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Studies of less familiar birds

no. Grey-rumped Sandpiper

By Irene Neufeldt, Л. V. Krechmar and Л. I. Ivanov

Photographs by A. V. Krechmar and J. Y. ~Livshits

(Plates 5-8)

Very little is known about the breeding biology of the Grey-rumped Sandpiper (*Tringa brevipes*)* because it inhabits the remotest and wildest mountains of north-eastern Siberia. During the last few years, however, observations have been made by A.V.K., V. I. Kapitonov, K. A. Vorobiev and A. P. Vaskovski, and the following account is based mainly on these. All references to Kamchatka, the Sea of Okhotsk and the Cherski range respectively concern the papers by Averin (1948), Vaskovski (1956) and Vorobiev (1959).

This wader is widely distributed in the mountains of north-eastern Siberia from the Putorana mountain plateau (Lake Keta, the Rybnaya and Khantaika Rivers, etc., at about 69°N, 90°E) in the west to the mountains of the Kamchatka peninsula and probably the Anadyr range in the east. Within these limits Grey-rumped Sandpipers have

*In *The Handbook* this bird is treated as a race of the Wandering Tattler (*Tringa incana*) of America and the two forms are still regarded as conspecific by N. A. Gladkov in *The Birds of the Soviet Union* (1951). However, as pointed out in *The Handbook*, many other authors have treated the two as separate species because of structural differences, the Wandering Tattler having a longer nasal groove and the backs of the tarsi scutellated instead of reticulated; in addition, its under tail-coverts are barred in summer like the breast, instead of uniformly white as in the

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been found in a number of places—in the Kharaulakh mountains, east of the Lena River at about 69°-70°N, in the Verkhoyanski range near the source of the Yana and Adycha Rivers, in the Cherski range by the upper courses of the Indigirka River and, lastly, in the mountains along the watershed between the Kolyma River and the Sea of Okhotsk. There is nothing new that can be said about the southern limits of the breeding range and, as far as we know, the species nests south to the high mountains near Lake Baikal and in the south-eastern parts of the Sayan mountains near Lake Kosogol.

The vertical distribution of the Grey-rumped Sandpiper varies in accordance with the latitude. In the foot-hills of the Putorana mountain plateau, where the tree-line is rather low, A.V.K. met these birds from only 100 to 300 metres (about 325-1,000 feet) above sea level; and in the Kharaulakh mountains, also in the far north, V. I. Kapitonov found them at similar altitudes, from 200 to 600 metres (roughly 650-2,000 feet). On the other hand, according to Vorobiev (1959), the species is common in the Cherski range from 800 to 1,400 metres (roughly 2,600-4,600 feet) above sea level and to the north of Lake Baikal Stegmann (1936) recorded it from 1,500 to 1,800 metres (roughly 5,000-6,000 feet). It is now evident that the Grey-rumped Sandpiper is characteristically found along the banks of rivers and streams in subalpine and alpine zones, and that only a few pairs nest much below the tree line.

The main migration routes are along the eastern coasts of the Asiatic continent and only as rarities have Grey-rumped Sandpipers been recorded on passage in central parts of Siberia. The first spring arrivals appeared on the Kamchatka coast about 13th-15th May. On the shores of the Sea of Okhotsk, near Magodan, the main passage took place between 20th and 25th May, and in 12-15 days the spring migration was over there. Much further west, in the Kharaulakh mountains, the first Grey-rumped Sandpipers were recorded on 23rd May at a time when all the mountain streams were still covered with ice and there were only a very few spots free of snow where the birds could feed, but in three or four days enough of the snow and ice had melted for them to find feeding places on the river banks. In the Cherski range the first of these waders appeared on 31st May. It was the very beginning of spring in the mountains and the northern slopes were covered with snow while the river beds were still waterless, as in

present bird (plates 5 and 6a). In accordance with our normal practice, we are following the *Check-list of the birds of Great Britain and Ireland* (1952) in treating them as distinct species. The information given in *The Handbook* on the breeding of the Grey-rumped Sandpiper (or Polynesian Tattler) is based entirely on observations on the Wandering Tattler and so the data given in this text supplement that, while it should be particularly noted that the nest shown on plate 6b is the only one of the Grey-rumped Sandpiper that has ever been found.—I. J. F. L.



