

## Sitting with Sanderling

By Rebekah Snyder

During the hot, late summer months, beachcombers, campers, and sandcastles are all common sights to be seen when you make your way to the beaches of Texas. Maybe you live here and are quite familiar with these observations. Maybe you're a visitor camping on the shore in a tent or RV, or maybe you're just passing through. Whether you are a resident, visitor, or someone on an extended stay, one other familiar sight you may recognize to our beaches are the birds! And there's no beach bird more popular than the Sanderling.

Sanderlings are one of our most common shorebird species along the Texas coastline. They are plump little sandpipers that are mostly recognized by their unique foraging behavior, which is to run up and down the shoreline "chasing" the water and drilling the ground for food. They breed in North American and Eurasian Arctic but have one of the largest distributions of shorebirds and can be found at coastlines all over the world! How lucky we are that we get to have them here in Texas.

Sanderling are what I like to call the "true snowbirds" of the Gulf. A plump little bird, during the wintering months they are gray on top and white on bottom, have black legs, a small whitish-gray head, and a short black beak. During the breeding season, their head and silvery-gray winter feathers are replaced with a mottled rufous and copper color, almost making them appear like an entirely different bird. Like many people along the coast, these birds are here to winter and take advantage of the great food resources available.

The first time I ever saw a Sanderling was over 12 years ago in New Jersey, at a place called Barnegat Light. At the time, I was a not-so-great birder and an even worse shorebird identifier. I remember my friend telling me what those cute little plump birds running up and down the coast were and how to identify them. As a college kid who had been living in the Blue Mountains of Pennsylvania, it wasn't every day that you got to go to the beach to look at shorebirds.

Sanderlings have been a special bird to me because, like many other people getting into bird watching, they were one of the first shorebird species I ever saw. Shorebirds are known for being a challenging group of birds to learn, but the Sanderling have a way of reminding you that whenever you try something new, you have to start somewhere. They're good at encouraging you to keep going and at reminding you how far you've come.

The next time you are out on the beach, take note of the birds that you see around you. You'll very likely see a large group of Sanderling resting on the shore, or you may see a few individuals running up and down and foraging for food. Take some time to sit with the Sanderling. They too have come a long way to be here.