LOUISIANA
SHOREBIRDS

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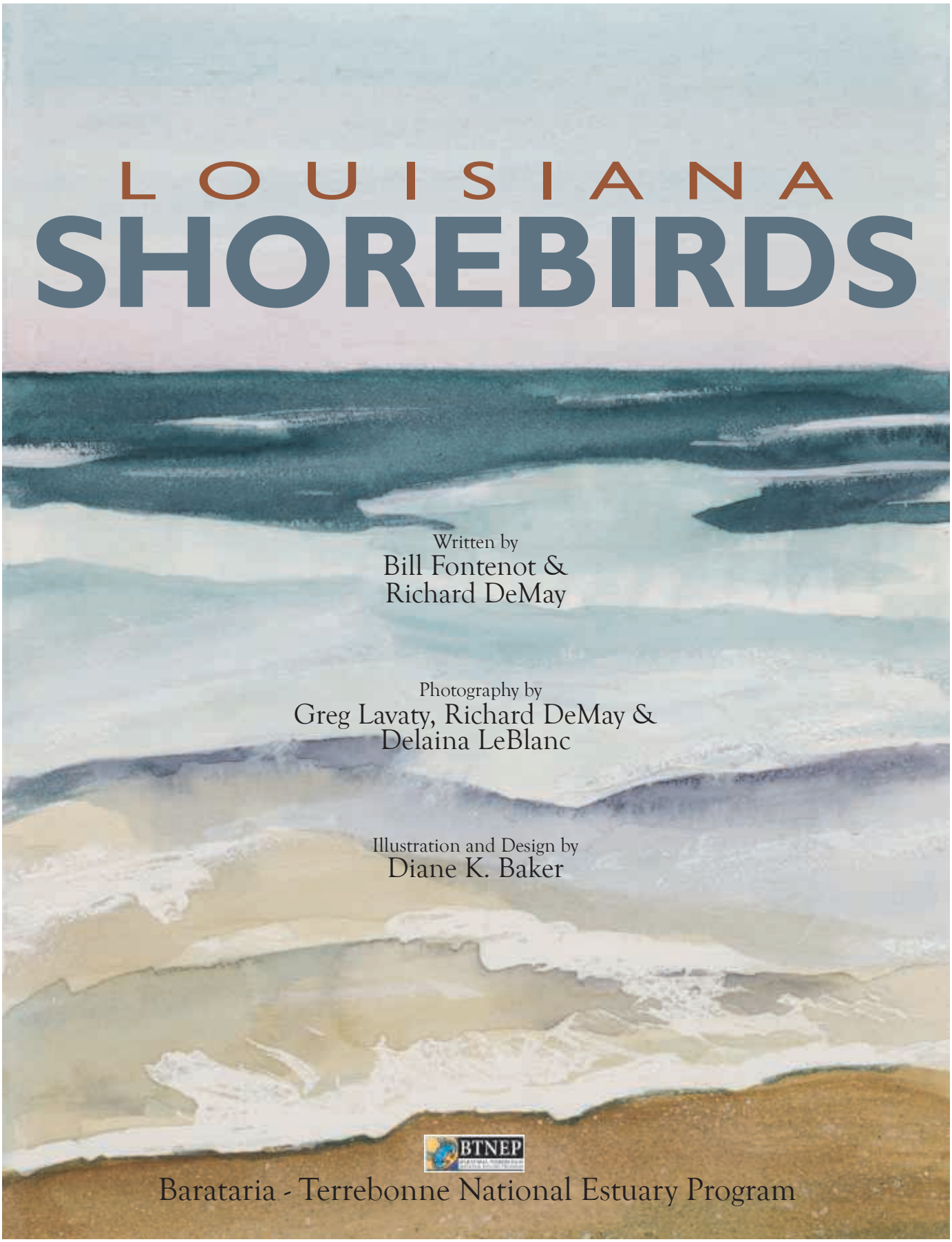
LOUISIANA
SHOREBIRDS
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WHAT IS A SHOREBIRD?

Of all of the world's major bird groups, the shorebirds probably exhibit the highest degree of variability in terms of body structure, size, behavior, and habitat preferences. In terms of size, for example, the six-inch Least Sandpiper is hardly larger than a sparrow, whereas the eighteen-inch long American Avocet is larger than a crow and possesses a wingspan comparable to that of a mid-sized heron. The eight-inch long sickle-shaped bill of the Long-billed Curlew gives it an almost freakish appearance, whereas the abbreviated "chicken-like" bills of the smaller plovers are only a quarter-inch or less in length. Some shorebirds, such as the Purple Sandpiper, possess notably short legs, whereas others such as those of the Black-necked Stilt seem almost ridiculously long. The Ruddy Turnstone and the aptly named Sanderling, live almost exclusively on beaches, whereas the American Woodcock makes its home in dense forests. Some, like the Stilt Sandpiper, routinely forage in several inches of water, while the prairie-dwelling Upland Sandpiper rarely ever approaches water at all.

Extremes aside, some broad generalizations can be made concerning the majority of shorebird species. Most shorebirds live in close association with water. Most live in open landscapes such as beaches, prairies, pastures, agricultural fields, or along the bare edges of lakes and streams. Most shorebirds possess long, pointed wings and are swift, powerful fliers. As well, most possess short tails for maximum maneuverability both on the ground and in the air. On the ground, shorebirds do not hop, but walk and/or run, some with remarkable dexterity and speed. Most shorebirds occur in groups, from smaller single-species flocks to larger mixed-species flocks.

Upland Sandpiper

Greg Lavaty

Over 60 species of shorebirds have been recorded in North America. Most of these nest within marsh, prairie, and tundra habitats of far-northerly latitudes, and most overwinter thousands of miles to the south, along the coastal zones of North, Central, and South America.

Shorebirds are grouped into several families: Plovers (family Charadriidae), Oystercatchers (family Haematopodidae), Stilts and Avocets (family Recurvirostridae), Jacanas (family Jacanidae), and Sandpipers, Phalaropes, and Allies (family Scolopacidae).

Greg Lavaty

Black-necked Stilt

American Avocet

Greg Lavaty

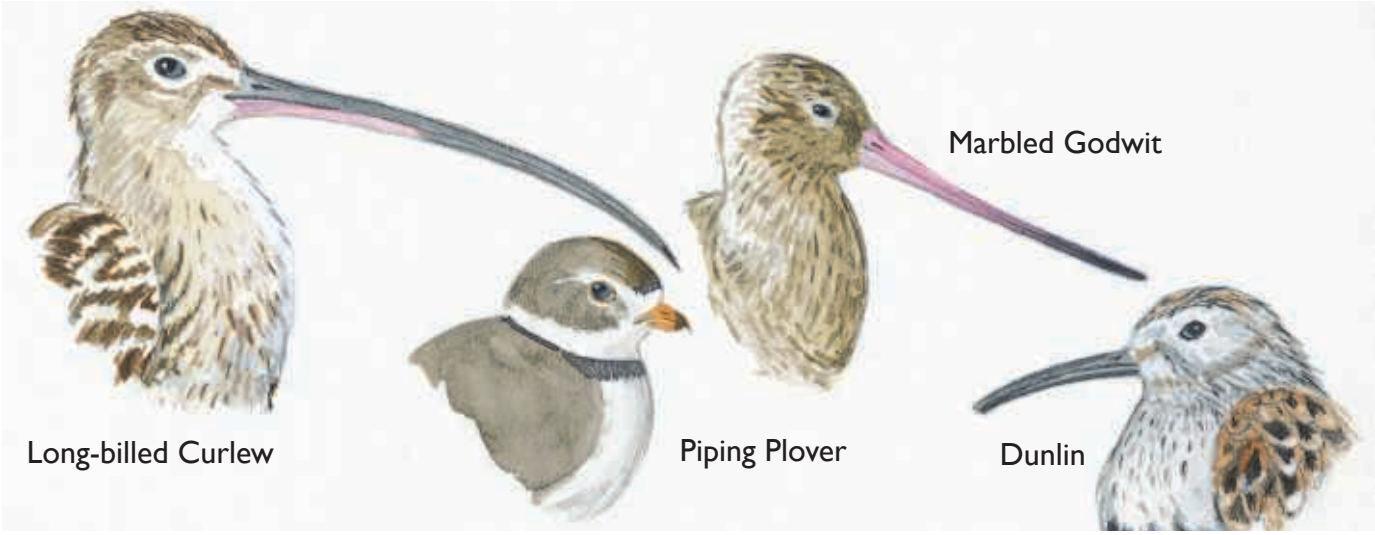
Plovers are relatively short-necked, short-billed birds that utilize dry to saturated bare-soil or short-grass fields and beaches to run down their prey. Sandpipers tend to forage with their heads down most of the time, whereas plovers maintain a more alert upright posture; their relatively large eyes constantly scanning for prey – even at night for some species such as Black-bellied Plover and Killdeer. Unlike most other birds, the hind toes of the plovers are reduced to mere vestigial appendages, signifying their adaptation to only the flattest and smoothest of substrates. Recent DNA studies have revealed that the plovers are actually more closely allied to the gulls and terns than they are to the sandpipers.

With their sleek, tapered bodies and wings, plovers are among the swiftest and strongest fliers in the bird world. Shorebird expert Dennis Paulson has reported American Golden-Plover flight speeds in excess of 100mph. Average cruising speed for this species during its annual 10,000 mile bi-hemispheric round-trip migration trek from the Arctic to southern South America is estimated to be about 50mph.

Twelve of the world's 66 species of plover breed in North America.

Said to have evolved from an ancestral plover-like bird, the oystercatchers possess thick, strong legs and bills; well-suited to mollusk-hunting along rocks and reefs in near-shore marine waters. Two of the world's 10 oystercatcher species breed in North America. It is not known for sure, however, it is thought that oystercatchers that breed at sub-tropical latitudes (northern Gulf of Mexico) do not migrate much at all, likely congregating in mostly small loosely associated communal groups during winter, perhaps remaining within the same general area all year long.

Stilts and Avocets are larger, long-legged, long-billed waders that pluck or skim their prey from the water. As with the oystercatchers, this subgroup is said to have descended from



Long-billed Curlew

Piping Plover

Marbled Godwit

Dunlin

Diane K. Baker

a common ancestral plover-like bird. Also like the oystercatchers, the relatively large body sizes and striking color-patterns and body parts of stilts and avocets afford fairly straightforward identification in the field. Two of the world's 9 species of stilts and avocets breed in North America.

Jacanas are New World tropical birds which superficially look and behave much like the gallinules. The Northern Jacana is the only jacana species known to occur north of Mexico, occasionally turning up within the marshlands in the coastal zone of southern Texas.

Sandpipers, Phalaropes, and Allies vary over an amazingly wide spectrum of size, shape, and structure, and are generally adapted to lives in or near shallow water where they probe or pluck prey from both water and soil. Most sandpipers gather into larger feeding flocks than do plovers, methodically foraging like grazing herds of cattle. Compared to the plovers, the toes of the sandpipers are long, with the hind toe short and elevated – not vestigial as with the plovers.

Like the plovers, a number of species within the sandpiper group are known for their epic long-distance migrations. Semipalmated Sandpipers engage in a globe-trotting 10,000+ mile, elliptical migratory route similar to that of the American Golden-Plover. Such routes include a few non-stop 2,500 mile legs, the first of which is launched from the Bay of Fundy (southeastern Canada) out over the western Atlantic Ocean, then banking off of the trade winds to reach their first stop in northern South America. In order to find favorable winds, migrating birds utilize a variety of altitudes ranging from just above sea level all the way up to 20,000 feet.


Ruddy Turnstone

Greg Lavaty

Recent technological advances in telemetry have allowed researchers to track the migratory journeys of individual birds. A one-ounce Semipalmated Sandpiper was tracked on a non-stop flight from Maine to Guyana (northern South America) in two days, averaging about 40 mph

Wilson's Plover nest on a beach scrape

Delaina LeBlanc

over the course of the journey.

Recently (2012), researchers have tracked three spring-migrating Whimbrels engaged in a 95-100 hour, 4,000 mile non-stop flight from wintering grounds at Sao Luis, Brazil to the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

The family Scolopacidae is the largest of all the shorebirds, containing 21 separate genera and 87 total species worldwide, 42 of which are regularly found in North America.

Essentially, shorebirds inhabit most all major ecosystems in North America from dry short-grass prairies, to wet meadows, stream banks, Artic tundra, and even woodlands; but are rarest in mountainous settings.

Like most animals, shorebirds are opportunistic foragers, routinely taking a wide variety of habitats in which they seasonally occupy. Typical items include small amphibians, fishes, mollusks, crustaceans, spiders, insects, worms and grubs, as well as the adults and/or larvae of other invertebrates. Some species also include seeds and berries in their diets. The high metabolic demands of these long-distance migrants require much of their time to be spent foraging.

As with most seabirds (example: gulls and terns), most shorebird species nest in simple "scrapes," slight indentions made on various substrates from sand to gravel to grass. Normally, the male excavates the scrape, and in most species the female adds bits of various materials to line the indention and arrange it about her legs and breast. Site fidelity, down to reusing the same scrape year after year, has been documented in a number of species. Beyond scrapes, a few species nest at the tops of grass tussocks or at the bases of shrubs. Only one North American species, the Solitary Sandpiper, routinely nests in trees, most often reusing abandoned songbird nests.

Many shorebirds engage in ritualistic, almost mechanical breeding displays both on the ground and in the air, often accompanied by equally strange vocalizations, all of which are intriguing to observe and hear. Male Pectoral and White-rumped sandpipers possess inflatable sacs within their upper breasts which they use during breeding displays. During the breeding season, the male Ruff grows an elaborate display plumage about its neck and upper breast, analogous to the nuptial plumes put on by some egrets.

Interestingly, nesting and brooding duties are reversed in the phalaropes. Within this group, the females are more brightly colored, and it is they who compete for the attention of the males. Once eggs are laid, the females leave them to the males to incubate and brood. In fact phalarope females not only leave these duties to the males, but they also depart early from their breeding grounds altogether, initiating migration as soon as their egg-laying duties are done.

For most species, shorebird eggs are large in relation to the body sizes

Willet chick

Richard DeMay

Wilson's Plover

Greg Lavaty

of the females. Accordingly, hatchlings are quite precocious, able to move about and forage on their own within a very short time after hatching. Among all of the North American shorebirds, only the oystercatchers, Wilson's Snipe, and American Woodcock feed their hatchlings!

In most species, males take over incubation and brooding soon after the female lays. It is thought that this strategy allows the female to prepare for her long migratory trek by restocking her nutrient-depleted body as soon as possible after producing those substantial eggs.

