

Kane County Sharp-tailed Sandpiper: fifth Illinois record

by Scott Cohrs

On the morning of Saturday, 27 September 2003, I decided to visit Blackhawk Forest Preserve on the Fox River in Kane County. Having recently moved to the area, I enjoyed the chance to see several new birding sites. A few weeks earlier I had read a posting on Illinois' birding list service, IBET, regarding shorebirds at Blackhawk, and it now had become a regular stop.

Water levels had been perfect the fall of 2003 for shorebirds on the Fox River. The river was low, exposing several gravel and sand banks that were enticing to waders. The morning of 27 September 2003 was no exception. Several Pectoral Sandpipers and assorted other peeps were feeding in the river. As I was sorting through the various shorebirds, a bird with the Pectorals caught my eye. One of the Pectoral Sandpipers seemed to have an extremely bright rufous cap, and other characteristics of the bird just didn't seem quite right. I noted the rufous cap, as well as rufous tertials and lack of defined streaking on the breast. Unfortunately (in terms of taking notes on a possible rare bird), at this time I began talking with a non-birder who was interested in the other birds present. I showed him an egret in my scope, and eventually lost track of the sandpiper I was looking at and had to leave for other commitments.



I arrived home that night thinking I may have seen a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*). However, I had no experience with this bird and knew that I hadn't studied it enough to decide definitively. Ironically, a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper had been found in Indiana the previous day and a picture of that particular bird was on the Surfbirds website. Upon seeing that picture, and with encouragement from my girlfriend, I decided to return the next day and try to view the bird again.

Fortunately, on 28 September, I was able to relocate and observe the sandpiper from a footbridge that crosses over the Fox River at this location. From this great vantage point, I was able to again note the aforementioned rufous cap and tertials. I was also able to see a well-defined supercillium and thin white eye ring, as well as a buff wash on the breast with no

streaks. Finally, I noted that the rufous edging on the tertials seemed to be broader than that of the nearby Pectoral Sandpipers' (*C. melanotos*). Until this point, I was trying to convince myself that I was not viewing a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper but rather just a weird Pectoral Sandpiper. But as each field mark was confirmed, I knew it was not a Pectoral. I consulted my Sibley and Kaufmann field guides one final time and concluded this bird was indeed a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper.

The hard part was only beginning. For starters, I was not a member of the IBET group, and did not yet have computer access at home.

1: Sharp-tailed Sandpiper at Blackhawk Forest Preserve, Kane County.
3 October 2003. Photo by Jerry Kumery.

2 & 3: Sharp-tailed Sandpiper at Blackhawk Forest Preserve, Kane County.
4 October 2003. Photo by Louise Augustine.

4: Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (front) with Pectoral Sandpiper at Blackhawk Forest
Preserve, Kane County. 4 October 2003. Photo by Kanae Hirabayashi.