

HOW TO RECOGNISE JUVENILE CURLEW SANDPIPERS

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When the Curlew Sandpipers Calidris ferruginea return to us again in September, there will be many showing lots of breeding plumage. Some will be deep wine-red to cinnamon in colour. Others will show only traces of their past magnificence and will be well on the way to the even cream to light brown upperparts and white underparts of the winter plumage.

Early October also brings the first juveniles to the Cape. At this time the adults are still in all stages of body moult so that it is impossible to tell the juvenile from the adult in the field. Adding to the confusion are one-year-old birds in their winter plumage. (15 months old by now) which we think mostly did not leave southern Africa.

A juvenile Curlew Sandpiper can be distinguished from other age classes up to the end of December on plumage characteristics and thereafter for certain only on state of moult.

1. All primaries in very good condition.
2. Big areas of dark brown feathers on the lesser and median coverts. These feathers however become rapidly replaced and the dark brown areas become patchy and disappear by December.
3. Medium to dark brown back extending down to the upper tail coverts which are whitish. The brown feathers are also replaced by December. The adult in Winter plumage has a light brown to cream back.
4. In its first year, a juvenile will not replace any primaries or secondaries before May or June. The second year bird as well as the adult begin primary moult in September - October and complete this moult by the end of December at the earliest or by March at the latest.