Greg Lavaty

Solitary Sandpiper

Fall migration composition and timing are dependent on the course of the reproductive cycle. Failed breeders are the first to head south, with a number of tundra and tiaga-nesting species arriving on the U.S. Gulf Coast as early as the last week of June – exceedingly early for any fall-migrating bird, especially considering that individuals of the same species may have been still making their way north to breeding grounds as late as early June!

Next come the successfully-bred adult females, often beginning in early July; then followed by the adult males in August. First-year birds are the last to migrate, peaking along the U.S. Gulf Coast in October, corresponding more closely to the fall migration peaks of raptors and songbirds. With fall migrating shorebirds, juveniles are relatively easy to identify as they are the only ones wearing bright "pre-basic" plumages. By contrast, fall-migrating adults possess dull, worn plumages.

Greg Lavaty

American Oystercatcher

Semipalmated Sandpiper

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SHOREBIRDS IN LOUISIANA

Shorebirds are generally attracted to damp-to-wet sites, so it follows that shorebirding should be first-rate in Louisiana, one of the dampest-to-wettest regions in North America.

It also has been established that shorebirds generally prefer wide-open landscapes such as beaches, marshes, agricultural fields, and at the open edges of lakes and streams. Here in Louisiana, such landscapes are commonly associated with the alluvial lands within the Red and Mississippi River valleys; and abundantly so within the state's coastal zone which includes the Interstate-10 and Interstate-12 corridors and all lands southward to the coast itself.

Of particular importance to Louisiana shorebirds is the old "prairie district" – now referred to as "the rice country" located in the southwestern quadrant of the state. This 2+ million-acre region forms a rough triangle extending southward from Evangeline Parish in central Louisiana, southwesterly through Jefferson Davis Parish and southeasterly through Vermilion Parish, with both legs terminating along LA 14, which forms the southern/east-west base of the triangle. Here, vast pastures along with numerous large rice and crawfish-farming operations dominate the landscape, featuring thousands of acres of flat, open lands containing various degrees of moisture and vegetation at various times of the year. Fortunately, the flooding/draining cycles associated with these rice/crawfish aqua-cultural practices dovetail nicely with the seasonal habitat requirements for most of North America's nesting, migrating, and overwintering shorebird species.

In an effort to better understand and appreciate the importance of

Sanderlings and Ruddy Turnstone

Greg Lavaty

rice/crawfish agriculture in southern Louisiana to shorebirds, a group of ornithologists conducted a one-day "snapshot" survey in the heart of the rice country on February 21, 1988. Covering parts of Cameron, Jeff Davis, Vermilion, Acadia, and Lafayette parishes, this 870,000 acre area contained well over 750,000 acres of fields; 82,240 acres (10.7%) of which were actually surveyed. Fourteen species of shorebirds were recorded, seven of which occurred in numbers impressive enough to conclude that the entire rice-growing region "is an important area for wintering shorebirds, perhaps the most important inland area in the United States." Extrapolating from the 10.7% of the fields surveyed, observers estimated that the area's total 762,151 acres of fields held approximately 225,000 shorebirds, including over 46,000 Killdeer, over 57,000 Western Sandpiper, over 15,000 Dunlin, and over 80,000 Long-billed Dowitcher. Keep in mind that the survey area represented just under half of the total rice-growing acreage in this region!

Elsewhere, damp agricultural lands, pastures, reservoirs, sandbars, river locks, and beaches are well-distributed throughout the state, attracting a fairly steady stream of shorebirds throughout much of the year.

In terms of "shorebirding hotspots," several areas within the state stand out. In northwestern

Louisiana, the Yates Unit of the Red River National Wildlife Refuge (Red River Parish), and the Natchitoches Fish Hatchery (Natchitoches Parish) can be quite productive, especially during migration seasons. In northeastern Louisiana, the eastern portion of the Ouachita Wildlife Management Area (Ouachita and Richland parishes) supports rice production, and hosts shorebirds through much of the year. In southeastern Louisiana the Grand Isle area (southern Jefferson and Lafourche parishes) provides excellent shorebirding opportunities, particularly along Bay Tartellon at Port Fourchon, on Elmer's Island just west of Grand Isle, and in many places on Grand Isle itself, including Grand Isle State Park.

As previously mentioned, almost all of the "Rice Country" of southwestern Louisiana provides outstanding shorebirding on a near-year round basis. Best opportunities exist throughout most of Acadia, Vermilion, Jefferson Davis, and northeastern Cameron parishes. Here, most of the shorebirds are found on private lands, operated by rice/crawfish farmers, which limits birding opportunities to public roadsides possessing safe pull-off areas. In such cases, birders are strongly advised to remain near their vehicles at all times, should farmers require access into the fields through the pull-off areas. Farmers are generally friendly and courteous to those birders who remain safely parked along public roads; and are more often than not curious as to what birders might be observing in their fields.

Less-intrepid birders would best be advised to limit their southwestern Louisiana shorebirding to the public "wildlife drives" located at the western edge of the Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge and eastern edge of the Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge, both located in northeastern Cameron Parish.

The beaches, marshes, and pastures along coastal Cameron Parish also provide excellent shorebirding throughout most of the year. Best opportunities exist at Rutherford Beach, Holly Beach, and Martin Beach – all easily accessible off of LA 82.

In terms of seasonality, shorebirding is good to excellent in Louisiana from mid-July through early June, very nearly year round! The summer months are the slowest, with most of the migrants and overwintering species absent, leaving only local-breeding and a few "summering" individuals. "Summering" is a behavioral phenomenon in which certain individuals of certain species stop short of returning all the way back to their respective breeding grounds, choosing instead to spend the summer months in non-breeding mode in regions well to the south.

This summering phenomenon has been documented to various degrees through numerous bird groups, but none so frequently, consistently, and as widespread as with the shorebirds. Here in Louisiana, summering/non-breeding instances are most evident among the beach-loving species, but also occur in other species with marsh and short-grass habitat preferences.

During any late-June outing then, bird biologists are faced with an annually-occurring conundrum: Are the non-breeding species which we are encountering unusually-late

Greater Yellowlegs

Greg Lavaty

Killdeer

Greg Lavaty

spring migrants, or are they actually summering here? The answer, as best as we presently know it, is "a little of both." Similarly, by July the question becomes, "Are we encountering early-fall migrants (a substantial number of migratory shorebird species initiate fall migration by mid-summer), or, are these summering individuals?" Thus far, no shorebird or migratory bird researcher has come up with a methodology to solve this problem on a bird-by-bird basis.

The list of species falling into this curious category within the coastal zone of Louisiana is substantial, and includes Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Plover, American Avocet, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot, Sanderling, Western Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, and Short-billed Dowitcher.

The absolute peaks in both species diversity and sheer numbers of individuals occur in Louisiana during spring migration between mid-April and mid-May, and again from August through October during fall migration. Winter shorebirding is normally excellent to outstanding, particularly in the Grand Isle and rice country regions, with over 20 species regularly overwintering in these areas.

Detailed Louisiana shorebird records date back to those of J.J. Audubon in the early 19th century. Over a century later, ornithologist Harry C. Oberholser compiled the shorebird records of over 40 contributing ornithologists, biological surveyors, and collectors in his book, The Bird Life of Louisiana, published in 1938 by the Louisiana Department of Conservation. In it, he listed a total of 37 shorebird species (along with numerous sub-species, as was the

common practice in those days) for our state.

Over the ensuing years, more species have been added as both identification skills and seasonal coverage have increased. Today, a total of 45 shorebird species have been recorded for Louisiana, 37 of which occur here on a regular annual basis.

Regarding relative abundance of various shorebird species in Louisiana, it should be remembered that values such as abundant ("will see"), common ("should see"), and uncommon ("might see") apply to shorebirds on a local basis only. Thus, relative abundance terms must be modified to "locally abundant," "locally common," etc. due to the specific nature of shorebird habitat preferences. Too, seasonality must be taken into account when assessing relative abundance, as most shorebirds are strongly migratory. Louisiana's roster of shorebird species may be thusly divided, along with the caveats of "in appropriate habitats" and "in appropriate seasons" to each of the following values:

Abundant

Killdeer

Common

Black-bellied Plover
Black-necked Stilt
Greater Yellowlegs
Willet
Lesser Yellowlegs
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Dunlin
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe
American Woodcock

Fairly Common

Wilson's Plover
Semipalmated Plover
American Avocet
Spotted Sandpiper
Solitary Sandpiper
Whimbrel
Marbled Godwit
Red Knot
Semipalmated Sandpiper
Stilt Sandpiper
Pectoral Sandpiper
Short-billed Dowitcher

Uncommon

American Golden-Plover
Snowy Plover
Piping Plover
American Oystercatcher
Upland Sandpiper
Long-billed Curlew
Hudsonian Godwit
White-rumped Sandpiper
Baird's Sandpiper
Buff-breasted Sandpiper
Wilson's Phalarope

Occasional/Accidental

(few records)
Lesser Sand-Plover
Mountain Plover
Black-tailed Godwit
Purple Sandpiper
Curlew Sandpiper
Ruff, Red-necked Phalarope
Red Phalarope

Marbled Godwit

Greg Lavaty

OBSERVING & IDENTIFYING

Observing some shorebirds – species such as American Oystercatcher, American Avocet, Long-billed Curlew, and Black-necked Stilt – all of which possess larger body sizes and starkly contrasting plumage patterns on a year round basis, is easy and straightforward. All an observer needs to do is find the right place at the right time in which to encounter them. Over time, observers learn that the best places to find most shorebirds are in wetland settings, especially where two or more habitat types converge, such as where tidal pool-studded salt-marshes meet open beaches; or in artificial settings such as sewerage treatment facilities, and here in Louisiana, especially in rice/crawfish fields that are in the process of being flooded or drained, creating a mosaic of wet, dry, and damp places – effectively mimicking natural tidal actions in estuarine settings.

Dunlin

Richard DeMay

Unfortunately, simply finding proper shorebird habitats is not the primary challenge to observing and identifying most shorebird species, for most are relatively small birds possessing multiple, and often cryptic plumage patterns over the course of each year. Here in Louisiana, due in no small part to our geographical location, observers annually view individual birds of many species in full breeding (alternate) plumage, full wintering (basic) plumage, sub-adult plumage, and many variations in between. In all of these instances, the ability to focus on fine and subtle details in order to identify the bird in question – the presence or absence of "eyebrows," eye-lines, eye-rings, streaked or unstreaked crowns, streaked or clear underparts – is paramount.

Richard DeMay

Piping Plover

Richard DeMay

Least Sandpiper and
Semipalmated Sandpiper

The most important identification character upon which an observer should first focus is the appearance of the bird's bill. What is its relative length? Shape? Coloration? Using the bird's head as a measure, compare bill length to head length. If bill length is longer, then how many times longer than head length? Bills of many shorebird species also possess distinctive shapes. Is the bill straight or curved? If curved, is it curved downward (decurved) or upward (recurved)? Is the bill evenly curved, or is it somewhat straight, but "droops" up or down toward the tip?

Noting coloration of both bill and legs is also useful. Note whether the bill is bicolored or unicolored (concolored). Leg coloration is quite diverse across many species. Note whether legs are pale or dark, then determine color hue, which can range from straw-yellow, orange-yellow, flesh-colored, reddish, greenish, blueish, grayish, or black. Understand that leg color varies not only between species, but also within some species, as numerous shorebirds exhibit differing leg coloration between breeding and non-breeding plumages.

In summary, when studying shorebirds, especially the smaller, more cryptically-colored species, focus first on the bird's bill, ascertaining relative length, exact shape, and coloration, moving next to markings (or lack thereof) on the face and crown, then progressing to body plumage and flight-feather (wings, tail) markings, and finally leg length and coloration. All the while, listen for vocalizations, which in some cases are the best identifying feature upon which to rely.

Obviously then, shorebird observation and identification requires optical equipment over and above the usual 7-9X binoculars used by most birdwatchers. In most cases, attempting to study the fine details necessary for shorebird identification through hand-held binoculars is impracticable. Hands soon tire and viewing becomes shaky after only short periods of time. Thus, a good quality spotting scope mounted on a sturdy yet portable tripod becomes essential.

Experienced shorebirders prefer lightweight equipment, as walks of various distances and constant repositioning of the scope/tripod are common necessities. Smaller-bodied scopes featuring high-light-dispersion optics in "fixed" powers of 20-30X are best. Some observers prefer variable-power optics, most often 20-60X, which can offer some advantage. Remember, however, that heat wave distortion and shallow depth-of-field problems often ensue at powers above 30X. When considering the purchase of a scope/tripod for shorebirding purposes, first seek advice from experienced shorebirders via local bird clubs, nature centers, and wildlife refuge visitors centers.

After only a little practice with a spotting scope and tripod set-up, observers find careful study of shorebirds to be far easier, convenient, and even leisurely compared to working with binoculars. Soon, one will experience the value of such equipment when sorting through mixed flocks comprised of hundreds of shorebirds, which is more often than not the case in shorebirding. In such large, mixed-flock situations, learning comes quickly, with many opportunities for direct comparison of bill appearance, body size, plumage patterns, and leg details, both between and within species.

As with researching proper optical equipment, shorebirding students should seek opportunities to go out into the field in the company of experienced observers. As with most endeavors, there is simply no substitute for experience. Many experienced shorebirders welcome the opportunity to pass along tips, not only for the benefit of the student, but also to reinforce such information in their own minds.

Louisiana Breeding Shorebirds

The vast majority of the world's shorebirds nest far north in tundra or tiaga habitats. In North America, 43 species nest in Alaska alone. Only a small percentage breed at tropical/sub-tropical latitudes. Here in Louisiana seven species annually nest, ranging from the common and ubiquitously distributed Killdeer to the rare and isolated Snowy Plover.

Willet

Richard DeMay

Greg Lavaty

Snowy Plover

Charadrius alexandrinus

The U.S. breeding range of the Snowy Plover is comprised of a curious mix of inland alakali ponds in the Great Basin and southern Great Plains as well as the beaches of the Pacific and Gulf Coasts. A species of conservation concern throughout its patchy breeding range, recent estimates put the U.S. population of Snowy Plover at 18,000 individuals, with the majority breeding in the interior locales. The Pacific Coast population is comprised of about 2,000 individuals, and the Gulf of Mexico/Caribbean population hovers around 2,500 birds.

Louisiana's first Snowy Plover nest was not recorded until 1994 in Cameron Parish. More recently, during Louisiana's first ever comprehensive ground-based beach-nesting bird census held in 2005, only two pairs of Snowy Plovers, both in Cameron Parish, were encountered along the state's 322-mile beach-survey route. Five years later during the 2010 census, presumably the same two nesting pair were again found in Cameron Parish along with the first ever record of a nesting pair in lower Plaquemines Parish in southeastern Louisiana. Thus, after 21 years, it seems that this species' breeding status here is still only barely established. As with all beach-nesting species, human recreation, particularly in the form of ATV usage on beaches, constitutes a major threat.

