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THE 2018 FLIGHT OF THE BUFF-BREASTED SANDPIPER

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For the Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Calidris subruficollis*), fall migration along the west coast of North America in 2018 was exceptional, with 70 individuals reported, five to ten times the norm. The one at Morro Strand State Beach, San Luis Obispo County, California, shown on this issue's back cover, was representative.

This distinctive shorebird breeds on the arctic tundra from western Alaska across northern Canada to Baffin Island (McCarty et al. 2017). It winters over 10,000 km to the south, on the grasslands of the basin of the Río de la Plata in Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. Its primary migration corridor is east of the Rocky Mountains, through the central United States. A secondary route is along the east coast. Although it is frequent enough that the records committees for Washington, Oregon, and California have discontinued reviewing reports, the Buff-breasted Sandpiper remains rare in fall migration along the west coast. In spring, it is almost entirely absent; the only records are of one at Arcata, California, 3–4 May 1980 (Roberson 1986) and Edwards Air Force Base, Mojave Desert, 3–9 June 1990 (Patten and Erickson 1994).

To quantify the magnitude of the irruption of 2018, I compiled data on the Buff-breasted Sandpiper in southern British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and

Table 1 Occurrences of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper from British Columbia to California, 2014–2018

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
British Columbia					
No. individuals	3	3	7	3	19
Size of largest group	2	2	4	1	13
Date range	15 Aug– 24 Sep	17–19 Aug	24 Aug– 13 Sep	16 Aug– 12 Sep	24 Aug– 22 Sep
Washington					
No. individuals	8	1	1	1	9
Size of largest group	3	1	1	1	2
Date range	20 Aug– 17 Sep	20 Aug	17 Sep	30 Jul	30 Aug– 22 Sep
Oregon					
No. individuals	1	0	4	2	19
Size of largest group	1		3	1	5
Date range	2 Sep		19 Aug– 3 Sep	29 Aug– 29 Sep	23 Aug– 19 Sep
California					
No. individuals	4	0	1	2	23
Size of largest group	2		1	1	3
Date range	26 Aug– 4 Sep		20 Aug– 11 Oct	26 Aug– 3 Nov	24 Aug– 17 Nov
Total					
No. individuals	16	4	13	8	70
Size of largest group	3	2	4	1	13
Date range	15 Aug– 24 Sep	17–20 Aug	19 Aug– 11 Oct	16 Aug– 3 Nov	23 Aug– 17 Nov

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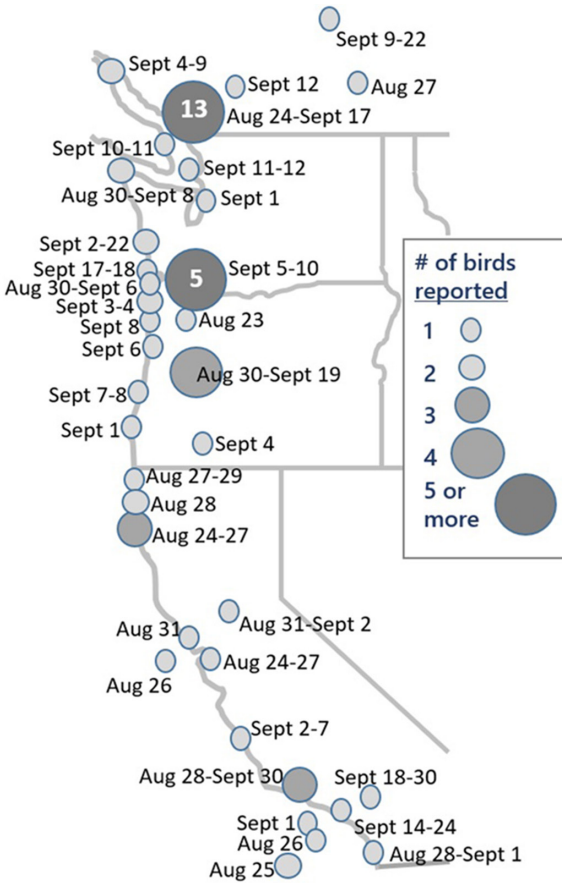


FIGURE 1. Distribution of records of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper from British Columbia to California, fall 2018.

California from www.eBird.org from late July to September from 2014 through 2019. Additional information was provided by key local contacts. Fall migration records outside of this period are few, although the species has lingered in southern California into October and even November.

Four to sixteen individuals were counted each fall between 2014 and 2017 (Table 1). In 2018, 70 individuals were reported (Figure 1).

Some additional observations can be made about the 2018 flight year. While fall migration generally extends from mid-August through late September, within that interval the timing of occurrences is not strongly correlated with latitude. That is, it does not appear that birds are moving from north to south through the period. Each season's latest records, from mid or late September, may come from British Columbia or Washington as easily as from southern California. That said, in 2018, the latest records are indeed from southern California. Moreover, the very few October records over the years (not included in Figure 1) are from southern California.

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From British Columbia to California, the Buff-breasted Sandpiper occurs most consistently in the Pacific Northwest, reaching California only in years of relative abundance, such as 2018. The only location with records every year from 2014 to 2018 is Salmon Arm Bay of Shuswap Lake, in the interior of British Columbia. Sites with records in all but one of these five years are Boundary Bay, British Columbia, and along the south coast of Washington, such as Ocean Shores and the vicinity of Gray's Harbor.

The vast majority of records are of single individuals. The only time more than four birds were encountered together during these years was in 2018, with five birds at once at Sauvie Island, Oregon, and a remarkable 13 at Boundary Bay.

In the years 2014–2017, Buff-breasted Sandpipers first appeared between 15 and 19 August. In 2018, they did not appear until 23 August, and most were later than in previous years.

In 2018, there were three California records offshore: of one on the Farallon Islands, two from San Clemente Island, and two birds seen together over the ocean ~160 km off southern California. These were all relatively early in migration, between August 25 and September 1. In contrast, that year most records from the Oregon coast were from the first week of September.

2018 represented the largest flight of the Buff-breasted Sandpiper since 2007, when over 80 birds were reported from the region, including a group of 18 at Midway Beach, Washington, on 14 September. In 2007 as in 2018, most of the birds were later than normal, arriving in late August and throughout September.

In 2019, 16 Buff-breasted Sandpipers were again reported from the region, from 16 August to 3 October. These included seven from British Columbia (including Salmon Arm and Boundary Bay), five from Washington (including the south coast, with one record of three birds together), two from Oregon, and two from California. While slightly above the average of 2014–2017, this number suggests 2019 represented little to no echo (a smaller-scale invasion in the following year, as sometimes occurs with species irruptive in winter).

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LITERATURE CITED

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“Featured Photo” by © John Sterling of Woodland, California: Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Calidris subruficollis*), Morro Strand State Beach, San Luis Obispo County, California, 6 September 2018. The number of Buff-breasted Sandpipers recorded during fall migration each year from British Columbia south through the Pacific states varies widely but is typically under 20. In occasional flight years, such as 2007 and 2018, however, the numbers are much larger: at least 80 in 2007 and 70 in 2018.

