

In a world with no trees and few plants, the sanderlings' nests are simple. Sanderling mothers choose a site near vegetation and water. They form a depression in soft ground with their bodies. Dried leaves plucked from plants form the beds of the nests. Mothers lay three or four spotted eggs, then huddle to keep the eggs warm. Both mother and father help protect the eggs from the cold Arctic air and the foxes and **jaegers** (hunting birds) that would make the eggs a meal. About 24 days after they're laid, the eggs hatch. The parents and chicks stay in the nest for only about 12 hours, and then head to the water's edge to feed.

THE DANCE OF LIFE



Photo Courtesy of Macaulay Library, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

THE DANCE OF LIFE



<http://beyondpenguins.nsd.org>

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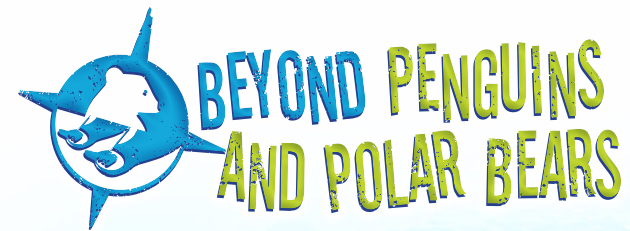


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BY STEPHEN WHITT

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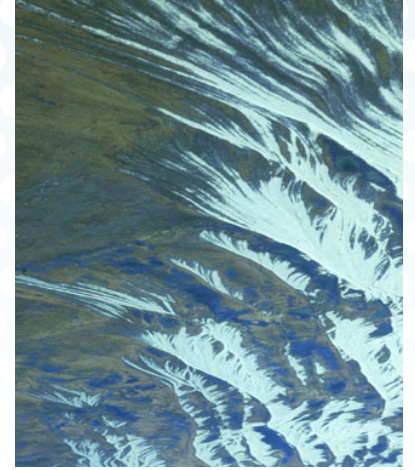
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Photo Courtesy of Macaulay Library, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Most young sanderlings stay in the sunny south for a full year to feed and grow. But then, these young birds return to the faraway land of snow and ice to take part in the dance of life.

Photo Courtesy of M.K. Peck, Project WILDSPACE(TM)



The sanderlings arrive in the far north in late spring, when it is still cold. Sudden storms can chill these delicate loving birds and freeze their delicate feet. The first few Arctic days are the most dangerous for the weary sanderlings.

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Photo Courtesy of Macaulay Library, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

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jaeger: a hunting bird that lives in the Arctic

migratory: animals that move from one place to another seasonally

sanderling: a bird that lives on beaches in the fall and winter and in

the Arctic in the spring and summer

GLOSSARY

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But as spring becomes summer the Arctic blossoms with life. Flowers bloom and butterflies visit them frantically. Insects and their larvae burst forth, providing the sanderlings food. Refreshed, the small birds build their nests.



Photo Courtesy of madpai, Flickr.

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How do the chicks do it? How do they know to fly south toward the warmth of the sun? How do they know to hug the shoreline, avoiding the mainland and the open ocean? Quite simply, they are born with it. As the cold and darkness of November once again grip the north lands, the young sanderlings head for the warm parts of the world, where sunshine and surf will provide food and companionship for many months.

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Amazingly, one thing the parents don't teach their chicks is where to go next. The Arctic summer is short, and the birds must return to their warm southern beaches before winter. Soon after the chicks begin flying, the adults depart. But the chicks are too weak for such a long flight so soon. Four to six weeks later, with no adults to show them the way, the chicks begin their own long journey to beaches they've never seen.

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You can see sanderlings on the beach in the early morning or late evening. These little birds dance along the water's edge, daring the waves to catch them. The sanderlings are so swift that they almost always succeed. This dance is serious business. The mole crabs that the sanderlings catch are critical to their survival. The sanderlings will soon leave this warm beach to journey to a place as cold and bleak as this one is warm and inviting.

THE DANCE OF LIFE



Sanderling migration

Sanderlings are **migratory** birds. Each spring, they leave beaches in Florida, the Caribbean, and South America and travel to the Arctic to nest and raise their young. Some travel almost halfway around the Earth.