

Sanderling, the most common shorebird

Article by Taylor Bennett



Photos by Taylor Bennet

Sanderlings group photo caption: A flock of Sanderlings observed huddling together on Follet's Island. TX

Sanderlings are a type of sandpiper that you can often see on the beach in the winter and summer. For those of us who watched the movie "Finding Dory," you might recall seeing a short film called "Piper," which was actually based on Sanderlings. The film stayed true to their behavior and how they feed, but unfortunately, you won't see any Sanderling chicks running on the beaches of Texas. This is because Sanderlings actually breed in the Arctic tundra.

Here in Texas, we only see Sanderlings when they are migrating or stopping over. They can be seen eating and resting on

beaches along the gulf coast. As a biologist for the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, I see Sanderlings at all of my nonbreeding shorebird survey sites: Matagorda Beach, Bryan Beach, Quintana Beach, and Follet's Island.

Sanderlings are medium in size and can be identified by their pale sand-like plumage. They are light gray on the top and white on the bottom with a stout black bill and black legs. They also have a broad white wing stripe when they fly. Sanderlings look similar to a Red Knot in non-breeding plumage, but are a tad bit smaller. They are often seen feeding and roosting in large flocks along the shore. This benefits them because when a predator is near, they can all fly up at once.

When it's cold, the large flocks can huddle together to stay warm. You might even observe birds standing on one leg. This actually helps them retain heat because of an adaptation called "rete mirabile." When birds stand with one leg to their chest, the warm blood in the arteries in their legs warms the cool blood in the veins close to their heart. It's an adaptation that all birds have.

You can typically identify Sanderlings by their round and plump silhouette, but you can also identify them by their behavior. When Sanderlings run or walk they will bob their heads like bobble heads. Similar-looking species like Piping Plovers and Snowy Plovers don't bob their heads and have shorter bills than Sanderlings. Now, Ruddy Turnstones will also bob their heads, but they have more striking plumage than Sanderlings.

Sanderlings tend to have more of an energized behavior than most other shorebirds because they feed with the rhythm of the waves. When the wave comes in, it not only brings invertebrates to the shore, but also awakens the filter feeders like small clams and worms that are buried within the wet sand. When the wave goes out, the Sanderlings come in and probe the sand for those hidden morsels. This is why you typically see them constantly running back and forth as the waves go in and out. They will also

feed in the moist areas of the beach as well. If there are no tasty morsels around, they will actually eat plant material like seagrass and algae.

Sanderlings have been observed roosting and feeding with other non-breeding shorebirds such as Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones, Willets, Black-Bellied Plovers, Dunlin, Dowitchers, and other sandpipers. Like Red Knots, Sanderlings rely on the horseshoe crab eggs for survival. Sanderlings are also considered a long distant migrant. They can travel as few as 1,800 to more than 6,000 miles. Not too shabby for a little guy if you ask me.

Even though Sanderlings are considered common shorebirds, their population has been in decline over the past few years. They are now being classified as a species of high concern. This is due to habitat loss and oil spills. So, like the other shorebirds on the beach, please be kind and give them their space.