



Shorebirds

Waders of Shores, Wetlands and Grasslands

What Is a Shorebird?

Shorebirds generally inhabit open areas of beaches, grasslands, wetlands, and tundra; some even nest above the treeline on mountains. This group of birds, which includes the plovers, oystercatchers, avocets, stilts, and sandpipers, often share characteristics of long bills, legs and toes and rather drab coloration. Long bills, legs, and toes are useful in wading to forage on mudflats and in wetlands. Shorebirds mainly feed on insects, molluscs, and other invertebrates that they locate by either sight or taste. Because almost all shorebirds nest on the ground, earth-tone plumages camouflage adults as they incubate their eggs. Because shorebirds lay at most four eggs, they produce relatively few offspring each season; predation on eggs and chicks and harsh weather can greatly reduce productivity in some years.

Shorebirds undertake some of the longest migrations known. Red Knots breeding in the high latitudes of the Canadian Arctic will spend the winter in southern South America. Bar-tailed Godwits nesting in western Alaska can be found along beaches of New Zealand in the Austral summer. A Buff-breasted Sandpiper wintering in Argentina may cross seven countries and 11 states and provinces before reaching its breeding

grounds in northern Alaska. Along their migration pathway, many shorebirds feed in coastal and inland wetlands where they accumulate fat reserves needed to continue their flight. Aggregations of shorebirds at some of these sites, called stopovers, can number in the millions.

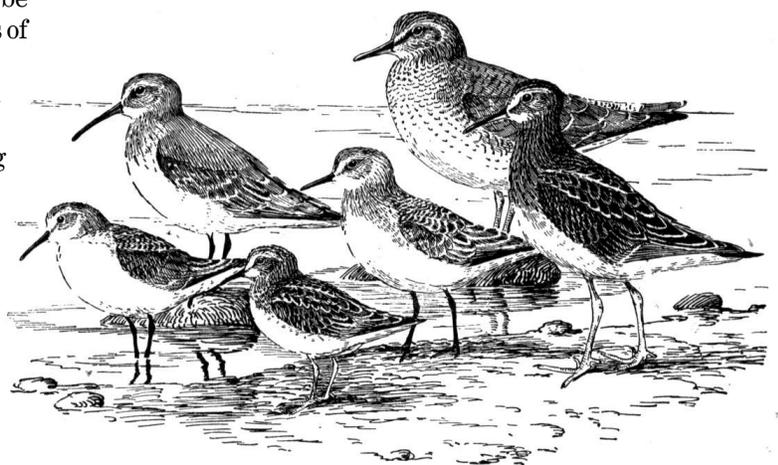
Should We Be Concerned About the Conservation Status of Shorebirds?

Yes. Breeding or migratory shorebirds can be found in all 50 states and about 23% of all shorebirds known worldwide occur in the U. S. Many species of shorebirds have recognizable populations that breed in discrete areas and migrate to different wintering grounds. These populations number from a few thousand to millions of individuals. Because many breeding species are dispersed across wide, inaccessible areas, accurate estimation of population sizes is difficult. We do know that some populations of shorebirds are small and warrant special attention. The Great Lakes population of Piping Plover; the western population of Snowy Plover; the Hawaiian population of the Black-

Migratory Bird Management

Mission

To conserve migratory bird populations and their habitats for future generations, through careful monitoring and effective management.



Sandpipers credit: Alan Brooks

necked Stilt, and the Eskimo Curlew (now likely extinct) are listed as Endangered or Threatened in the U.S.; the Mountain Plover and the Bristle-thighed Curlew have been considered for listing. Counts made during migration and on the breeding grounds suggest that many other shorebird populations are declining.

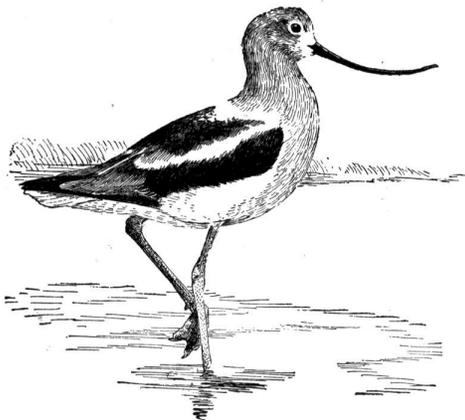
What Are the Causes of Shorebird Declines?

Market hunting in the late 1800s likely caused declines in many species of large- and medium-sized shorebirds and contributed to the possible extinction of the Eskimo Curlew. Current loss or alteration of grassland, wetland, and beach habitats in the temperate U.S. is a major threat to the stability of shorebird populations. Because shorebirds migrate long distances, habitat loss could be compounded throughout the flyway. The habit of many species to concentrate in coastal estuaries and inland wetlands make them vulnerable to catastrophic events like large shifts in water-level management and oil spills. Increasing sea level and arctic temperatures associated with global warming could have severe consequences for shorebirds that migrate through or winter in coastal estuaries and breed in tundra habitats.

What Are We Doing To Manage Shorebirds?

The Migratory Bird Management Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is engaged in numerous activities to ensure that shorebird populations remain healthy.

We have funded efforts to *assist with implementation of the International*



American Avocet
credit: Alan Brooks

Shorebird Survey program for breeding and migrating shorebirds and have fostered the integration of shorebird monitoring with other migratory bird efforts. We have assisted the Service regions with development and implementation of shorebird monitoring efforts and have worked with National Wildlife Refuges throughout the country to promote shorebird conservation and habitat management.

We have funded and sponsored *shorebird management training* workshops and funded the development of a shorebird management manual. These workshops are targeted for site managers and focus on shorebird identification, habitat requirements, and management practices. We have also supported *identification and designation of sites for the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network*, a collaboration of government and private organizations that are committed to shorebird conservation.

We played a leadership role in the *development of the recently-completed U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan*. We house the *National Shorebird Coordinator* to assist implementation of the national and regional conservation plans and to provide assistance to other Service offices. The coordinator works to integrate shorebird conservation into existing programs and develop new partnerships for plan implementation. The coordinator serves as liaison to other national and international bird initiatives.

We react to resource conflicts, such as that of Delaware Bay where hundreds of thousands of shorebirds stop during spring migration to rest and feed on horseshoe crab eggs. Concern has been raised about the effect that recent increases in harvest of horseshoe crabs might have on migratory shorebirds. We are responsible for *compiling information on the link between horseshoe crabs and shorebirds* and for assembling a committee to review the information for fishery decision-makers.

We recognize that outreach and education are important components of shorebird conservation. We help sponsor the *Shorebird Sister Schools Program*, an Internet-based education program designed for broad audiences of educators and students.



Black-bellied Plover
credit: Alan Brooks

What Else Is Needed for Shorebirds?

Shorebirds have been one of the most neglected groups of migratory birds. Much work is needed to increase our knowledge of status and trends of shorebird populations. New monitoring methods should be developed and existing methods modified to ensure we can track populations of these species. A thorough knowledge of habitat requirements throughout their annual cycle is crucial to adequately and effectively manage landscapes for shorebirds. Information we gather on shorebird biology and habitat use should be transmitted to land managers, and we should strive to create a greater awareness for shorebird conservation in the general public.

Shorebirds and other migratory birds are some of nature's most magnificent resources. Their conservation is a critical and challenging endeavor for the Migratory Bird Management Program and all who value nature.

For More Information:
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Division of Migratory Bird Management
4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Room 634
Arlington, VA 22203
703 358 1714
<http://birds.fws.gov>
<http://migratorybirds.fws.gov/shrbird/shrbird.html>

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