

# The Purple Sandpiper in Finnmark



Information sheet for the project «Bird tourism in central and eastern Finnmark», a project part of «The natural heritage as a value creator (M)»

*The Purple Sandpiper is a common bird species along the coast of Finnmark, where in summer it nests along and near the coast. The great majority of the coastal breeding birds apparently migrate in autumn, but during the period September-November tens of thousands of Purple Sandpipers come from the coasts of Siberia to overwinter. These birds migrate back to their breeding grounds in Russia during the end of April and in early May.*

The Purple Sandpiper is the only wading bird that winters in Finnmark in large numbers. Here it can be found in flocks, searching for food in the tide-water zone. At high tide they gather in flocks in order to rest until the next low water. The flocks can be large, sometimes up to 1500 birds, but usually the flocks are of 200-500 birds. The Purple Sandpipers may also be found singly or in small groups.

The male and female are alike as regards plumage, but

the females are somewhat larger than the males and have rather longer and more decurved bills. The upper side in summer is darkly speckled with rust-brown feather edges, while the underside is grey-white with black-brown spots. The legs are yellowish grey, while the bill is yellow with a darker tip. The winter plumage is more uniform grey-brown on the upper side. The English name, Purple Sandpiper, describes well the colour of the winter plumage.



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*The Purple Sandpiper has a characteristic compact body with relatively short neck and short, strong feet. This means that it loses little body warmth even in periods of low temperatures and biting wind.*

### Distribution in Finnmark

The birds that remain in Finnmark in winter probably come mainly from the breeding population in Russia. This wintering area extends from the coast of Murmansk and westwards along the whole coast of Finnmark, and further southwards all the way to the coast of central Norway. It is also possible that some that breed in Svalbard can winter in Finnmark, but the great majority of the Svalbard birds winter further south.

Finnmark also has its own breeding population, but very few of these birds winter in this county. A large proportion migrate southwards, probably to the coast of central Norway where they winter. There are, however, no recoveries of ringed birds which can confirm this, but biometric measurements taken of the wintering birds, indicate that these are birds that breed in northern Norway.

In Finnmark the Purple Sandpiper nests on barren montane terrain with little vegetation along most of the coastal areas all the way south to Troms. The species is scarce in the mountains around the inner fjords, and is entirely absent in the inner parts of the county and on Finnmarksvidda.

### Diet and ecology

The wintering birds feed to a large degree on common periwinkles and horse mussels that they find in the tidal zone at low water. In late winter they also take some crustaceans and bristle worms, but snails and mussels still form their main diet. Studies of the choice of food in the Purple Sandpiper in Troms have proved that more females than males forage in the soft parts of the tidal zone. The females' longer bill makes them better able to reach prey species that live down in the ebb-tide sand, such as bristle worms and the Baltic telline. In the hard parts of the tidal zone in Troms the males comprise about 65 % of the flocks, but these ratios are the reverse in the flocks that feed on the soft parts of the tidal zone.

At the nest sites in the mountains, insects of various kinds form the major part of their food, but early in the breeding season they also eat some algae.