Referred to by U.S. shorebird expert Dennis Paulson as the "Beach Ghost," the Snowy Plover is a small, sand-colored bird that differs from other U.S. small plover species in its lack of a complete breast-band. This character, combined with its notably thin black bill and gray legs, distinguishes it from the similar-appearing but stubbier-billed, yellow-legged, Piping Plover. When encountered, the Snowy Plover sits low upon the sand rather than running for cover. Compared to other plover species, Snowy Plovers possess relatively short legs and wings.

Greg Lavaty

In fall, interior populations of this species migrate to wintering grounds along tropical beaches. Prior to the mid-20th century, the Snowy Plover was considered a rare transient in Louisiana, with records confined to spring and fall migration periods only. By 1974 (third edition of Louisiana Birds) George Lowery, Jr. commented that it "seems to be rapidly passing from the Louisiana scene," and noted that it occasionally went unreported all year long. Still, even back then he suspected that it might be nesting here on secluded barrier island beaches.

Greg Lavaty

Presently, non-breeding Snowy Plover records have picked up somewhat since Lowery's time. At certain times during migration periods it can become fairly common along our beaches; less so over the winter months, and quite scarce during the summer months. It is only rarely encountered inland during migration.

As with other plovers, Snowy Plovers consume a wide variety of prey including insects, small worms, and amphipods (very small shrimp like crustaceans) all considered common invertebrates living on or just below the surface of Louisiana beaches. Normally site predators, Snowy Plovers chase down their food, however, like Piping Plovers, Snowies sometime use "foot trembling" as a method of finding prey where they quickly tap the surface of the sand repeatedly. This helps them locate small worms in particular.

Wilson's Plover

Charadrius wilsonia

Similar in appearance to the Snowy Plover, but a bit larger, is Wilson's Plover, which possesses a much larger bill than the former (Wilson's was once known as the "Thick-billed Plover), as well as a more substantial upper breast band. When encountered, Wilson's Plover tends to run relatively long distances, whereas

Greg Lavaty

the Snowy Plover tends to hunker down on the sand. Wilson's Plover is also similar in appearance to the Semipalmated Plover, but possesses longer, duller-colored legs than the latter, along with a much thicker all-black bill in all plumages.

The breeding range of Wilson's Plover is restricted to the beaches of the mid-Atlantic Coast southward through Florida and westward around the entire rim of the Gulf of Mexico. Another breeding population exists along the lower Pacific Coast of Mexico northward to Baja, California.

In 1938, Harry Oberholser listed Wilson's Plover as a permanent resident in coastal Louisiana, common in summer, somewhat more numerous during migration periods, but with only one winter record - December 12, 1931 in Grand Isle. By the latter part of the 20th century, its status remained the same here: common in spring, summer, and fall, and extremely rare in winter.

Most recently, Wilson's Plover has been designated a species of conservation concern, and is listed as threatened or endangered in a number of Atlantic Coast states. In 2001, a rough estimate of the continental population was put at 6,000 individuals. In Louisiana, a 2005 beach-nesting bird survey revealed a total of 759 pairs (1,518 individuals) of Wilson's Plover. However, five years later, a similar survey documented nearly twice as many breeding pair. Future surveys will help define the population of breeding pairs and help biologists understand whether data from the 2010 survey was an anomaly or a continuation of a trend in population.

Today, Wilson's Plover's Louisiana status remains broadly about the same as it was a century or more ago. It is not known whether this recent spike in winter sightings is due to increased observer effort or perhaps global climate change. The same could be said for the more recent perceived increases in breeding populations. Traditionally, Wilson's Plovers retire to tropical coasts in winter and have been considered rare anywhere north of the Florida peninsula during that season.

The primary diet of Wilson's Plover is fiddler crabs often making up over 90% of their diet. These birds use their large beaks to dislodge crabs, shaking them vigorously to dislodge legs and pinchers. A very small percentage of their diet is insects.

Greg Lavaty

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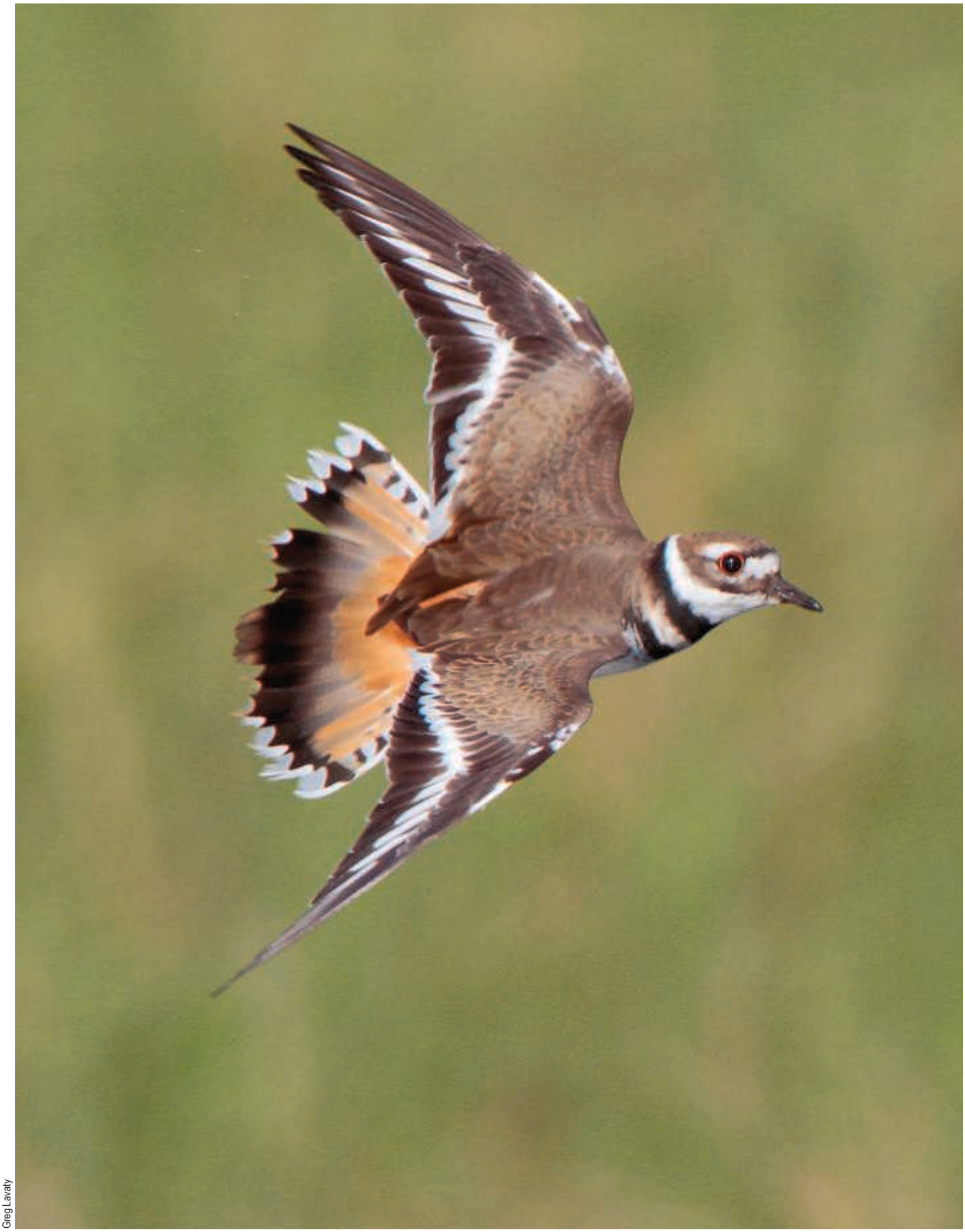

Greg Lavaty

Killdeer

Charadrius vociferus

Well-known throughout most states and provinces in North America, the Killdeer is one of the continent's largest plovers. Easily identified by its loud and frequent vocalizations alone, the Killdeer's heavily-etched double breast band and long, yellowish-orange tail provide immediate visual recognition as well.

The Killdeer is in fact the noisiest of all shorebird species, uttering a variety of vocalizations depending on circumstances. Its breeding display call is a high-pitched, thin, rolling, echoing "teedee-year!" When disturbed or flushed, it gives a strong, clear "Tee-dee-dee!" often uttered so rapidly that it transforms into a trill. Its normal "killdeer!" call is strong and penetrating as well, often heard as a steadily repeated "Dee-yee!" or "Tee-wee!"

As with several other plover species, Killdeer occasionally employ a "foot stir" technique when foraging; making rapid, trembling foot-tapping motions to either stir up or attract prey as they move forward. All plovers are very alert, visual foragers, possessing eyes that seem a bit large for their heads. In this regard the Killdeer is no different; and along with the Black-bellied Plover, is an active nocturnal forager and flier as well. A wide array of invertebrates makes for a Killdeer's meal. Insects, crustaceans, worms, and many other small critters fall to the opportunistic foraging behavior of this species.

Killdeer have been recorded nesting in nearly every Louisiana parish, and using every imaginable open-country rocky/gravelly substrate in which to build its simple scrape – including busy gravel roads and parking lots! Even many non-birdwatchers are aware of the Killdeer's "broken wing tactic," in which it feigns injury by deliberately hanging one or both wings dragging the ground as it limps away – vocalizing in mock terror all the while – in attempts to lure intruders away from its nest.

In short order, this bird has easily adapted to human-modified urban and suburban settings, so long as the landscape is relatively treeless, such as golf courses, ball fields, playgrounds, and parks.

Killdeer are especially numerous in and around short-grass pastures and agricultural fields; and each winter our sizable resident population is augmented by many more birds which pour in from points north. Peak winter density occurs along the Interstate-10 corridor, where over the years the Crowley, Lafayette, and Baton Rouge Christmas Bird Counts have all recorded top national high-counts for this species.

Greg Lavaty

American Oystercatcher

Haematopus palliatus

With its stark, bold color pattern and large crow-sized body, the easily-identifiable American Oystercatcher is almost cartoon-like in appearance. Unfortunately for birders, it is a shy, wary bird, preferring isolated sandy or rocky stretches along secluded beaches. This behavior, combined with low population numbers, makes any encounter with this species a real treat.

Plover-like in behavior, posture, and overall appearance, the American Oystercatcher is able to run rapidly, as well as to occasionally swim and even dive with ease. It possesses strong, thick legs and a long, stout, knife-like bill with which it pries open oysters and other bivalved mollusks.

In North America, the American Oystercatcher possesses a breeding range very similar to that of Wilson's Plover, confined to secluded beach habitats along the Atlantic, Gulf, and southern Pacific Coasts. Since the beginning of ornithological record-keeping here in the United States, this species has always maintained its highest population density on the Atlantic Coast.

Considered a rare permanent resident in Louisiana by Oberholser in1938, he added that the American Oystercatcher was "formerly apparently much more numerous" here. By the mid-20th century, George Lowery, Jr. maintained its status as rare in Louisiana, with breeding records confined to the Chandeleur Island chain. With the publication of the third edition of Louisiana Birds (1974), Lowery mentioned a first-ever nest record for this species west of the Mississippi River Delta (Timbalier Island, 1973) since Audubon's 1837 report from the Isles Dernieres.

Though both Oberholser and Lowery considered the American Oystercatcher to be a rare perma-

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nent resident here, their listings (which together spanned over 100 years) lacked any winter records for it. Today, this species is considered uncommon year round throughout the entire Louisiana coast, including a fairly substantial number of winter records.

Most recently, in Louisiana's first-ever comprehensive ground-based beach-nesting bird survey completed in the summer of 2005, 57 pairs (114 individuals) of American Oystercatchers were tallied over a 322-mile coastal beach route. Five years later, a similar survey documented more than twice the number of breeding pairs. This was due in large part to surveying additional small islands that comprise the Mississippi Sound area that were not visited in 2005. Here, with numerous small vegetated islands, many pairs of American Oystercatcher were documented, some even using the smallest of bare sand or shell beach areas. The latest (2001) estimate for the entire North American continental population was 7,500 total individuals. The American Oystercatcher is a species of high conservation concern throughout much of its North American distribution range.

Greg Lavaty

Black-necked Stilt

Himantopus mexicanus

Its bold black and white color pattern has earned the Black-necked Stilt the nickname "Tuxedo Bird." This, along with its long red legs and loud, whining, "keef! Keef!" or "kek! kek!" vocalizations make it instantly recognizable wherever it is encountered.

Historically, the Black-necked Stilt has been primarily a bird of New World tropical marshes, reaching peak population densities in Central and South America. Today, however, it nests along most all U.S. coasts from Maryland southward through the entire Gulf Coast and up the entire Pacific Coast of North America up through California. It also nests in U.S. interior marshes in the Great Basin, southern Arizona and New Mexico, and up the Mississippi River Valley through Memphis.

Besides nesting in marsh habitats throughout Louisiana's coastal zone, the Black-necked Stilt has adapted to nesting on the levees of actively-growing rice fields all the way up into such interior rice-growing parishes as Rapides, Natchitoches, Concordia, Morehouse, and East and West Carroll. In such settings, the starkness of this bird's black, white, and red color pattern against a backdrop of bright spring-green rice is dramatic indeed.

In 1938, ornithologist Harry C. Oberholser (Bird Life of Louisiana) considered the Black-necked Stilt "a rare permanent resident," also mentioning instances in which birds were nesting in pastures "where numerous cattle are apparently a menace to its safety."

In both his first (1955) and third (1974) editions of Louisiana Birds, George Lowery, Jr. referred to the Black-necked Stilt as "confined to the coast, especially the southwest Louisiana coastal zone" where he considered it a "regular summer resident," with "a few overwintering."

Today, this species is considered common in spring and summer and uncommon in fall and winter within the coastal zone of southeastern Louisiana, and common to fairly common year round in our southwestern coastal zone. In its central and northern Louisiana haunts, the Black-necked Stilt is considered uncommon to common during the spring/summer breeding season, and into early fall.

Black-necked Stilt employ a more leisurely feeding behavior, often found wading through water in search of insects both at the surface and below the surface of the water. Opportunistic in behavior, this species will consume all sorts of both aquatic and terrestrial insects.

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Willet

Tringa semipalmata

Plain gray-brown and unadorned, this large, stout-legged, thick-billed shorebird often initially presents a puzzle to observers who encounter it – until it flies off, that is, exhibiting boldly "zebra-patterned" black and white wings and sounding its characteristic "Clee-leelee!" alarm call. True to its name, its territorial breeding song is a loud, rolling "pill-Will-WIL-LET!" George Lowery, Jr. mentioned "*vire-vire*" as a Cajun French nickname for this species, in obvious reference to its vocalizations.