PLATE 5. Female Grey-rumped Sandpiper (*Tringa brevipes*), Rybnaya River, Siberia, July 1959. Nearly Redshank-sized but with shorter legs, this species is uniform dark grey above except for light feather edges. In summer the throat and breast bear wavy bars of a similar grey, while the belly and under-tail are white (page 30). The legs and a patch at the base of the blackish bill are dull yellow. Like other *Tringa*, it perches on trees in the nesting area (photo: A. V. Krechmar)



PLATE 6. Above, female Grey-rumped Sandpiper (*Tringa brevipes*), showing the grey barring on the white under-parts, Rybnaya River, July 1959 (photo: A. V. Krechmar). Below, the only nest ever found (page 32)—four eggs in a grass-lined hollow among stones, Makus River, Siberia, 19th July 1959 (photo: J. Y. Livshits). Inset, a downy nestling roughly two days old (page 32) (photo: A. V. Krechmar)

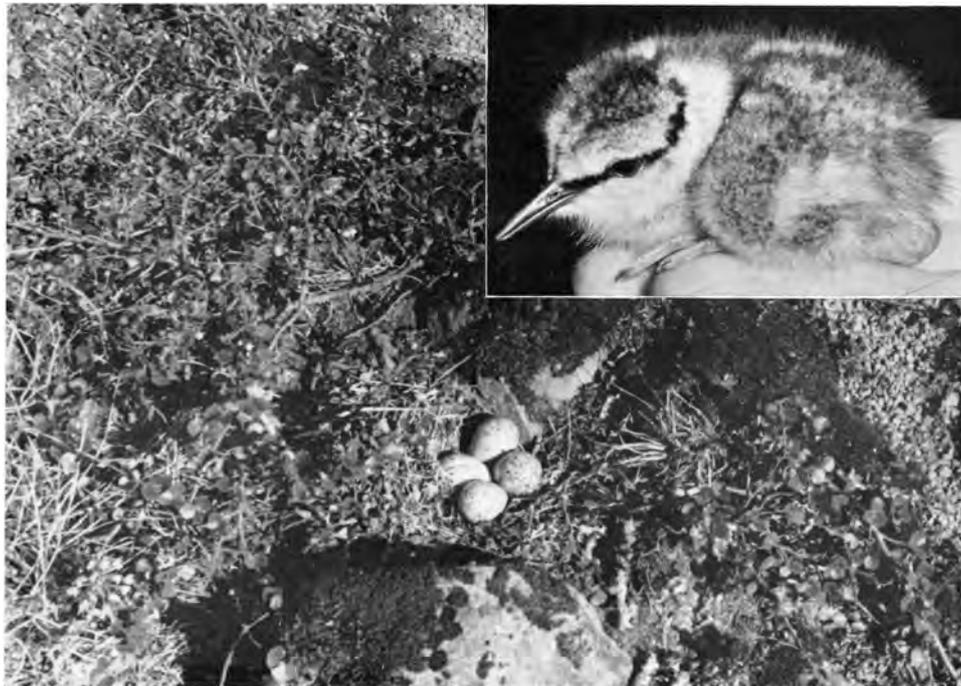




PLATE 7. Breeding habitats of Grey-rumped Sandpipers (*Tringa brevipes*), Rybnaya River, July 1959. This species nests near the tree-line in the mountains of north-east Siberia at altitudes from under 500 to over 6,000 feet (page 31). It is characteristically found along river banks, but occasionally some distance from water in sparse forests of stunted trees (page 33) (photos: A. V. Krechmar)





PLATE 8. Above, pair of Grey-rumped Sandpipers (*Tringa brevipes*) brooding young, Rybnaya River, July 1959. Below, female with chick creeping under her right wing. Both sexes brood the young, but the females do so more readily. The chicks are reared among the sedges and dwarf willows of marshy river edges where they feed on the hordes of gnats and mosquitoes (page 32) (photos: A. V. Krechmar)



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winter. Then in a day the weather became much warmer, a lot more snow melted and the waders had a chance to search for food beside the now-flowing streams.

