

# Nature Notes

...from Sharon

The Ruddy Turnstone is another bird that was reclassified by the American Ornithological Union (AOU). It is now classified in the Sandpiper family *Scolopacidae* but was formerly placed in the Plover family. DNA basing a change!

Some people ask how so many different birds can feed at the surf's edge and have enough to eat. Take a closer look at all those birds...some have short bills and/or short legs...they stay in the shallower areas. Others have longer legs and/or longer bills...they can go into deeper water or forage deeper in the sand. Isn't it amazing how nature provides for the different creatures in different ways? When walking the beach this spring, pause and ponder the virtues of stranded seaweed. Those scattered clumps along the high-tide line actually have a name - beach wrack - and are a pivotal part of the beach ecosystem. Although the Ruddy Turnstone does forage in the shallow surf, it also may be found at the wrack line seeking out food in parchment worm casings, picking through shells, searching seaweed and even turning stones where they may find invertebrates. Therefore, their common name: Ruddy (for the color) and Turnstone (for turning stones over to find food).

## Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*)



Ruddy Turnstone is a fairly small stocky bird, being 8 – 9 inches long with a wingspan of about 20 inches. These shorebirds have a dark wedge-shaped bill that is slightly upturned. It has short legs (about 1.4 inches) that are a bright orange. The back, wings, and head are a dark gray-brown and black mottling, with a dark bib-like chest patch. The belly and rump are white. It winters in our area and returns far north for breeding in the summer. As you can see from the map from Cornell Lab of



Ornithology below left, the Ruddy Turnstones have a long migration. They can survive in a wide range of habitats and climatic conditions from Arctic to tropical. The typical breeding habitat is open tundra with water nearby. Outside the breeding season, it is found along coasts, particularly on rocky or stony shores. It may venture onto open grassy areas near the coast. Small numbers sometimes turn up on inland wetlands, especially during the spring and autumn migrations. These birds often return to particular sites year after year. Because they breed in the northern climes, we do not usually see their peak breeding plumage with brilliant ruddy upper parts and the unique black and white patchwork on the face.

Ruddy Turnstones are able to breed when two years old. Their average lifespan is about 9 years. It is a monogamous bird and pairs may remain together for more than one breeding season. During courtship, the males make nest-like scrapes on the ground, but the female

constructs the actual nest, often lining the scrape with leaves. Several pairs may nest close together. A single clutch of two to five eggs is laid. The eggs are smooth, slightly glossy and oval to pear-shaped. Eggs are variable in color but are commonly pale green-brown with dark brown markings. Incubation lasts for about 22–24 days. The female is mainly responsible for incubating the eggs but the male may help towards the end. The young birds are able to leave the nest soon after hatching. They are able to feed themselves early on but are protected by the parents, particularly the male. They fledge after 19–21 days.