Willets breed in marshland and grassland habitats along the entire Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the United States as well as in the Great Basin and northern Great Plains of the United States and south-central Canada.

In Louisiana, Willets most often use immediate beach and back-beach dune and marsh habitats for both foraging and nesting. Birds migrating in and out of the state – to and from points west and north – are fairly commonly observed in the rice country of south-central and southwestern Louisiana, and are occasionally encountered inland into northwestern Louisiana. Willets are most often encountered singly or in groups of a few individuals; but occasionally can be observed in groups of up to a few dozen birds. Miscellaneous records (1967-2004) taken from individual islands within the Chandeleur Island chain during

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the month of June have totaled 50-200 Willets at a time on a number of occasions.

Over the years, a number of observers have reported a propensity for some individuals, possibly territorial males, to perch up high on fence posts, low trees, and even buildings – a decidedly unusual behavior amongst shorebirds.

For the past 150 years, the Willet has been considered a common permanent resident (augmented by numerous migrants in fall, winter, and spring) throughout Louisiana's coastal zone. Today, the year round status of the Willet remains much the same as it has since the early to mid-19th century.

Another generalist or opportunistic feeder, Willets consume all sorts of invertebrates including insects and crustaceans. Using several feeding techniques to find and catch prey, this species is as comfortable feeding at night as it is during the day. Although it must be said that other species of shorebirds also forage during the night, more so on nights with some moonlight.

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American Woodcock

Scolopax minor

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Unlike any other shorebird, the American Woodcock is adapted to spending much of its life in woodland niches. Slightly larger than a robin, this species is a large-chested, short-legged, and long-billed shorebird with a characteristically dumpy appearance. Its gorgeously-patterned cryptically-colored plumage recalls that of our native sparrows.

Unlike most shorebirds, the American Woodcock's wings are short and broad, with more rounded tips, allowing a more explosively-vertical helicopter-like launch when disturbed in its densely-wooded roosting habitat. Its prominent eyes hint at its nocturnal foraging habits. Woodcocks roost in dense forest thickets by day, flying out each dusk into open, moist to muddy ground where they probe for earthworms, grubs, and slugs. Foraging habitats vary geographically, and include agricultural fields, open margins of lakes or streams, damp meadows, pastures, utility rights-of-ways, and the like.

Woodcock flight is buoyant and erratic; bat or butterfly-like. Upon flushing, its rapidly beating wings give off a characteristic "doodling" sound, similar to that of some dove species.

By day, Woodcocks are so retiring in habit that relatively few birders chance to see them. More often they are encountered by hunters who flush them while pursuing other game. Too, some hunters specialize

in hunting Woodcock using Brittany spaniels or other pointer-type dogs. American Woodcock and Wilson's Snipe are the only two North American shorebird species that can be legally hunted.

For those wishing to simply observe Woodcocks, the best season is winter, the best time is at dusk, and the best places are along the interfaces of dense bottomland hardwood forests of any size and muddy agricultural fields. In prime settings, Woodcocks use the same flight path between forest and field each evening; and in many cases a number of birds will use the same flight path, following each other one bird at a time.

The American Woodcock breeds throughout most of eastern North America from southeastern Canada southward through the coastal plain forests of the Gulf Coast states. In Louisiana, the "*becasse*," as it is known in Cajun French, is considered a thinly-distributed and irregular breeder – a status which might well change if breeding bird surveyors focused on the very early spring period, particularly the months of February and March, which is when local Woodcocks are said to breed. Normally, breeding bird survey work takes place from mid to late spring and into early summer.

In any case, Louisiana's Woodcock population swells many times over each winter, when local birds are joined by large numbers of northerly-breeding birds. As with many species of waterfowl, the density of the overwintering population at this latitude is dictated each year by the severity of winter weather to our immediate north. In milder winters, more Woodcocks overwinter to our north; in colder winters, they move as far south as necessary to escape frozen foraging habitats.

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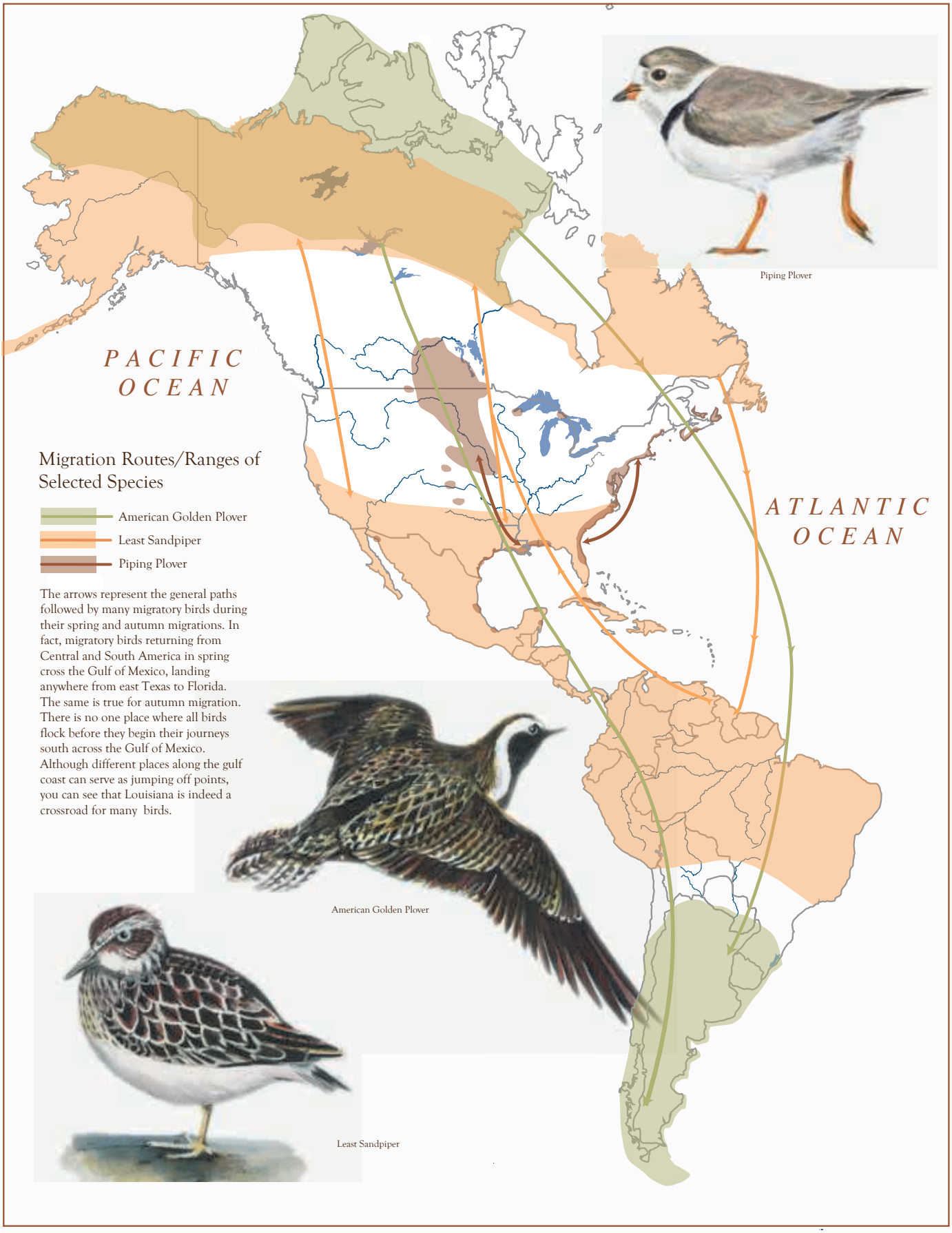

Diane K. Baker

Louisiana's Common Non-Breeding Shorebirds

Thirty species of North American shorebirds regularly occur in Louisiana on an annual basis, many of which actually spend more time here than they do on their breeding grounds. A substantial number of the non-breeding species discussed herein are regularly recorded in our state 9 to12 months out of each year!

Long-billed Curlew

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Black-bellied Plover

Pluvialis squatarola

Slightly larger than a Killdeer, the Black-bellied Plover can only be confused with the Golden Plover in its stark black and white breeding plumage, differing from the latter in its white undertail and black axillar feathers. In its winter/non-breeding plumage, however, it is quite plain mottled charcoal/white above and pale brownish gray below. Its prominent head and steep forehead earned it market-hunter nicknames such as "Bullhead" and "Beetle Head." Its frequently uttered, plaintive "pee-er-weee" call – uttered both day and night – earned it the nickname, "Whistling Plover."

Known for its swift powerful flight, this species breeds in the high Arctic tundra of Canada and northern Alaska and winters throughout all North and Central American coasts down into South America. Preferred winter habitat includes tidal flats of beaches as well as short-grass prairies, pastures, and other fields near the coast. In Louisiana, it also finds good foraging ground inland on muddy harvested rice fields.

As with most plover species, the Black-bellied Plover forages in groups of various sizes (depending on density of prey items), but maintains a substantial amount of space between individuals. In the rice fields it loosely associates with a number of sandpiper species, focusing on muddy/non-flooded areas, and occasionally in very shallow (<1") water.

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Because a number of individuals tend to "summer" along the Louisiana coast each year, Oberholser (1938) called this species a "fairly common permanent resident." In his mid-to-late 20th century writings, George Lowery, Jr. reported the Black-bellied Plover to be "numerous on the coast, but seldom seen inland, even in migration."

Today, the Black-bellied Plover is considered common from late summer through late spring along the southeastern Louisiana coast; uncommon in June and the first half of July. Along the southwestern coast it is considered common year round; absent only in the last of June. Since the days of Oberholser and Lowery, inland records have picked up considerably. Today, the Black-bellied Plover is considered uncommon to common in the rice country of southwestern Louisiana from July through late May, with a smattering of records in June. In northwestern Louisiana it is considered rare but regular during migration periods (late-April - late-May; early-August - early-November).

American Golden Plover

Pluvialis dominica

Similar to the Black-bellied Plover in structure and plumages, the American Golden-Plover is slightly smaller in size and features a slightly smaller, slimmer bill. In breeding plumage, feathers on its mottled upperparts are edged in golden-yellow.

The American Golden-Plover breeds throughout the Arctic tundra of North America from Alaska through the Atlantic coast of Canada, and winters far southward in southern South America. This species possesses an elliptical migration route, launching out over the western Atlantic Ocean in late summer and flying a non-stop 2,500-mile first leg to northern South America. In spring, birds proceed northward through the middle of the Americas.

This species prefers more upland short-grass habitats, only using wetter sandy/muddy substrates when dense concentrations of prey species are present.

In 1938, Oberholser considered this species to be a rare statewide migrant in Louisiana, somewhat more common within the coastal zone; and "much reduced in recent years." By the mid-20th century George Lowery, Jr. reported it as "common in spring; occasional along the coast in fall and into winter."

Today, the American Golden-Plover is considered uncommon in spring and rare in fall (with isolated records in February and November) along the coastal zone of southeastern Louisiana. Within the southwestern Louisiana coastal zone it is decidedly more common during spring (March-May) migration, with scattered records in fall from mid-September through mid-November. In northwestern Louisiana it is considered a common spring migrant (mid-February-mid-April) and uncommon to rare in fall. Records in northeastern Louisiana are rare, and confined to early spring.

Considering its elliptical migration route, it is interesting that the American Golden-Plover should be detected at all in Louisiana during fall migration periods. Lowery considered most fall-to-early-winter records in Louisiana to consist of young "hatch-year" birds.

This species is the most visible, active, and numerous of North America's small plovers (genus Charadrius). Compared to other small plovers, the Semipalmated Plover possesses dark-brown upperparts, a short bi-colored black/orange bill and vivid orange legs, along with a bold blackish breast-band.

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Semipalmated Plover

Charadrius semipalmatus

The Semipalmated Plover breeds across most Arctic and sub-Arctic regions in North America, and winters along tropical and sub-tropical coasts from the U.S. Pacific, mid-Atlantic, and Gulf coasts southward through most of coastal South America. It is especially attracted to tidal mud flats, but can also be found foraging on sandy beaches, often in the company of Sanderlings.

In the early 20th century, Oberholser reported it as a fairly common spring and fall transient in Louisiana, with some individuals possibly remaining through the summer months. At the time (1938), he also suspected it to overwinter in small numbers along coastal beaches and barrier islands, but possessed "no authentic winter records" from that season.

By 1955 (Louisiana Birds 1st ed.), George Lowery, Jr. reported that this species was perhaps "conspecific" (the same species) with an Old World species, the Common Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*), to which it closely resembles. Over time, however, detailed taxonomic studies have maintained these two as separate species.

Presently, the Semipalmated Plover is considered common in migration, uncommon in winter, and rare in June and July throughout the Louisiana coast. In northwestern Louisiana it is uncommonly recorded during spring (April 04-May 27) and fall (mid-July through early October) migration periods; rarer still in northeastern Louisiana.

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Piping Plover

Charadrius melodus

Superficially, the Piping Plover appears as a sort of "cross" between a Semiplamated Plover and a Snowy Plover; with breeding adults possessing the same bill and leg color patterns of the former along with the pale sandy colored upperparts of the latter. Compared to those two species, however, the Piping Plover is notably shorter-legged and more compactly built.

The Piping Plover breeds sparingly along the sandy shores of freshwater lakes and rivers in the Great Plains and Great Lakes regions of North America, as well as along the north Atlantic coast from Canada down to North Carolina. Each winter, it drops down into the southern Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the United States and on into Mexico. With an estimated population of 6,000 individuals across the three different geographically located breeding populations remaining, this species is considered "threatened" and "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act. As such, it is afforded special protection throughout its range.

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Through the early 20th century, Oberholser considered this species a rare to occasionally locally common migrant on beaches throughout the Louisiana coast, and at least a casual winter resident on the Mississippi River Delta (one record on January 22, 1932 from Octave Pass). By the mid-20th century, Lowery had provided the species' first two inland records, both from the LSU Baton Rouge campus during the passage of hurricanes.

Today, continuous records exist for the Piping Plover from August through April (along with 2 isolated June records) along the southeastern Louisiana coast, where its official status is "uncommon." Along the southwestern coast it is considered fairly common in fall migration (late-July – early-October), dropping to uncommon from mid-October through mid-May. Piping Plover records are rare in inland Louisiana. It is only occasionally detected in the rice country during migration periods. In northwestern Louisiana, a smattering of spring and fall migration records exist, falling mostly between mid-June and early October.

