

CURRENT BREEDING STATUS OF BAIRD'S SANDPIPER (*CALIDRIS BAIRDII*) IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*) is known to breed from northeastern Siberia, western and northern Alaska, and high Arctic Canada to northwestern Greenland (American Ornithologists' Union 1998) and recently a small disjunct nesting population has been found in extreme northwestern British Columbia (Campbell et al. 2001). The latter record, from 1996, was overlooked by Moskoff and Montgomerie (2002) as it was only included in the final volume of *The Birds of British Columbia* as an "Addition to the Avifauna of British Columbia, 1987 through 1999".

In this note I summarize historical information on the summer arrival of the Baird's Sandpiper, and current breeding status, in the Haines Highway region of northwestern British Columbia. This highway, often referred to as the Chilkat Pass, connects Haines, Alaska (marine port) with Haines Junction, Yukon Territory. The highway is about 244 km (152 mi) long, of which 79 km (between km 66 and km 145) passes through British Columbia. The area generally coincides with timberline and reaches an elevation of 1,065 m (3,494 ft) in the Chilkat Pass.

In British Columbia, Baird's Sandpiper is generally considered a spring and autumn transient

(Campbell et al. 1990). The spring passage is less noticeable than the more robust autumn movement that also includes subalpine and alpine habitats.

The Haines Highway region of British Columbia has not been well explored ornithologically although it was visited briefly by collectors in the mid 1900s (e.g., Rand 1946, Godfrey 1951). During the summers of 1957 to 1959, Robert B. Weeden, while studying ptarmigan in the Chilkat Pass, maintained field notes of other birds observed and later published the first treatise for the region (Weeden 1960). Although he recorded 13 species of shorebirds during 153 days of fieldwork Baird's Sandpiper was not observed.

It appears that the earliest record of Baird's Sandpiper for Chilkat Pass was an adult collected on 24 June 1973 (ROM 119407) during a field expedition by the Royal Ontario Museum (Campbell et al. 1990). Over the next 34 years, through 2007, the species has been observed in spring and summer between Kusawak Lake, Mosquito Flats, and Kelsall Lake, as collectors, researchers, and birdwatchers infrequently visited the region.

The earliest suggestion that Baird's Sandpiper may be breeding in British Columbia occurred in 1980 when an alarmed adult was watched at Kelsall Lake on 20 July calling continuously from a wet sedge area (R.W. Campbell pers. comm.; Figure 1). As Drury (1961) mentions young freeze immediately at the parent's alarm call and despite a short search of the wetland no young were found.

In addition, courting displays, including flights,



Figure 1. Wet sedge tundra habitat where Baird's Sandpiper was found nesting in 1996. Kelsall Lake, BC. 2 July 1999 (Linda M. Van Damme).

calling, and ground running, have been observed near Goat Creek (1 June 1989, Bill Jacobs pers. comm.), Kusawak Lake (28 May 1990, Al DeMartino pers. comm.) and Mosquito Flats (4 June 1992, John Ryder pers. comm.; Figure 2) suggesting breeding was more widespread than suspected.

The first confirmed breeding was discovered in 1996 (Campbell et al. 2001). Additional information supporting the record follows. On 2 July, I observed three territorial pairs of adult Baird's Sandpipers on the muskeg flats at the west end of Kelsall Lake which is located on the east side of the Haines Highway in Chilkat Pass in the extreme northwestern region of the province. One pair of Baird's Sandpipers was observed foraging with four recently hatched chicks that were feeding independently on the open and densely vegetated terrain (see Figure 1). While photographing one of the young to provide evidence of breeding (Figure 3) there was no aggressive

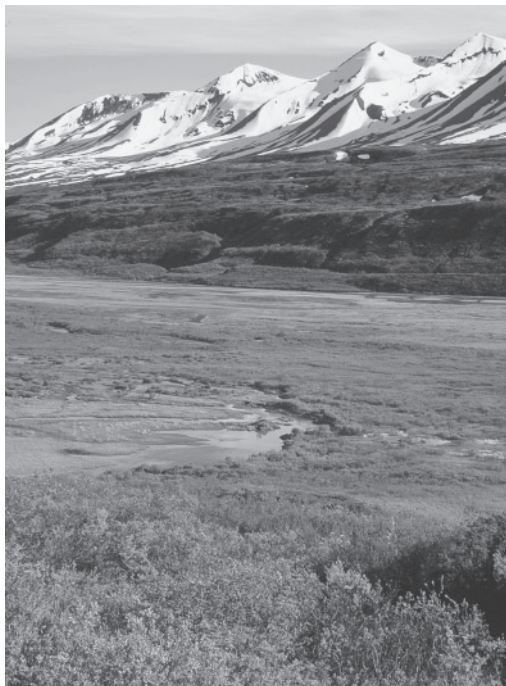


Figure 2. The Baird's Sandpiper may breed in the extensive wetlands at Mosquito Flats, BC, but access is difficult. 24 June 1996 (R. Wayne Campbell).

behaviour by the adults who simply kept feeding. This discovery extended the known breeding range of this sandpiper 900 km southeast at a latitude of 59° 48' north latitude and 136° 34' west longitude (Moskoff and Montgomerie 2002).

Later that day, at the south end of Kusawak Lake, west of the Haines Highway, another pair of Baird's Sandpipers was observed with one tiny chick that



Figure 3. Baird's Sandpiper chick discovered at Kelsall Lake, BC, provides the first documented breeding record for this species in the province. 2 July 1996 (Linda M. Van Damme) BC Photo 3610.

scampered across a boggy area along the shoreline of the lake. This sighting was at 59° 42' north latitude and 136° 35' west longitude.

During the 1980s, a small but local population of breeding Baird's Sandpipers became established in the Chilkat Pass portion of British Columbia. The species may also be expanding its breeding range in the Yukon Territory as Sinclair et al. (2003) report breeding in the central portion of the province.

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