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FEATURE ARTICLES

DISAPPEARANCE OF BREEDING SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPERS FROM CHURCHILL, MANITOBA: MORE THAN A LOCAL PHENOMENON

JOSEPH R. JEHL, JR.¹

*Smithsonian Ornithology, U.S. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC 20560*

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¹ E-mail: grebe5k@cs.com

Abstract. As late as the 1940s the Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*) was the most abundant sandpiper breeding at Churchill, Manitoba. By the 1960s it had undergone a sharp decline, and by the mid-1990s the local population consisted of 11 pairs in a single colony. Nesting was last documented in 2001. Declines had also become evident at several other breeding sites along the Hudson Bay coast of Manitoba and Ontario, as well as in the number of migrants detected on the Atlantic coast of Canada and the northern United States. Information on the biology of the Churchill population in 1993–2004 largely agreed with that gathered at La Pérouse Bay, Manitoba, in the 1980s: reproductive success was good and new birds continued to join the colony; however, the number of breeding attempts by individuals was low and decreasing. As there is no evidence that the decline was related to local factors (e.g., altered habitats, climate change), it is probably attributable to mortality in the nonbreeding season, which leaves fewer birds available to return north. Whether causality can be fully resolved is problematic. Monitoring migrants can reveal population trends and studies on the breeding grounds can help frame hypotheses, but both approaches are time-consuming and provide only partial answers. In such cases, restoration of declining species may be best served by fostering habitat conservation throughout a species' range.

Key words: breeding biology, *Calidris pusilla*, Churchill, Manitoba, monitoring, population dynamics, Semipalmated Sandpiper.