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American Avocet

Recurvirostra americana

With a long bill, upswept (recurved) at the tip, and bold black and white color pattern, this long-legged, crow-sized shorebird can hardly be mistaken for any other species. During breeding season, its pale-gray head and neck become infused with a bright-cinnamon color, contrasting beautifully with its white body, black wings and scapulars, and relatively bright blue-gray legs. Even for its large size, the Avocet is a strong, rapid flier, with a flight style that resembles that of waterfowl – or more closely, of ibises.

When foraging, Avocets prefer relatively deep, open water where they often assemble into rows, driving prey ahead of them as they sweep their bills from side to side just beneath the surface, straining small invertebrates from the water. They take larger prey items as well. Avocets are among the relatively few shorebird species which regularly swim.

The American Avocet nests in alkaline marshes throughout much of western and mid-western North America. It winters from coastal California southward to Guatemala, and along the southern Atlantic Coast of the United States westward through the Gulf Coast at least as far south as Mexico. Non-breeding/"summering" individuals are often encountered lingering along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the United States.

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John James Audubon furnished the first Louisiana record for American Avocet – from Bayou Saint John in New Orleans on November 2, 1819; and then again on Isles Dernieres where he noted three individuals on April 16, 1837. Just over 100 years later, Harry Oberholser characterized this species as but a rare transient in the Louisiana coastal zone, with no authenticated winter records.

By the mid-1900s George Lowery, Jr. reported it as "appearing to increase [in numbers] year to year," and "now common in extreme southwestern Louisiana in winter;" mentioning that none were reported from here between 1899-1940. By 1974, in the third edition of Louisiana Birds, he noted "records for every month of the year."

Presently, the American Avocet maintains a small but regular non-breeding summer presence in coastal Louisiana, but remains uncommon to rare anywhere and at any season within the southeastern coastal zone. Along the southwestern coastal zone it is considered fairly common to common, with numerous records for every week of the year except for the second week of August.

First recorded outside of the coastal zone in the fall of 1949 (75 individuals 2 miles south of Shreveport), the American Avocet is presently considered an uncommon transient in northwestern Louisiana from late winter through early May (with a few June records) and again from mid-July through late-November. Only a few fall records exist from northeastern Louisiana.

Spotted Sandpiper

Actitis macularius

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This smallish, short-billed, short-legged, short-winged sandpiper is most often encountered alone or in small groups (in more favorable foraging areas) along the edges of water bodies of various sizes. When foraging it habitually teeters its posterior up and down, and flies low along the water with characteristically rapid, shallow wingbeats, often uttering its descending "peet-weet-weet-weet" call.

True to its common name, the Spotted Sandpiper possesses numerous dark spots on its white underparts during breeding season, but lacks any spotting whatsoever in non-breeding plumage.

Outside the lower South, the Spotted Sandpiper nests along lake shores and river banks throughout most of the United States and Canada. Its wintering grounds are equally expansive, stretching from the southern United States to southern Brazil and Bolivia. In winter it seems particularly attracted to artificially-constructed cement and rock rubble shorelines. One or more individuals are almost always to be found along rock jetties, oxidation ponds, and sewage treatment facilities.

In 1938, Oberholser characterized this species as "common in migration, rare in summer and winter, mostly in southeastern Louisiana." By 1955, Lowery had slightly refined its Louisiana status as rare only in "mid-summer and mid-winter," with records throughout the coastal zone for every week of the year.

Today, the Spotted Sandpiper is considered fairly common along Louisiana's southeastern coastal zone in every month except June and early July, though isolated records exist from that time period as well. Within the southwestern coastal zone it is uncommon to common nearly year round, with a similar paucity of June and early July records. Northwestern Louisiana records show it to be a fairly common migrant in spring and fall; then uncommon to rare in winter, early spring, and early summer. In northeastern Louisiana it is an uncommon spring and fall migrant, with records trickling into December.

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Solitary Sandpiper

Tringa solitaria

As its common name implies, the Solitary Sandpiper is usually encountered singly, though small groups are occasionally observed together in spring migration along the U.S. Gulf Coast. This mid-sized sandpiper features very dark upperparts speckled with small white dots, crisp white eye-rings, a dark breast, and plain white underparts.

This is the only shorebird species known to nest in trees, routinely using abandoned songbird nests. It nests throughout the sub-Arctic boreal forests across much of Alaska and Canada, and winters from Mexico and the West Indies southward through most of South America. Like the Spotted Sandpiper, it utilizes the margins of most any water body for foraging, often bobbing the front half of its body (vs. the rear half in the Spotted Sandpiper). In migration, it will even check for prey in small rain puddles wherever they may be found, from utility rights-of-ways to urban/suburban ball fields, golf courses – even gravel parking lots!

In non-breeding plumages the Solitary Sandpiper superficially resembles the Spotted Sandpiper in not only appearance but also in habitat preference and foraging behavior. During such periods, the Solitary can be safely separated from the "Spotty" by noting the slower deeper wingbeats of its all-dark wings, its shorter white tail (featuring a dark stripe down the middle and dark bars on its outer tail feathers), and especially by its ascending (vs. descending in the Spotted) "peet-weet-weet" whistle, which it frequently gives when flushed.

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In the early 20th century, Oberholser characterized the Solitary Sandpiper as fairly common throughout Louisiana during migration periods – especially in the eastern part of the state – and casual in winter in the coastal zone. Twenty-five years later, Lowery considered it very common throughout Louisiana during migration, with "some stragglers" in south Louisiana in winter.

Today, this species is considered an uncommon to rare migrant within the southeastern coastal zone, and fairly common to uncommon in the southwest. It is considered common during migration periods in northwestern Louisiana; uncommon in the northeast.

The Yellowlegs

Tringa melanoleuca and Tringa flavipes

Due to their similarity in appearance, habits, distribution, and seasonality, we discuss the **Greater Yellowlegs** (*Tringa melanoleuca*) and **Lesser Yellowlegs** (*Tringa flavipes*) together. Size is the primary distinguishing factor between these two species, with the Greater Yellowlegs approaching the size of a small crow and the Lesser Yellowlegs more like that of a robin. Problems arise when either one is encountered without the other, especially at longer distances. Fortunately such scenarios are relatively rare, as both species tend to forage in the same habitats, and more often than not in the company of several other waterbird species from which relative size comparisons can be made.

Long legs, necks, and bills give both species a lanky appearance. Breeding, non-breeding, and juvenile plumages of both species are strikingly similar. Practiced observers learn to note the perfectly straight bill of the Lesser Yellowlegs versus the slightly upturned bill of the Greater Yellowlegs in order to separate them. Vocalizations are also fairly distinctive between the two, with the "too-too" of the Lesser being flatter, milder, and shorter than the more strident "few-few-few!" of the Greater.

Lesser Yellowlegs

Greg Lavaty

Both Yellowlegs species breed in boreal forest and muskeg habitats through much of middle Canada, with the Lesser Yellowlegs also utilizing the Yukon area in northwestern Canada and Alaska. Both species winter throughout most of the coastal United States southward through most all of South America, using almost any available freshwater habitat from the edges of streams and lakes, to vast marshes and wet agricultural fields.

When foraging, both Yellowlegs can be quite animated compared to most other sandpiper species. Normally, they forage in small groups, maintaining substantial spacing between themselves, constantly walking and even occasionally running to chase down prey, much like the plovers do. At other times, especially when prey items are particularly dense, both species will work more tightly together in small groups, lowering their bills into the water as they move steadily ahead in a sort of plowing motion.

The historical status of the Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs in Louisiana seems somewhat sketchy. In the early part of the 20th century, Oberholser lamented the decline of both Yellowlegs, blaming a combination of over-hunting and habitat loss. He considered the Greater Yellowlegs to be a fairly common migrant statewide, and an uncommon winter resident in south Louisiana.

Referring to the Lesser Yellowlegs as the "Summer Yellowlegs," he fixed its Louisiana status as a common winter resident near the coast, more numerous in migration, and casual in summer within the coastal zone.

By 1955 Lowery considered the Lesser Yellowlegs to be fairly common to abundant statewide in migration, and rare to uncommon in winter and summer within the coastal zone, with records available for every month of the year. He gave the status of the Greater Yellowlegs as common statewide in migration, and fairly common to uncommon within the coastal zone during winter, depending on severity of weather; and by 1974 furnished records for every month of the year.

Today, both Yellowlegs species are considered common through much of the year (rare only between mid-June and early July) throughout the coastal zone of Louisiana. In the northern half of the state, both species are considered common during their protracted spring and fall migration periods, with the Greater Yellowlegs becoming uncommon to rare in mid-winter, and the Lesser Yellowlegs absent altogether in that season.

Greater Yellowlegs

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Upland Sandpiper

Bartramia longicauda

Similar in size, shape, and coloration to the Greater Yellowlegs, this terrestrial sandpiper can be quickly differentiated from the latter by its disproportionately small head, large eyes, short yellow bill, and long dark tail – not to mention its predilection for dry short-grass habitats.

For years, this sandpiper was called the "Upland Plover," undoubtedly due to its terrestrial habits. Like most plovers, it forages rapidly and visually, chasing down insects with its trademark jerky, mechanical, head movements.

The Upland Sandpiper breeds in short-grass prairies, pastures, and meadows throughout the northeastern Great Lakes and Great Plains regions of the United States, northwest through the Canadian prairies up through the Yukon of the Northwest Territories and Alaska. It winters far south in the pampas of southern South America.

As with a number of other large sandpipers, the Upland Sandpiper was once hunted unmercifully by sportsmen and market-hunters alike, who called it the "Field Plover," or "Quailie." In French Louisiana it was known as the *"papabotte"* (pron. "Pop-oh-BAUT"). In Louisiana Birds George Lowery, Jr. mentions, "There is an old French idea that those who eat the flesh of this bird are imbued with extraordinary amatory prowess. Possibly this belief coupled with the delicacy of its flesh was the reason why the papabotte was once killed in such great numbers."

Despite great hunting pressure, both Lowery (1955) and his Louisiana predecessor, Harry Oberholser (1938), fixed the Upland Sandpiper's Louisiana status as a "once abundant; now fairly common" spring and fall migrant through the state. By the late 20th century, with the publication of his 3rd edition of Louisiana Birds, Lowery had upgraded its migratory status to "often quite common."

Currently, the Upland Sandpiper is considered an uncommon to rare spring and fall transient throughout all of Louisiana; perhaps a bit more commonly encountered within the pastures and meadows of our southwestern Louisiana rice country.

Greg Lavaty

Whimbrel

Numenius phaeopus

This crow-sized shorebird possesses a long strongly-decurved bill and can thus be easily separated from most other shorebird species, with the exception of the Long-billed Curlew and the Bristle-thighed Curlew (the latter, a rare North American breeder not yet recorded in Louisiana). However, the Whimbrel differs from these two curlews in possessing a dark crown split down the middle by a fairly wide, cream-colored stripe. Fortunately, this field mark can be noted from rather long distances, for Whimbrels are wary birds, rarely allowing close inspection.

Historically known as the "Hudsonian Curlew," the Whimbrel is a cosmopolitan breeder, nesting in Arctic tundra habitat around the globe, and wintering on all tropical coasts as far south as Chile. Whimbrels utilize a wide assortment of habitat types including marshes, beaches and dunes, rocky shorelines, plains and meadows, as well as wet agricultural fields.

In 1938, Harry Oberholser reported the Whimbrel's Louisiana status as "a rather rare permanent resident on the islands, marshes, and prairies along the coast." He hinged its "permanent resident" status on but a few summer records and only one winter record. By the middle and latter parts of the 20th century, not much had changed regarding this species' Louisiana status, as it was considered common only during spring migration; rare in all other seasons. In 1974 George Lowery, Jr. (Louisiana Birds, 3rd ed.) stated that the Whimbrel was restricted to the coastal parishes in Louisiana, with but one record coming from elsewhere.

Presently, the Whimbrel is considered an uncommon spring and rare fall migrant along Louisiana's southeastern coast, with only a couple of winter records from that area. Within the southwestern coastal zone, its status ranges from fairly common in spring, to uncommon or rare at other seasons. In that part of the state, it has been recorded nearly year round, with the exception of a three-week period between late-June and early-July. Farther inland, many records have piled up since Lowery's time. Today the Whimbrel is an uncommon to fairly common spring migrant through the rice belt of southwestern/central Louisiana; but with very few records coming from elsewhere. One such record involves a very rare fall migration (late August) report from the Upper Ouachita National Wildlife Refuge in Union Parish, north of Monroe, LA.

Greg Lavaty

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Long-billed Curlew

Numenius americanus

The aptly-named Long-billed Curlew possesses a bill bordering on "grotesquely-long." Weighing in at 1.3 lbs., with a wingspan of nearly three-feet, this Mallard-sized species is North America's largest shorebird. In flight, its broad wings beat shallowly but strongly; the upper surfaces showing broad rufous-brown patches on the secondaries and inner primaries, and the undersides a beautiful cinnamon-buff color.

This species traditionally nests in the short-grass prairies of southwestern Canada and the western U.S. Great Plains and Great Basin regions. Northwestern shorebird expert Dennis Paulson states that it is fortunate that the Long-billed Curlew has adapted to short grain fields and pastures as well. Relatively few Long-billed Curlews winter along the Pacific and Gulf coasts of the United States and Mexico, with the bulk of the population spending winters in the arid grasslands of the interior southwestern United States and Mexico.

In 1938 (The Bird Life of Louisiana) ornithologist Harry C. Oberholser states that the Long-billed Curlew was formerly "very much more abundant, but now a rare winter resident; casual [occasional] in summer." Once legislation had been passed to protect most shorebird species, Long-billed Curlew numbers began to rise. By 1955, George Lowery, Jr. called it "not uncommon" along the coast and adjacent meadows from late July through late May; especially numerous in migration periods, with a few [non-breeding] found in summer, and moderate numbers in midwinter.

Reporting its Cajun French name as *corbigeau*, Lowery summarizes the feeling that all Louisiana birders who have been fortunate enough to see "and hear"this wary, magnificent bird at relatively close range: ". . . there are few natural sounds more thrilling than this bird's clear, mellow whistle, a cur-lee, cur-lee. Indeed, I pity the man who has never in his lifetime stood alone on an ocean shore, far from the usual discordant sounds of our civilization, and watched curlew probing their bills into the sand and giving out their wild cries at the slightest alarm."

Currently, the Long-billed Curlew is considered occasional/irregular year round along the southeastern Louisiana coast, and uncommon to common depending on season, on the southwestern coast. As recently as 1974, only one inland Louisiana record existed (October 1953 at Wallace Lake near Shreveport) for this species. Today, the Shreveport area has added only a couple of additional records; one in early September and another in late December. Undoubtedly arising from increased observer coverage within the southwestern and south-central Louisiana rice country, a smattering of spring, fall, and winter records presently exist for this species.

