

## A Well Spotted Sandpiper

On the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2020, I was enjoying a leisurely stroll through the lower end of Glen App. A pleasant day, with warm sunshine and a light wind, hundreds of Wood pigeons being stalked by a big female Goshawk. Life really doesn't get much better. At mid-day my mobile phone makes one of those strange utterances that only their kind can - it's a message from a birding friend who is telling me that "Hayden has just found a Spotted Sandpiper at Culzean Bay."

Hats off to Hayden Fripp for this discovery. This was a really good piece of birding, since you could easily pass this bird off for a Common Sandpiper. However, as he said later, "Something about it wasn't quite right." A closer look showed that its shape was different, having a noticeably short tail, yellowish (not green) legs, a largely pink bill and, in flight, a shorter white wing bar which was mostly concentrated in the centre of the wing.



**First-winter Spotted Sandpiper at Rancleugh Burn – 17 October 2020**

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2021, Fran McCrossan was walking along the beach just to the south of its original location. He's looking for Fulmars on the Culzean cliffs, but a movement in front of him draws his attention to a small wader with a bobbing tail – a Spotted Sandpiper. Spotty had probably never left this general area! Its ability to hide and run, from people and dogs, rather than fly, could make it very elusive. With some severe spells of cold weather setting in during late January and February, this put the bird under a bit of pressure. However, it remained faithful to the stretch of beach just south of Goats Green, and came through the adverse weather. Life would have been difficult for the sandpiper at this stage, as it foraged among seaweed for invertebrates



**By 31 January 2021, it had settled into an area of shoreline just south of Goats' Green**

At this point, another issue began to emerge which was of interest to several Ayrshire birders: "When would it start to show its spots, and just how Spotted would this Sandpiper be by the time it

was ready to migrate?” When it was re-discovered in late January, there was no indication of any dark, blackish-brown spots which give the bird its name. The bird was, effectively in its first-winter plumage, having moulted most of its juvenile feathers. During its winter stay, it would start to moult its flight feathers and, by early February some inner primaries looked very worn. Body moult was still some time away.



**By mid to late March, the spots had started to become more obvious**

By early March, there was the suggestion, particularly on the rear flanks, that some dark spots were appearing and, by mid-month, some breast spots had emerged. From this point on, it started to show a wider covering of spots. By early April, the spotting had covered much of the breast and belly. Since this bird was entering its first full breeding plumage, the extent of spotting was a bit more restricted, and perhaps less spectacular, than on an adult but, nonetheless, it did show a remarkable change from earlier in the year.



**During early April it was showing a larger amount of spotting, and some wing moult is also evident.**

**Postscript:** By the time it was last seen in Culzean Bay, the Spotted Sandpiper still showed signs of “immaturity.” It still retained greyish-brown sides to neck and breast areas and the extent of the dark spotting was scattered and less extensive than on most adults. Comparison with the photo of an adult shown below, taken in Michigan, USA during July, shows just how much “spottier” they can be.

Should the Culzean Bay bird survive until 2022, it should look like this by April of that year. Either way, the Ayrshire bird was a wonderful discovery in the autumn of 2020, and its confiding nature throughout its stay earned it the affection of the many Ayrshire birders who had the opportunity to see and photograph it.



**Adult Spotted Sandpiper Michigan, USA July 1992**

**Angus Hogg, May 2021.**      (*All photos: Angus Hogg*)