

# PETE'S TIPS

## Wading through the *Tringa* Trio

By PETE DUNNE

It's one of those rites of passage. When you learn to tell Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs apart, you've mastered one of birding's classic challenges—not as daunting, maybe, as Scaup vs. Scaup, but harder than House Finch vs. Purple Finch.

One of the things that make the separation difficult is that the plumages of the two species are virtually identical. Size, when direct comparisons between the yellowlegs species (or with other familiar shorebirds) are offered, greatly simplifies the challenge. Lesser Yellowlegs are conspicuously smaller and more slightly proportioned than Greater. But for solitary birds, most people turn to the rule of bill—straight and one-and-a-half times the width of the head for Lesser, slightly upturned and twice the width of the head for Greater.

Bill length and shape works. But just in case you left your spotting scope behind, here are a few behavioral characteristics that also help distinguish the yellowlegs.

Greater tend to be active, aggressive feeders. Running through shallow water, striding through deeper water; jabbing angrily at the surface. They are often solitary (i.e., not feeding among groups of smaller shorebirds) and cover ground quickly, foraging through the ranks of whatever other shorebirds may be around. Being able to forage in deeper water, they are also more often found amid herons (like Snowy Egret and Little Blue Heron) than Lesser Yellowlegs.

Lesser Yellowlegs are slower, more deliberate, more delicate feeders, picking at the surface, not stabbing. They cover less ground and take more time about it than Greater. They are also more social, often foraging among other shorebird species (like dowitchers and Stilt Sandpipers).

Also, Greater Yellowlegs are more vocal. Their loud, ringing three-note call seems to herald your arrival on the scene. Lesser Yellowlegs' softer one- to three-note call is less com-

monly uttered or heard.

There is a third common and widespread small North American *Tringa*—Solitary Sandpiper. A dark-backed, shore-hugging sandpiper whose shape is akin to a yellowlegs x Spotted Sandpiper cross. Plumage and shape readily separate this species from its longer-necked, longer-shanked cousins—but don't fail to note fundamental behavioral differences.

First, as the name suggests, Solitary Sandpiper is a loner. The word “flock” doesn't exist as a concept in the mind of Solitary Sandpiper. While multiple birds may, at times, occupy the same vernal pool, their proximity is sheer happenstance. They don't feed together. They don't cluster.

Also, where Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs often occur in salt water, Solitary Sandpiper is a freshwater obligate. Even the name “sandpiper” is misapplied. The birds are most drawn to the shallow, muddy, and (frequently) vegetated edges of small ponds and freshwater pools. “Puddlepiper” would be a more accurate name.

And if Lesser Yellowlegs is a deliberate feeder, Solitary Sandpipers seem hobbled. The birds can be perfectly happy spending a morning working an area the size of a bathtub—moving tentatively, pausing frequently, examining, closely, the area just beneath their bills.

One last point: when flushed, Solitary Sandpiper often does not fly far (in fact, it often lofts into the air and descends nearby). Yellowlegs, particularly Greater Yellowlegs, are more apt to put distance, often great distance, between you and them.

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## America's Birdiest City and County 2006

Setting a new city record of 247 species, Corpus Christi, Texas, took top honors in the 2006 contest to be named America's Birdiest City. The highest overall county tally was attained by Los Angeles, California, with a total of 265. Special congratulations go to the birders of the San Antonio, Texas, area, who on their debut outing took first place in two categories: with 195 species identified, the Alamo City was the birdiest large inland city in the competition, and Bexar County, at 205, the most bird-rich inland county on the Central flyway.

New York City and San Diego took the honors among large east-coast and west-coast cities, respectively, while Dauphin Island, Alabama, turned in the largest list for a small coastal city. Duluth, Minnesota, with 147 species, was

the birdiest of the small inland cities participating.

Nueces County, Texas, had the highest tally of any Gulf Coast county; on the Atlantic, Richmond County, New York, counted 160 species for first place. Inland, Kern County, California, beat out all others with an impressive 247 species.

Again this year, many entrants combined their participation in the competition with successful fund-raising efforts on behalf of local birding and conservation programs.

2006 was the final year for the contest to benefit from the enthusiastic and skillful coordination of Phil Pryde, San Diego Audubon Society. For information on taking part in next year's competition, e-mail Mike Wilson at Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuary, Ylhammer1@cs.com.