Greg Lavaty

The Godwits

Limosa haemastica and Limosa fedoa

Greg Lavaty

Hudsonian Godwit

Godwits are relatively large-bodied shorebirds possessing long, slightly-upturned bills. One of the less common North American shorebird species, the **Hudsonian Godwit** (*Limosa haemastica*) nests in but a few scattered populations within the Arctic tundra in coastal Alaska, the coast of the Northwest Territories, and along southern shores of Hudson Bay in Canada. Its wintering grounds are restricted to the coastal flats and pampas marshes of southern South America.

From the beginning of ornithological record-keeping in Louisiana in the 19th century and on through the middle of the 20th century, the Hudsonian Godwit was considered the rarest of our regularly-occurring migrant shorebirds. As with numerous other shorebirds, market hunting had taken its toll on this species. In 1938, Harry Oberholser reported only three definite Louisiana records for the Hudsonian Godwit. By 1955, only two additional observations had been reported, including one inland record from Shreveport in May of 1951.

By 1974, over 50 years after federal protection for most shorebird species was enacted, George Lowery, Jr. upgraded the Hudsonian Godwit's Louisiana status from very rare to uncommon, mentioning that "Enough records have accumulated to make me feel confident that the species can be located every spring by a careful search in the rice fields of southwestern Louisiana," yet even by then, only five fall records had been turned in.

Today, we have come to understand that the Hudsonian Godwit's migration path through the Gulf Coast runs more through eastern Texas than in Louisiana. Thus, along

Louisiana's southeastern coast, only several records exist during this species' spring migration period in April and May, and again during fall migration in September and October. On the other hand, being contiguous with the coast of southeastern Texas, records are far more numerous along Louisiana's southwestern coast. There, it is considered an uncommon but regular spring migrant, particularly between mid-April and mid-May.

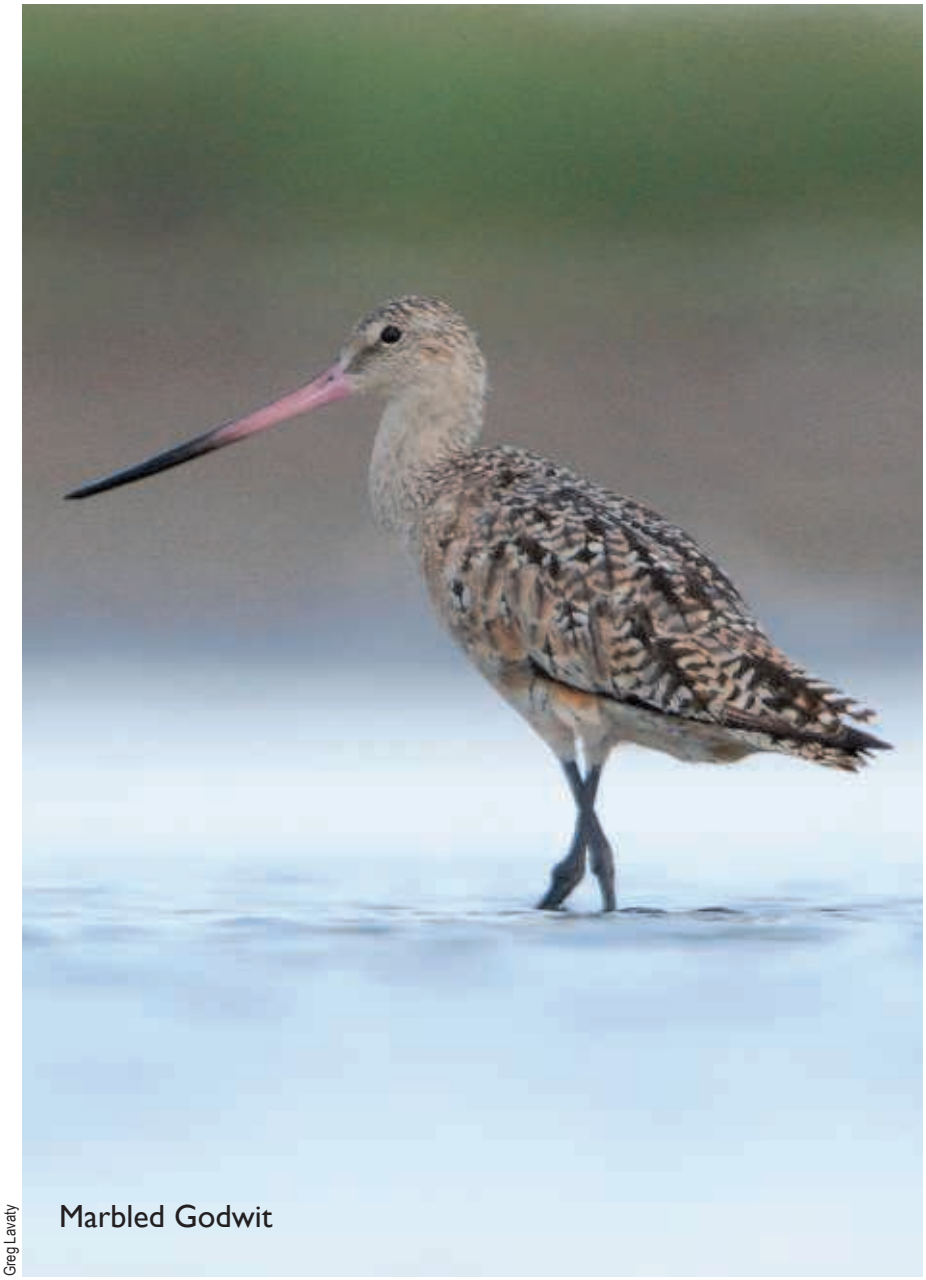
Interestingly – just as Lowery had predicted – in the rice country just a bit inland from Louisiana's southwestern coast, this species' current spring status is put at uncommon-to-fairly-common primarily from mid-April through mid-May, along with a number of late spring and early to mid-summer records as well.

As with the Hudsonian Godwit, the **Marbled Godwit's (***Limosa fedoa***)** North American breeding range is spotty, limited to the moister grasslands of the northern Great Plains and in a few tundra habitats in southwestern Alaska and at the southern end of James Bay in the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Nineteenth century market hunting nearly extirpated this largest of all godwit species as well, but it recovered more quickly than did the Hudsonian Godwit, and is presently substantially more populous, wintering primarily along the Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf coasts of the U.S. and Mexico.

Up through the early 20th century, Oberholser reported the Marbled Godwit as a very rare winter resident in southern Louisiana, "reported by several authors, but with only two definite records," both from Sabine Station in southwestern Louisiana's Calcasieu Parish in November, 1885 and December, 1888.

By the mid-20th century, Lowery reported more numerous Marbled Godwit records (all coastal) during both spring and fall migration periods; and by 1974 added that it had by then been recorded on the coast in every month of the year, and also mentioning two inland records – both from the LSU campus in Baton Rouge.

Presently the Marbled Godwit is considered an uncommon winter resident, and fairly common spring and fall migrant along the southeastern Louisiana coast. On our southwestern coast it is considered uncommon to fairly common nearly year round, being recorded in every week except for the last week of June. Inland, it is uncommonly recorded in spring and fall migration within the rice belt of southwestern/central Louisiana, with rare fall records up into northwestern Louisiana.



Marbled Godwit

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Ruddy Turnstone

Arenaria interpres

Boldly patterned in both breeding and non-breeding plumages, this robin-sized shorebird is easily identified as it mingles with Sanderlings and other shorebirds along its favored beach habitats. Nicknamed the "calico back," the Ruddy Turnstone is a truly cosmopolitan species. It breeds in Arctic tundra habitats in both eastern and western hemispheres. Likewise, it winters worldwide on temperate and tropical coasts.

Its short bill is stout and pointed, adapted for prying mollusks from rocks and reefs. It also uses its strong bill to turn over (thus its common name) beach debris in search of other prey items. Though its legs are short and thick, it moves quickly as it forages, often running through foraging flocks of other shorebirds, animatedly flipping all manner of debris into the air in its wake.

Up through the mid-20th century this shorebird was actually included within the plover family, due undoubtedly to its plover-like appearance, rapidity of movement, and foraging habits. Today, it is more properly placed in the sandpiper family (Scolopacidae).

The Ruddy Turnstone has always been a fairly common permanent resident throughout Louisiana's entire coastline and barrier island beaches. It is obviously far more common during migration periods than in either summer or winter, yet at least a few can be found on almost any Louisiana beach year round. George Lowery, Jr. suspected that the main spring migration route for those Ruddy Turnstones overwintering around the Gulf of Mexico proceeded eastward across the northern Gulf Coast, through peninsular Florida, and then up the Atlantic Coast en route to the Canadian Arctic.

As late as 1974 (Louisiana Birds, 3rd ed.), only three inland Louisiana records existed for this beach-loving species – two from Baton Rouge and one from Shreveport. More recently, however, increased observer coverage has resulted in a substantial number of spring and fall migration records from the rice belt in southwestern/central Louisiana, and up into the northwestern portion of the state.

Greg Lavaty

Red Knot

Calidris canutus

Once known as the "American Knot" or simply "Knot," this husky Killdeer-sized sandpiper is yet another globally cosmopolitan species, breeding in both Old World and New World Arctic tundra habitats, and wintering along tropical and sub-tropical coasts stretching from the Americas to western Europe and Africa and all the way south into Australia.

Although some references list mud flats as the preferred substrate for the Red Knot, most Louisiana observations are from open, sandy beaches – often in the company of Sanderlings and Ruddy Turnstones. In its relatively bright "burnt-salmon" breeding plumage the Red Knot is not difficult to pick out from amongst the other "beach pipers;" but in its drab gray non-breeding plumage, identification problems may arise. At such times, the combination of the Red Knot's relatively large body size and relatively short, straight bill may assist in differentiating it from other beach-loving shorebirds.

In 1938 Oberholser characterized the "American Knot" as a rare migrant and occasional summer visitor at many of the beaches and barrier islands of coastal Louisiana. At that time, however, he mentioned only two record locations west of the Mermentau River along the southwestern coast, and no definite winter records at all from Louisiana.

By 1955 Lowery reported the "Knot" as "never common, but encountered regularly at Grand Isle during migration periods, with a few remaining in cold months." Some 20 years later he considered it to be "regular at Grand Isle and Cameron during migration periods," and had accumulated records for all winter months along the coast, as well as three inland records (Baton Rouge, Natchitoches, and Shreveport).

Presently, the Louisiana status for Red Knot remains essentially the same as in Lowery's day. Along the southeastern coast and barrier islands it is considered uncommon in spring and fall migration, rare in summer and winter. Along the southwestern coast it is uncommon to rare from late March through early June and from mid-July through mid-November. Inland sightings remain quite rare and confined to migration periods.

The Rufa subspecies of Red Knot is now listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act, presumably the same subspecies that migrates through Louisiana. Biologists are now ramping up efforts to identify Louisiana's Red Knots to subspecies and more fully define the ecological needs of these birds.

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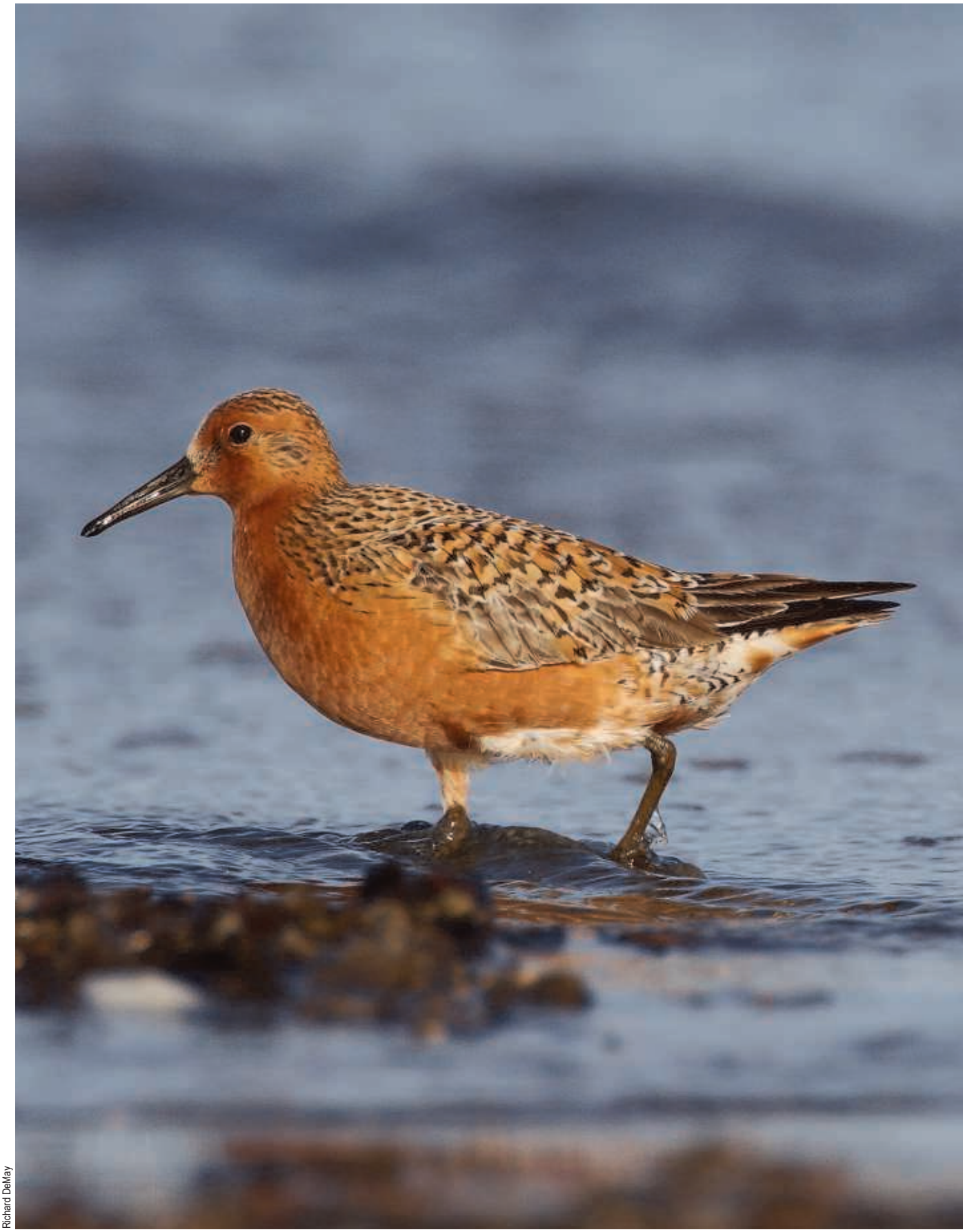