At the westernmost point of the range in the western foot-hills of the Putorana mountain plateau A.V.K. recorded the spring arrival on 31st May in 1958 and on 1st June in 1959. In each year there were only odd birds and a few pairs or small parties of three or four at first, but in about four days they became abundant. At first they kept to the very edge of the ice on the Rybnaya River because the thaw starts earlier there than on other rivers in that area. They searched for their food among the debris on the melting snow and ice, picking up the first spring insects (Apterygota) which were very easy to see on the white background. From the day of arrival the birds were beginning to display. Both their displays and their calls were very reminiscent of those of the Greenshank (*T. nebularia*) and like that species they often perched on dead branches (plate 5). Until about 20th June pairs could be seen every day at the same places, usually at the mouths of small tributaries of the Rybnaya River and along the Makus and Kamustyak Rivers (plate 7). After this date only solitary males were noted and it was presumed that the females were busy with incubation, but until mid-July A.V.K. found neither eggs nor young, nor did he see any pairs alarming. On 19th July 1959, however, the geologist J. Y. Livshits happened across the only nest of this bird that has ever been found (plate 6b). It was simply a hollow among stones lined with dead grasses and there were four eggs. The incubating female was very tame and the observer was able to approach to within the distance of his outstretched arm. The habitat was stony forest-tundra 320 metres (roughly 1,050 feet) above sea level near the source of the Makus River and approximately 80 kilometres WSW of Norilsk.

On 16th July, at the mouth of a small tributary of the Rybnaya River and about 100 metres above sea level, A.V.K. discovered his first brood of downy young; there were four of them and they were only one or two days old (one is shown in the inset on plate 6b). They were very lively and running about among sedge and willow scrub on the marshy ground beside the river. The mosquitoes were swarming in countless millions at that time and the chicks, like the adults, were picking them up from the grass and even catching them in the air. Only the female accompanied this brood; with loud notes of alarm she perched on top of a tree near-by (plate 6a) or, approaching very close to the intruder, tried to lead him away from her brood. Plate 8b shows the female brooding the young (one is just creeping under her right wing) after crouching with half-stretched wings and recalling her scattered brood with a sweet trill. On 18th July A.V.K. found four pairs of Grey-rumped Sandpipers alarming along a two-

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kilometre stretch of the river and located two more broods of recently hatched nestlings among the willow scrub. In each case both parents were with the young and both brooded them (plate 8a), though the females did so more readily. On the next day in a similar habitat three older chicks were discovered and on the 25th he found another brood, this time accompanied only by the male, on the partly dry shingle bed of a mountain stream on the watershed of Lakes Keta and Khantaiskoe. On 31st July, by the Khantaika River, he found a young one that was still only a few days old, but a week later, on 7th and 9th August, he came across young that were able to fly quite well and between the 12th and 19th the numbers of Grey-rumped Sandpipers—the young already very much like the adults—noticeably diminished until the last small flock was recorded on 8th September.

There are a few additional data on breeding from other parts of the range. V. I. Kapitonov found a single chick accompanied by only one adult on 19th July above the tree-line in the Kharaulakh mountains. According to K. A. Vorobiev, Grey-rumped Sandpipers are common on the stony banks and islets of the mountain streams along the upper courses of the Indigirka River (the Olchan and Omuk-Kiuriuelyakh Rivers). Habitats are rather diverse there, but the birds kept mainly to islands overgrown with polar willow scrub, bilberry and dwarf birches interspersed with open spaces covered with mosses and lichens and sometimes dotted with stones. However, broods were also found rather far from rivers in thin forests of stunted larch where numerous dead trees were lying on the ground and thickets of low bushes alternated with open spaces. The first brood to be recorded by Vorobiev was found as early as 5th July; and he noted that each one was accompanied only by the male, which had no brood patches.

The last Grey-rumped Sandpipers on autumn passage on the north-western coast of the Sea of Okhotsk were observed during 17th-19th September, but in Kamchatka the last of the autumn was seen as late as 4th October. The species is known to winter mainly from the Malay Peninsula to north-western Australia and Queensland and so it is particularly interesting to note that odd Grey-rumped Sandpipers have been recorded in the winter months near hot springs in Kamchatka: this is three or four thousand miles further north than the normal winter range and on the same latitude as Britain.

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