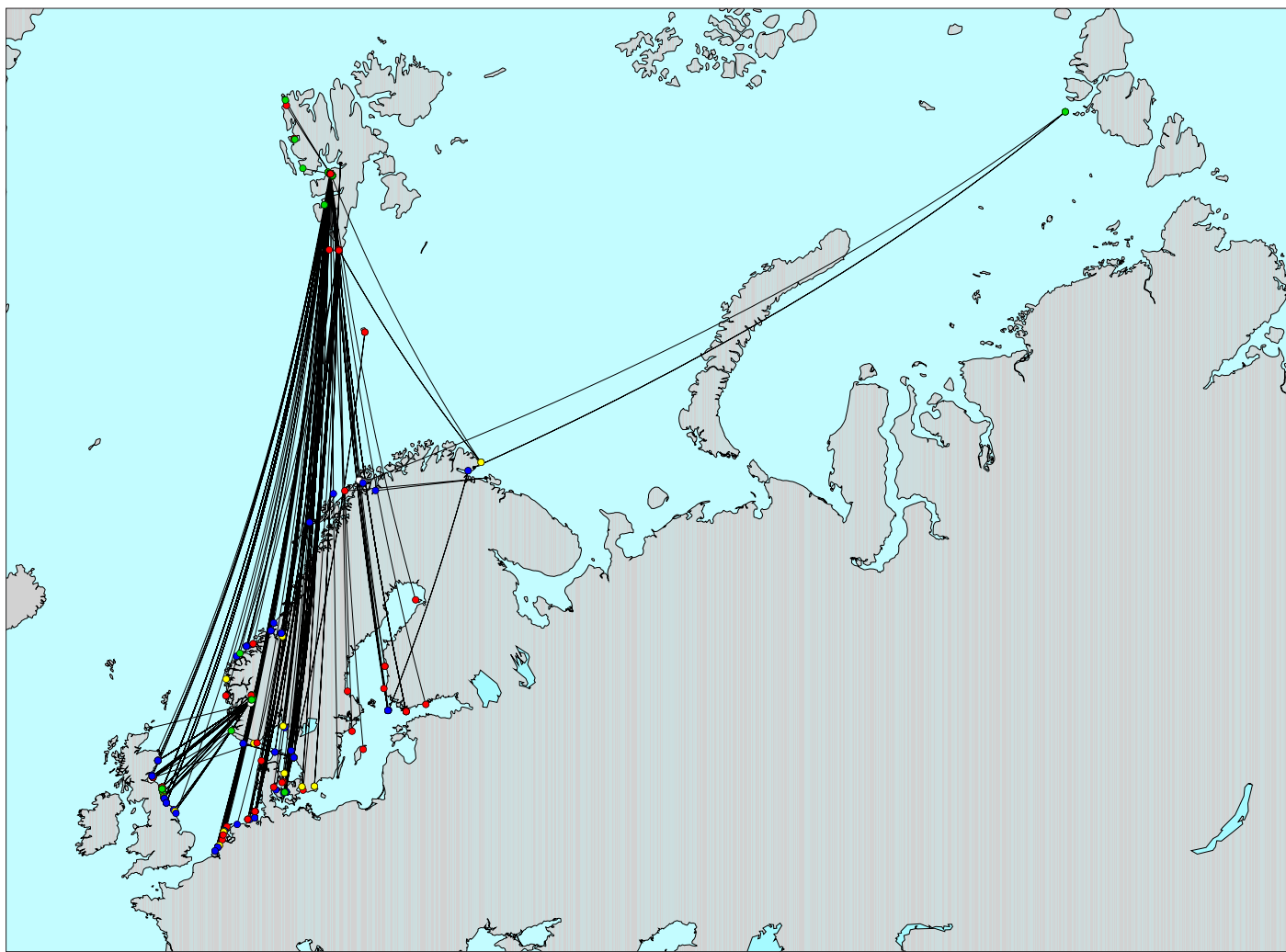
The Purple Sandpiper is monogamous and extremely faithful to the one nest site. Studies performed on the breeding biology of the species on Nordkinnhalvøya prove that the pair almost always return to the same territory in the mountains year after year. Two pairs returned to the same nest site for 11 and 13 years



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*The Purple Sandpiper is the wader that overwinters furthest north. It is very well adapted to the harsh climate that prevails on the coast of Finnmark, and studies show that even in mid-winter they are in good condition.*





*There are no recoveries or controls of birds ringed at the breeding sites in Finnmark. There are, however, controls of birds ringed in winter at nesting sites in Russia. These show that those that winter in Finnmark are mainly birds that breed in Russia. Purple Sandpipers from Svalbard have only been reported from Finnmark in spring, but many have been controlled on the coasts of the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. Breeding birds from Hardangervidda in South Norway mainly migrate to the east coast of the British Isles where they overwinter.*



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*At high tide the wintering Purple Sandpipers gather in large flocks, often on a promontory or the tip of a breakwater. Neither do they hesitate to rest directly on the snow if space is limited.*

respectively. In the nest, which is only a hollow in the ground, three or four eggs are laid. They are incubated by both sexes. The incubating bird is very reluctant to leave the nest, which it does seldom, even though someone stands beside the nest. The females leave the breeding site immediately after the young are hatched, and leave the male to care of the young. The young become fully fledged after about three weeks. Shortly afterwards they move with the male to the coast, before flying to winter quarters further south.

### Migration and movements

The local breeding birds in Finnmark begin to migrate in August, and probably arrive at their winter quarters as early as the first half of September. A long term study of the winter population in Finnmark carried out in the Tromsø area, and in Varanger from 1989 until the end of the 1990's, proved that these were birds that breed along the coast of Siberia. More than 400 Purple Sandpipers were colour-marked on the west side of the Varangerfjord in 1994. Of these, four were found breeding in coastal areas east of Taimyr the following summers. Similarly, many observations of these birds were reported in Varanger in the following winters, even until around 2008.

In earlier times Purple Sandpipers were caught and used as food along large parts of northern Norway, especially in lean years. The birds were plucked and salted and later used in cooking soup.

*This fact sheet is prepared by Vidar Bakken and Karl-Birger Strann (ARC)*

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### Threats

There are no known threats to the winter population in Finnmark which has its origin in Russia, nor to the local breeding population in Finnmark. Locally, important foraging sites may be destroyed as a consequence of road building and new industrial plants, but in general these are no serious problem along the coasts of northern Norway.