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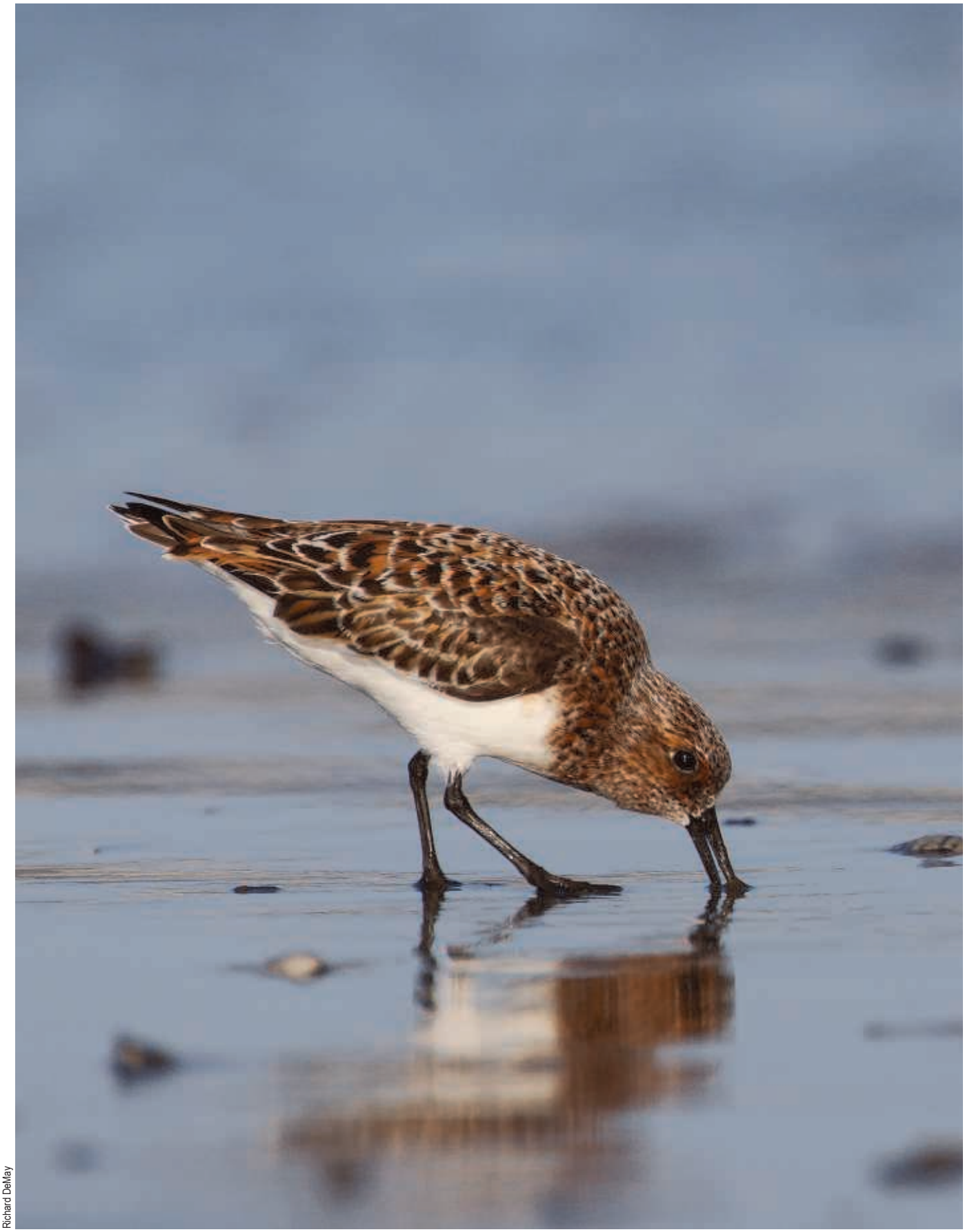

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Sanderling

Calidris alba

Richard DeMay

By far the most commonly-observed beach shorebird, the Sanderling is seldom encountered elsewhere. Slightly smaller than a Red-winged Blackbird, this species is relatively short-legged and short-billed compared to most other sandpipers. When foraging on open beaches, the Sanderling moves speedily and mechanically, dashing into freshly-flooded sand upon the departure of each wave, and retreating just as quickly with the arrival of the next.

Sanderlings nest in high-Arctic habitats worldwide, and spend their winters along most all temperate and tropical coasts. In testimony to the expansiveness of the Sanderling's migrations, shorebird expert Dennis Paulson wrote, "Thus far this is the only shorebird species in which the same color-banded individual has been observed on both the Pacific (spring) and Atlantic (fall) coasts of North America during its annual [migration] cycle."

In Louisiana winters, this small, pale bird is almost always observed within the surf zone of our beaches, or else resting on tidal flats behind. Come spring, its pale plumage transforms to bright rust-colored head and breast, complimented by blackish back feathers etched with rufous or white, all set off sharply by a pure-white belly and jet black legs. Lucky is the observer who chances to encounter a Sanderling in this plumage phase.

Greg Lavaty

Along the southeastern Louisiana coast the Sanderling is common in every month except June and July, when non-breeding/"summering" birds are decidedly uncommon but still regularly encountered. Along our southwestern coast it is considered fairly common to common nearly year round, being recorded in every week with the exception of the last week of June. Migrating Sanderling encounters are rare anywhere in inland Louisiana, but they are occasionally observed in muddy rice fields in the southwestern region in spring or fall. Only four migratory Sanderling records exist for northwestern Louisiana; none for the northeast.

The "Peeps"

"Peep" is a nickname used by birders for any one of five small-bodied, short-billed, short-legged, similar-looking North American sandpipers: Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, and Baird's Sandpiper. The name "peep" is derived from the chick-like or duckling-like flight calls produced by some of the species in this group.

While it is true that these five species bear a superficial resemblance to one another, patient and careful study at short distances through good optical equipment will solve most identification challenges posed by these birds. Fortunately, all five of these species regularly occur in Louisiana; two of which (Western and Least sandpipers) are present here in good numbers for at least 10 months out of each year. Consistent study of these two species in all of their various plumage phases goes a long way toward understanding the critical field marks necessary to distinguish all five species.

With a House Sparrow-sized body (but much longer wings), the **Semipalmated Sandpiper** (*Calidris pusilla*) possesses the shortest and most-blunt bill of the peeps. Even so, there is substantial overlap of bill length between this species and its closest look-alike, the Western Sandpiper. In foraging behavior Semipalmateds tend to move more quickly, picking prey off of the mud or sand surface, whereas Westerns tend to move slowly, methodically probing – often in belly-deep water. Also, the flight vocalization of the Semipalmated is a decidedly "un-peep-like" "chut" or "chert!" versus

Semipalmated Sandpiper

Greg Lavaty

White-rumped Sandpiper

Greg Lavaty

the "tcheet!" of the Western.

Semipalmated Sandpipers breed throughout the North American Arctic region from the North Slope of Alaska eastward through Prince Edward Island off the northern Atlantic coast. In migration, they travel mostly through the eastern United States en route to their wintering grounds in the Caribbean and northern South America. During late-fall migrations, a significant proportion of Semipalmateds and Westerns possess very nearly identical bill lengths. This, combined with their nearly identical non-breeding plumage patterns, makes separating those with similar bill lengths a hazardous exercise. For many years, shorter-billed Westerns were routinely being misidentified as Semipalmateds during the winter months here in the United States.

In fact it was not until the mid-1970s that this rather common error was revealed. In his detailed continent-wide work (1975; Semipalmated Sandpiper: identification, migrations, summer and winter ranges. American Birds 29: 799-806) with the Semipalmated Sandpiper, ornithologist Allan Phillips pointed out that not only did bill lengths differ between male (shorter) and female (longer) birds, but that overall bill length within the species increased from west to east across its North American breeding grounds. As a result Phillips found that the bill lengths of many eastern female Semipalmateds actually exceeded the bill lengths of many male Western Sandpipers!

Thus, it is not surprising that nearly 40 years prior to this discovery, Oberholser (The Bird Life of Louisiana 1938) called the Semipalmated Sandpiper a "common to locally abundant winter resident" in Louisiana. Interestingly, though, he furnished no winter specimen records. Likewise, Lowery (Louisiana Birds 1955 and 1974) mentioned that Semipalmated Sandpiper's "midwinter numbers [are] variable," even while conceding that winter-plumaged Semipalmateds and Westerns were difficult to distinguish in the field. Today, we understand that Semipalmated Sandpipers are simply not to be found anywhere in the United States, except during migration.

Presently, the Semipalmated Sandpiper is a fairly common spring migrant and uncommon fall migrant along Louisiana's southeastern coastal zone. Within the southwestern coastal zone it is considered fairly common in both spring and fall migration periods. In northwestern Louisiana it is a fairly common mi-

Western Sandpiper

Greg Lavaty

grant from May through early-June and from July through mid-October. In northeastern Louisiana, Semipalmated Sandpiper records vary from rare to common during late spring and early summer, and mostly uncommon from August through late October.

At 6.5-inches in length, the **Western Sandpiper** (*Calidris mauri*) averages a mere quarter-inch longer than the Semipalmated; but this minuscule size difference is perceptible when the two species are viewed side-by-side. As previously mentioned, most Westerns are longer-billed as well, with the bills of females most often possessing slightly drooped tips. Importantly, Westerns retain rust-colored scapular feathers in most plumages except in adult winter (non-breeding) plumage. Compared to all other peeps, non-breeding Westerns possess the "cleanest" less extensively-marked faces.

Unlike Semipalms, Western Sandpipers nest in a very limited area of low tundra along the coastal plain of western Alaska and northeastern Siberia. The winter range of the Western is quite large; and unlike the Semipalmated Sandpiper, includes most of the coastal United States and Mexico in addition to northern South America.

In Louisiana, Oberholser (1938) considered the Western Sandpiper "a rare winter resident," undoubtedly mistaking most winter (male) Westerns for Semipalms. By the mid-20th century, Lowery characterized the Western Sandpiper more properly as "abundant on the coast August through late-May" and "occurs in small [non-breeding] numbers even in June and July."

Currently, the Western Sandpiper is considered abundant during spring and fall migration, common in winter, and rare in summer within the coastal zone of southeastern Louisiana. Within the southwestern coastal zone it is considered fairly common to common year round except for the month of June. North Louisiana records show it to be a common fall migrant (late-July – September), and uncommon to rare in spring (mid-April – early-May). In northeastern Louisiana it has been recorded in December on a number of occasions.

Least Sandpiper

Greg Lavaty

Averaging 6" in body length, the **Least Sandpiper** (*Calidris minutilla*) is not only the smallest peep, but also the smallest shorebird species in the world. In breeding plumage, the Least Sandpiper closely approximates that of the Semipalmated Sandpiper; and in winter plumage, it can superficially resemble both the Semipalmated and Western sandpipers. In general, however, the bill of the Least Sandpiper is somewhat finer in structure, and tapering to a more pointed tip than that of the others. In all plumages, the more densely-streaked face, neck, and breast of the Least Sandpiper stand out as "dirty" compared with that of the Semipalmated and especially that of the Western. Most importantly, the leg color of the Least Sandpiper is a dull-yellow in all plumages whereas that of the Semipalm and Western is jet-black in all plumages. Thus, given a good look at the legs, the Least Sandpiper can be easily differentiated from the other two in any season.

In foraging, the Least Sandpiper is most often found on mud substrates, either bare or sparsely-vegetated, and on occasion even shallowly-flooded, where it gleans and probes for prey. The high-pitched, somewhat musical "preep!" flight call of the Least Sandpiper is the most "peep-like" of the group.

The Least Sandpiper nests in boreal forest habitats throughout all of Alaska and Canada, and winters along and well-inland of the Pacific, southern Atlantic, and Gulf coasts of the United States and Mexico southward into northern South America.

Back in the early 20th century, Oberholser characterized the Least

Least Sandpiper

Greg Lavaty

Sandpiper as a "common permanent resident; less numerous in summer," and "fairly-common in central and northern Louisiana in migration." Two decades later, as more records accumulated, George Lowery, Jr. called it "the commonest and most widespread" of all the peep species in Louisiana. Throughout our entire coastal zone, its current Louisiana status is similar to that of Lowery's day: fairly common from early-July through early-June; rare only from mid-June through first week of July; and uncommon to fairly common from early-July through early-May in northern Louisiana. Only one June record from the northwestern quadrant of the state is presently on file.

Averaging 7.5-inches in length, the **White-rumped Sandpiper** (*Calidris fuscicollis*) is notably larger than the three previously-discussed peeps. Otherwise, it can appear distressingly similar to the previous three in all its plumages, save for its longer wings which, unlike the other three, extend noticeably beyond its tail when they are folded, resulting in an overall slimmer look, with a more attenuated posterior. The "clinching" field mark for this species, however, is its unmarked pure-white rump – easily seen when the bird takes flight.

The White-rumped Sandpiper breeds in the Arctic tundra of north-central Canada, and winters far south in southern South America. As with the American Golden Plover and several other shorebird species, most White-rumpeds migrate southward over the western Atlantic Ocean in fall, but back through the middle of the North American continent in spring.

Also known as the "Bonaparte Sandpiper" back in the early 20th century, Oberholser characterized the White-rumped Sandpiper's Louisiana status as a fairly-common but local transient, regularly recorded throughout our coastal zone March-June, and again in August in fall migration. Back then, no records existed for this species in the northern half of the state. Later in the 20th century, Lowery considered its status to be similar to that of Oberholser's but "not common until late-May after most other transient shorebirds have moved north," routinely noting "throngs in the rice belt" of inland southwestern Louisiana, and appearing "regularly at the Natchitoches Fish Hatchery and other places" in northern Louisiana. Contrary to Oberholser, Lowery gave only one fall migration record (August 13, 1968 at New Orleans) from Louisiana.

Today, the White-rumped Sandpiper is considered a fairly common spring (May through early-June) migrant within Louisiana's southeastern coastal zone, with isolated fall migration records from July through early-September. Within the southwestern Louisiana coastal zone it is considered a rare (April) to common (May through mid-June) spring migrant, and uncommon fall migrant (latter half of September). In northwestern Louisiana it is considered an uncommon migrant between late-April and June, with isolated fall migration records from mid-July and August. In northeastern Louisiana, records exist for spring migration only.

