

## IDENTIFICATION OF RED AND RED-NECKED PHALAROPES

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Of the three phalaropes, the two primarily pelagic species are the hardest to separate as well as the most difficult to find in Alabama. These two, the Red Phalarope (Phalaropus fulicarius) and the Red-necked (formerly Northern) Phalarope (Phalaropus lobatus), are frequently likened in non-breeding plumage to "sanderlings at sea" because of their size, light color, prominent white wingstripes, and white-sided dark rumps. They are, however, longer-tailed than Sanderlings (Calidris alba) and have the characteristic dark "phalarope-mark" through the eye; you would also never find Sanderlings swimming and spinning in the water in the manner of phalaropes. The Wilson's Phalarope (Phalaropus tricolor) is more common in the State and non-breeders look like small yellowlegs with their dark wings and white rumps, marks which easily separate them from the Red and Red-necked Phalaropes.

The Red Phalarope is more pelagic than the Red-Necked Phalarope, and there are pre-1960 reports of it being regular and common far offshore in the Northern Gulf, including Alabama waters. Since that time there have been few offshore reports (perhaps due to lack of winter pelagic trips?), and the species has been observed only occasionally on land, mostly in the fall and winter. The Red-necked Phalarope has been observed less frequently in the Gulf, but is somewhat more frequent on land, again mostly in fall and winter. Probably the best location onshore in Alabama to look for either species is the huge settling ponds on Blakely Island at Mobile, particularly in late summer and fall.

The molts of phalaropes should be understood in order to identify the birds properly. Both species

have a molt in the late summer and early fall from the juvenal plumage to the first winter plumage. This molt is only partial and does not include the wings and tail. The spring molt produces the adult summer (or in some cases a recognizable first summer) plumage, and again is partial, sparing the flight feathers and some wing coverts. A complete molt is begun in the late summer to produce the adult winter plumage, and the pattern of complete molt in fall and partial in spring continues throughout the birds' lives. It is important to try to identify which of the three main plumage types (juvenile, basic (winter), or alternate (breeding)) you are dealing with as you observe phalaropes (and other shorebirds). A general rule in reference to these plumages is that, in fall migration, the adult phalaropes migrate a month or more earlier than the juveniles; most of them pass through Alabama in July and August, while the juveniles begin to come through in late August.

Following are summaries of the field marks of both phalaropes in the different plumages, with important marks underscored.

#### RED PHALAROPE (RP)

STRUCTURE: Larger than RNP (8-8 1/2"). Long wings and tail, relatively short legs. Stockier than RNP, with proportionally thicker neck and larger head. Bill much thicker and flatter than RNP, only slightly shorter.

JUVENILE: Dark mark through eye. Feathers of crown, mantle, and scapulars blackish-brown broadly edged with tawny (edges wear quickly) but not forming prominent light lines on back. Wing stripe broader than RNP and less contrasting. Tertiaries, median and lesser coverts, upper tail coverts, and tail feathers narrowly edged with paler buff or white. Face and underparts white with forehead, lores, neck, and

upper breast washed with buff. Rusty on sides of rump. Bill blackish. Legs grayish.

FIRST WINTER: Molt August - October. As adult winter but retains juvenile wing coverts and tail (with buff fringes). During molt mantle and scapulars may appear mottled or streaked with dark feathers.

ADULT SUMMER: Molt April - June. Bill yellow with black tip. Legs brownish with yellow lobes to toes. Throat blackish. FEMALE - Cap solidly dark; mantle blackish-brown with pale buff edges. Cheeks white. Bright chestnut below. MALE - Cap, hindneck, and mantle streaked brown. Small area of buffy-white on cheeks. Dull chestnut below often with some white on belly. Some first summer birds of either sex may have some juvenile wing coverts.

ADULT WINTER: Molt July - September. Dark mark through eye. Mantle and scapulars pale bluish-gray, paler than RNP (without white streaking). Wing stripe broader than RNP and less contrasting. Rump and upper tail coverts often brownish. White forehead and underparts. Bill blackish, sometimes with yellowish at base. Legs grayish. During molt may have mottled look above, but usually has some rusty or pinkish below at this time.

#### RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (RNP)

STRUCTURE: Smaller than RP (7-7 1/2"). Long wings and tail. Slimmer than RP, with proportionally thinner neck and smaller head. Bill thin and needlelike, slightly longer than RP but shorter than Wislon's phalarope.

JUVENILE: Crown and eye-patch blackish. Mantle, scapulars, and tertials dark brown with prominent golden-buff fringes to scapular and tertial feathers which form lines on back. Conspicuous white wing

stripe, narrower and more contrasting than RP. Median and inner greater coverts and central tail feathers narrowly edged with white. Face, throat, and underparts white with pinkish-buff wash and brownish-gray wash (lighter than RP) on breast and flanks. Bill black. Legs yellowish-flesh to bluish-gray.

FIRST WINTER: Molt in September and October. Most of upperparts paler gray but some of dark cap is retained and mantle is mottled blackish-brown and gray. Golden-buff fringes to scapulars and tertials become paler. Retains juvenile wings and tail.

ADULT SUMMER: Molt February - June. White throat. No reddish on lower breast or belly. Bill black. Legs and feet slate-gray. FEMALE - Crown, upper face, and upperparts slate-gray with golden buff lines on back. Clean white lower face and red neck patches extending into gray breastband. MALE - Crown, hindneck, and mantle brown or brownish-gray. Little red on neck and relatively indistinct whitish lower face. Some first summer birds of either sex obtain only partial development of adult summer plumage.

ADULT WINTER: Molt July - October. Blackish eye-patch. White forehead, face, and underparts. Darker gray upperparts than RP but noticeably lighter than juvenile; may have some blackish feathers. In fresh plumage whitish edges form lines on back (not as conspicuous as juvenile). Darker upper wings with narrower, more contrasting wing stripe than RP. Bill and legs dark gray or blackish. During molt may have brownish feathers in upperparts.

The best way to separate these species in non-breeding plumage is by body and bill shape, with the various plumage characteristics used as supplementary aids. These structural characteristics

are particularly helpful when the birds are in heavy molt. The juveniles in both species are dark above, while the adults in both cases are fairly light above, so you cannot simply identify a bird based on back color. Prominent light lines on the back point strongly toward RNP, but the apparent absence of light lines in a pale-backed bird does not mean you are observing an RP. A yellow base of the bill or yellow lobes on the toes (when they can be seen) should be diagnostic of RP in adult plumage. As with any complicated identification problem, you are working with probabilities, and the more underscored marks in the above descriptions that you can see, the higher your chances of making a correct identification.

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