

The Spotted Sandpiper

By Aryn Hayden

On June 21st, our second official day sampling on the river, I had the opportunity to learn some valuable wildlife lessons first hand. We had reached our campsite for the day at around 12:30 and we were planning to survey a site on the opposite bank (river right) at the confluence of Grossman Creek with the Grande Ronde River after we had set up camp. The sun was intense and we were all hot and tired as we retrieved our dry bags to go and set up camp before getting back in the boats to sample and I was headed back down to the river edge when Abby and a few others called to me, they had found a baby bird. I walked over quickly not fully grasping the situation and saw the small ball of white fluff on the ground. The chick was slightly larger than a golf ball with small legs and tiny black spots dotting its white downy feathers. We discussed what might have happened and where the bird might have come from- did it fall from a nest? What could we do for it? I then realized upon closer inspection that this was a Spotted Sandpiper chick that had probably been separated from its mother fairly recently.

This chick was entirely exposed to the sun on a fairly bare and open dirt space approximately twenty feet from the water edge. We proceeded, as our instincts (mine especially) guided us, to attempt to help the bird by shading it with our bodies and pouring water out on the ground for it to drink. To our dismay the chick started to pant, a sign of stress and overheating and I suddenly remembered everything that I had been taught about handling wildlife. In my rush to be helpful and solve what I saw as problems for this animal I had done the worst possible thing by attempting to save this chick. The best thing, I now remembered, to do when you encounter wildlife is to leave it alone because the mother of this baby was probably watching nearby. I hurried everyone out of the area and left myself to continue unpacking. I returned a few minutes later and the chick was difficult to find at first but I finally spotted the small ball of white fluff, lying quietly on its side. I quickly scooped up the chick and it slowly blinked one eye as I ran down to the water's edge. I wetted the chick's feathers and let a little water drip into its small open beak and I stared unbelieving when the chick did not move or stir. Although I am twenty-two, I had never actually encountered death until this moment and I sat on the rocky bank, stunned by the stillness of the mass in the palm of my hand.

A soft call pulled me back to reality, a high-pitched but soft call and I rose to my feet to find its source, the dead chick still in the crook of my hand. Imitating the call, I was able to locate another chick just as an adult Spotted Sandpiper flew in from upriver to the bank nearby. I quickly set down the dead chick and hurried away from the clearing, hoping that the mother would collect her living baby. I watched from a distance setting up my tent with Abby as the Sandpiper gathered her chick and herded it off to the shore. To my surprise she returned at least once more before we left to sample the opposite shore and gathered another baby while my classmates completely cooperated in avoiding the area at my request. She did not appear to stop at the spot where I had placed the dead chick but she instead focused on saving the chicks that still responded to her call. Here I was reminded of some of my earliest childhood lessons that the best of human intentions were not always best for wildlife and to always be aware of my

surroundings. When we left for sampling that afternoon I got onto the raft waiting to ferry us across the river with a goal to minimize my impact on the incredible ecosystem that we were studying impressed upon me by this experience.