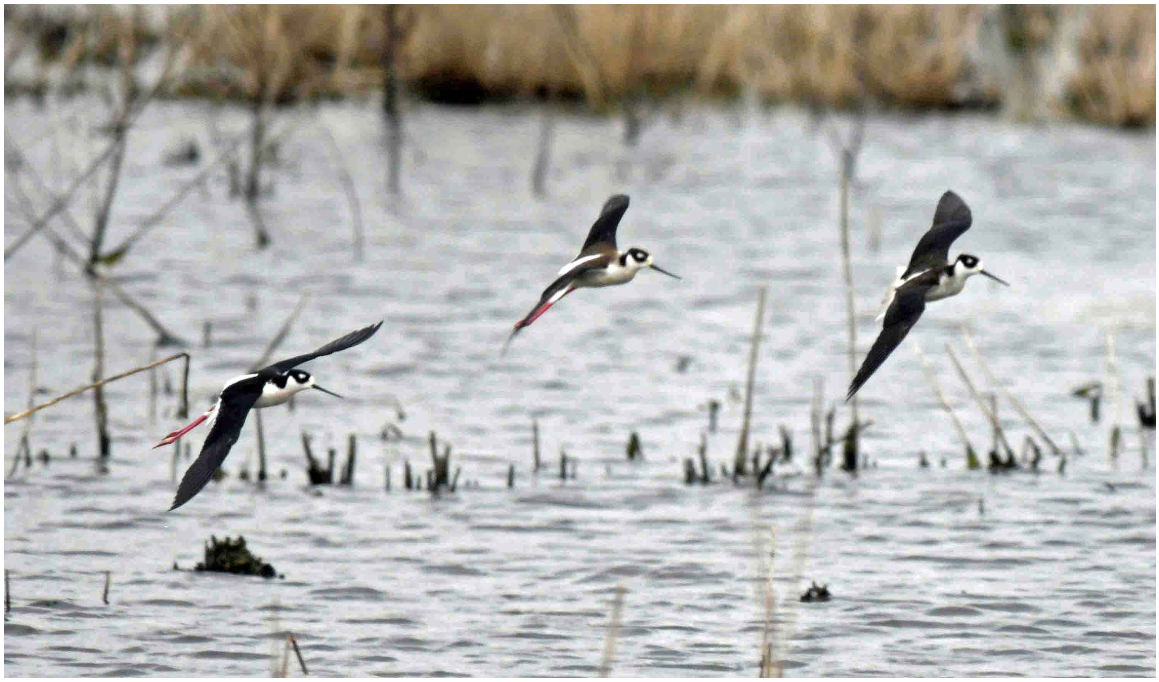


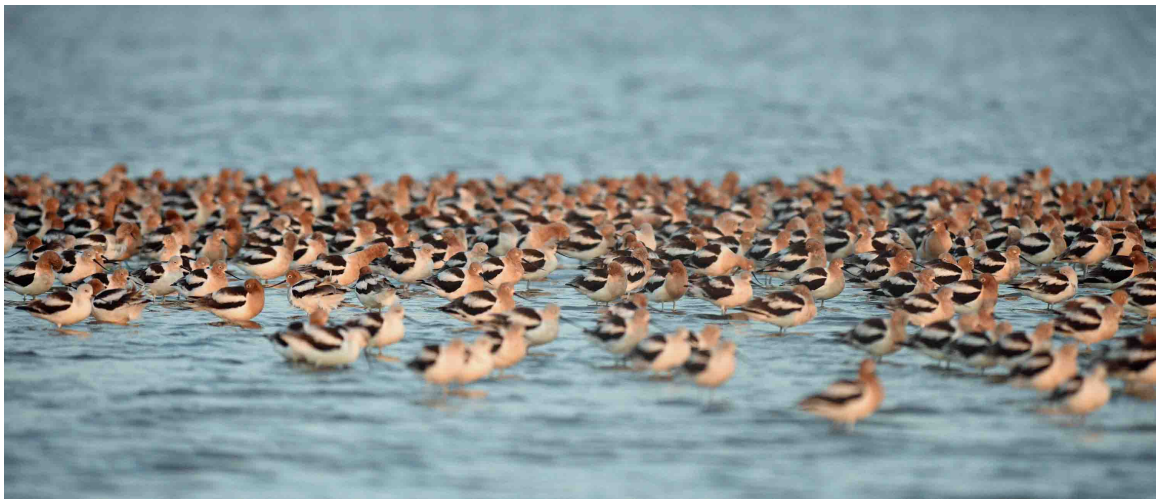
Least Sandpipers are more often seen individually or in small groups & may be quite a ways from the shoreline. They are much browner than Westerns & are the only peep in the World with yellow legs. Their thin bill is medium in length for a peep, shorter than a Western's & longer than the Semipalmated Sandpiper that arrives in spring.

Here are some Western Sandpipers with their kinda long bills, although they also are slightly drooped like a Dunlin's. This is the most abundant shorebird on Earth, most nesting in Western Alaska. Below you can see them in front of Dunlins, Short-billed Dowitchers and Western Willets on the left in both.



America Oystercatchers eat mostly mollusks but when tides are high there is often dead stuff on the beach (redfish). You can see the black on the bill tip showing it's been probing the mud for a snack. These are most easily seen on the Texas City Dike or bay docks on Sportsman Road.



Black-necked Stilts organize in flocks in winter and may be missed all day. Below are some migrating in late winter and will break up in couples fairly quickly. The top three has a female in the middle with her bronzy back but in winter male and female have little meaning. These are circum-Gulf birds, migrating along the Coast from South Texas and Mexico.

We have tons of American Avocets all winter in their dull, gray plumage w/ vast amounts of plankton and insect larvae getting sucked up. In March they start getting a beige head and neck in preparation to leave and breed to the northwest. The last ones usually leave in May.