Like the White-rumped Sandpiper, **Baird's Sandpiper** (*Calidris bairdii*) is notably larger-bodied and longer-winged than the other (Semipalmated, Western, and Least) peeps; with the folded wings on standing individuals extending even further past the tail than in the White-rumped, resulting in a similar-

ly sleek and attenuated appearance. Spring-migrating Baird's Sandpipers possess a characteristic buff-colored cast to their breeding plumage, particularly so on the neck and breast, allowing them to be distinguished from other peep species with relative ease during that season. George Lowery, Jr. (Louisiana Birds 1955) gave the flight call of Baird's as an unmusical "kreep-kreep."

Baird's is an Arctic tundra breeder from Alaska eastward through north-central Canada. Like the White-rumped Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper winters in far-southern South America; but with Baird's, both fall and spring migratory routes pass through a relatively narrow band through the center of the North American continent. Migrating juvenile Baird's are known to utilize both the U.S. Atlantic and Pacific Coasts as well. Generally, Baird's Sandpipers prefer drier habitats than the other peeps, where they forage much in the style of plovers, with rapid, short forays, abrupt stops, and quick picking actions with their bills.

Through 1938, only one published record of Baird's Sandpiper (Cameron Parish, April 1926) existed for all of Louisiana. By 1955 Lowery had compiled numerous records for it, calling it a "rare spring and uncommon fall transient (March-May and September-November)" in our state, mentioning the bulk of migration as occurring "to our west." By 1974 (Louisiana Birds 3rd ed.), he had upgraded its spring status from "rare" to uncommon, and mentioned a number of northwestern Louisiana records as well.

Presently, Baird's Sandpiper is considered rare (last week of March) to fairly common (April through mid-May) spring migrant, and uncommon (late-July through October) fall migrant within Louisiana's southwestern coastal zone; rare in both spring and fall along our southeastern coastal zone. In northwestern Louisiana it is characterized as uncommon in both spring (mid-March through late-May) and fall (late-July through late-October) migration periods. No records for this species exist from northeastern Louisiana.

Baird's Sandpiper

Greg Lavaty

Pectoral Sandpiper

Calidris melanotos

About the size of a Red-winged Blackbird, but with a more robust shape, the Pectoral Sandpiper resembles a double-sized Least Sandpiper in most respects, with its densely-streaked neck and breast very abruptly terminating above a pure white belly, resulting in a dramatic line of demarcation between these two areas that quickly catches the eye of any observer. In body size, the Pectoral Sandpiper exhibits a greater degree of sexual dimorphism (males far larger than females) than in any other shorebird. This is primarily due to the fact that males possess inflatable sacs above their breasts, which they use in courtship displays.

Pectoral Sandpipers nest in wet-tundra habitat from central Siberia all the way across Canada eastward through Hudson Bay. They winter far into southern South America, with scattered reports from New Zealand and Australia as well. Their North American migration route is elliptical in shape, hugging the Atlantic coast in fall, and then up through the middle of the continent in spring. As with Baird's Sandpiper, juvenile Pectorals regularly stray to both Atlantic and Pacific Coasts during migration.

Prior to the passage of protective legislation, the Pectoral Sandpiper was heavily hunted by both sportsmen and market-hunters, and thus one of the better-known shorebirds. In The Bird Life of Louisiana (1938), Oberholser gave "Grass Bird," "Jack Snipe," and "Creaker," as hunter-generated nicknames for this species, and considered it to be a still-common spring and fall transient through Louisiana. Only five years later, however, E. A. McIlhenny (Auk Vol. 60) lamented that the "churook" (the Cajun French name for this species) had "almost disappeared" from southern Louisiana, commenting that it was once "probably the most plentiful of all sandpipers" here.

A dozen years after McIlhenny's report, George Lowery, Jr. (Louisiana Birds 1955) maintained that the Pectoral Sandpiper was at "certain seasons one of our commonest sandpipers; and almost as numerous inland as on the coast," also mentioning its predilection for wet grassy habitats, "though not entirely averse to muddy" situations. By the 3rd edition of Louisiana Birds (1974) Lowery stated that Louisiana records for the Pectoral Sandpiper existed for every month of the year except January and June.

Today, the Pectoral Sandpiper is considered a fairly common migrant for six months out of each year (March-May; August-October) throughout most all of Louisiana.

Greg Lavaty

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Greg Lavaty

Dunlin

Calidris alpina

Slightly smaller than a Red-winged Blackbird, the Dunlin was once known as the "Red-backed Sandpiper" due to the bright-rufous upperparts of its breeding plumage. This mark, combined with an extensive, jet-black belly patch and medium-long gently-decurved bill make this species easy to recognize during spring migration. On the other hand, non-breeding plumage birds are about as nondescript as a shorebird can get, featuring unmarked dull-brown upperparts and breast, and dingy-white bellies. At such times, it's important to note the bill shape and length, along with the bird's size relative to other known species (yellowlegs, dowitchers, peeps) with which it often associates.

The Dunlin breeds on Arctic tundra habitat worldwide and winters along all northern hemisphere coasts, including the Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf coasts of the United States and Mexico.

In Louisiana, Dunlins are most attracted to mud flats in rice fields, marshes, and along the coast itself; methodically picking and probing their way over the mud, often into belly-deep water. As with the Stilt Sandpiper and Long-billed Dowitcher, the Dunlin's shallow water probing often becomes so rapid that the bird appears to be "stitching" like the needle of a sewing machine.

From the earliest days of record-keeping through the present,

Richard DeMay

the Dunlin has always been considered a common to locally abundant winter species throughout the coastal zone of Louisiana. Oberholser (1938) called it "casual in summer;" but Lowery (1955) reported it as absent from our state between May and early December. This disparity in summer status seems strange, given the Dunlin's unmistakable summer plumage pattern. Perhaps its summer status actually changed within the 17 year hiatus between the reports of these two ornithologists.

Of similar intrigue is Lowery's 1955 (Louisiana Birds, 1st ed.) comment that this species was "common on the coast but rare inland," as the Dunlin is quite common well-inland throughout the rice country today. By the third edition of Louisiana Birds (1974) Lowery had noted but a handful of fall/early winter records from inland locations such as Baton Rouge and Natchitoches, and only one spring record from Shreveport.

Today, within the southeastern coastal zone of Louisiana, the Dunlin is considered a common winter species and an abundant spring and fall migrant. Along the southwestern coast and inland through the rice country it is considered uncommon to common from the second week of September through May. Historically, northern Louisiana records for Dunlin were generally lacking, with only one report filed from Shreveport in May of 1953. Today, northwestern Louisiana records indicate it to be an uncommon spring (April-May) and fall (August-October) migrant. In northeastern Louisiana, records exist only from the rice fields of Richland Parish, where it is considered an uncommon winter bird (mid-October through mid-January).

Stilt Sandpiper

Calidris himantopus

With its long yellow-green legs and long slightly-decurved bill, this Red-winged Blackbird-sized species is the epitome of a "generic" sandpiper. In spring breeding plumage its pale body is heavily streaked and barred with blackish markings, set off beautifully by a reddish cap and cheek, divided by a bright white "eyebrow." In non-breeding plumage, the Stilt Sandpiper is quite nondescript – similar to that of a non-breeding Dunlin. In such plumages, and especially when the long legs of the Stilt Sandpiper are hidden underwater, it can look distressingly similar to the shorter-legged Dunlin, with only fine differences in bill shape (relatively straight but drooping at the tip on Stilt Sandpiper versus gently-decurved throughout on Dunlin) separating the two.

Greg Lavaty

The Stilt Sandpiper nests throughout North America's Arctic tundra region. It winters from the Caribbean southward through most of South America; less commonly so along the northern rim of the Gulf of Mexico, including the coastal zones of southern Texas, Florida, and Louisiana.

In The Bird Life of Louisiana (1938), Oberholser considered the Stilt Sandpiper to be a rare spring and fall transient in southern Louisiana, mentioning only five definite records, including one by John James Audubon on April 4, 1837 of "30 individuals on the southern shores of Barataria Island." By the mid-20th century Lowery had upgraded its Louisiana status to a "not uncommon" spring and fall transient statewide, mentioning but one winter record.

Presently, the Stilt Sandpiper is a fairly common spring and fall migrant and a rare winter resident through Louisiana's coastal zone; completely absent only for a short period in mid-summer. North Louisiana records show it to be an uncommon transient, with spring records lacking from the northeastern quadrant.

This mid-sized terrestrial sandpiper features a short bill, medium-length yellow legs, and plain buff face, neck, and underparts in all its seasonal plumages. Most observers agree that one of the most telling identification clues involve the Buff-breasted's black eyes standing out prominently against its unmarked pale-buff face. In foraging, the Buff-breasted appears erect and plover-like, but works at a slower more sandpiper-like pace.

Greg Lavaty

Greg Lavaty

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Buff-breasted Sandpiper

Tryngites subruficollis

The Buff-breasted Sandpiper breeds in dry Arctic tundra habitats along the northeastern coast of Alaska and northern Canada, and winters far south in the pampas of Argentina. It is the only North American shorebird to form leks during the breeding season, with up to 20 males at a time gathering to display.

Fortunately for Louisiana birders, this species' primary spring and fall migratory pathway runs straight through the middle of the United States, which includes most of our state. In migration through Louisiana, the Buff-breasted can turn up at almost any short-grass or dry bare-soil situation statewide. For this reason it is often missed by shorebirders who are focusing more on wet fields where most other sandpipers occur. That said, one of the best places to find Buff-breasteds is in southwestern Louisiana's rice belt during spring when newly-germinated rice is in the process of being flooded. In such situations, other sandpipers flock into the newly-flooded areas, picking off distressed terrestrial insects and other invertebrates flushed up in the inundation. Meanwhile, lines of Buff-breasteds can be found patrolling the dry-wet margins of the flood, gradually retreating landward as the water advances.

Greg Lavaty

Through the early part of the 20th century, Oberholser reported the Buff-breasted Sandpiper to be a rare spring and fall transient and casual winter resident (the latter probably based on a single record from Cameron Parish on February 27, 1919) throughout Louisiana's coastal zone, with no records from the central and northern parts of the state. Referring to this species as the "Robin Snipe" or "Vent Rouge" ("red belly" in Cajun French), E. A. McIlhenny declared it "once common; now completely absent" from southern Louisiana as of 1943.

Twelve years later, in his first edition of Louisiana Birds, George Lowery, Jr. clarified the Buff-breasted's state status, writing, "...until a few years ago, [it] was considered a very rare transient...now that its habitat preferences are better understood, however, it is found regularly in both small and large flocks."

Today, the Buff-breasted Sandpiper is considered a rare to uncommon spring and fall transient within Louisiana's southeastern coastal zone; uncommon to fairly common within the southwestern quadrant. In northern Louisiana it is considered a rare to uncommon fall migrant, with only three total spring reports on record from the northwestern quadrant.

The Dowitchers

Limnodromus scolopaceus & Limnodromus griseus

Long-billed, short-legged, and robust – even "dumpy" – in appearance, these Killdeer-sized sandpipers carry perhaps the most poorly-considered common names, for there is simply too much overlap in bill length between the **Long-billed Dowitcher** (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) and the **Short-billed Dowitcher** (*Limnodromus griseus*) to safely separate the two based on this character.

Until nearly the middle of the 20th century the Long-billed Dowitcher was considered a mere subspecies of the Short-billed Dowitcher. The Long-billed Dowitcher breeds in tundra habitats in a very limited area along the northern coasts of Alaska and the adjacent Northwest Territories of Canada. Conversely, it winters over a large geographical area which includes the entire Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf coastal zones of North America.

The Short-billed Dowitcher breeds in wet boreal forest openings, and in three distinct populations including the Yukon of Alaska, central Canada, and the Canadian Maritimes of Quebec and Newfoundland, respectively. All populations winter in the salt-marshes and marine estuaries along all U.S., Caribbean, and Mexican coasts, down through northern South America.

In all seasons, these two dowitchers possess nearly identical body structure and plumage patterns. In breeding plumages, very subtle differences can sometimes be distinguished at close range. Chief among these involves the rufous-orange

Long-billed Dowitcher

Greg Lavaty

Short-billed Dowitcher

Greg Lavaty

belly of the Long-billed versus the white belly of the Short-billed – with the caveat that the "prairie" race of the latter species does not possess any white on the belly. In any of the other plumages, however, all bets are off, as juveniles and wintering birds of both species generally possess much white on their bellies. During fall migration, some shorebird experts can separate juvenile dowitchers based on the width/amount of pale barring that alternates with dark barring on the tertial wing feathers and outer tail feathers (thinner/less white on the Long-billed versus wider/more white on the Short-billed) of the two.

Within the wintering grounds of these two species, the Short-billed exhibits a decided preference for coastal marine habitats whereas the Long-billed is most often found in freshwater wetlands. Indeed, in Louisiana, winter Short-billeds are almost always found directly on the coast along estuarine sandbars, salt-marshes, and mangrove swamp openings; whereas Long-billeds range a bit farther inland into the freshwater marshes and rice fields of the interior. Again, though, during migration periods all bets are off, as both species can be found in just about any open wetland habitat – fresh, brackish, or salt.

Ultimately, the surest and safest way to differentiate these two dowitchers is by their voices. Long-billeds give a harsher "keek!" (often sounding like, "keekeekeekee!" when an entire flock takes flight) whereas Short-billeds utter a much softer, mellower "tututu" (often sounding more like, "doodoodoo").

Prior to the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918, Dowitchers were heavily hunted by sportsmen and market hunters; and given a variety of colloquial names including "Robin Snipe," "Quail Snipe," "German Snipe," and "Gray Snipe." In south Louisiana they were known by Cajun French hunters as "Dormeur" or "sleepy one," due perhaps to their habit of sleeping – bills tucked duck-style beneath wings – in large groups for long hours each day.

Regardless of historical hunting pressure, both dowitcher species have always been considered common in fall, winter, and spring throughout most of Louisiana's coastal zone. During the summer months some non-breeding Short-billed Dowitchers tend to linger on the coast, whereas the Long-billed Dowitcher is absent from late May through mid-July. In northern Louisiana, the Long-billed Dowitcher is an uncommon winter resident; more common during migration periods. The Short-billed Dowitcher is considered a rare migrant in the northwestern quadrant; unrecorded in the northeast.

Wilson's Snipe

Gallinago delicata

Similar to the dowitchers in size and structure, Wilson's Snipe is perhaps the best-known shorebird in North America. Still known as the Common Snipe by some, market hunters also gave this bird nicknames such as "Jack Snipe," and "English Snipe."

Wilson's Snipe breeds in the tundra throughout all of Alaska and Canada south of the Arctic Circle, down into the marshes of the Great Basin, northern Great Plains, Great Lakes, and northeastern portions of the United States. Its wintering range is even larger, encompassing nearly all of the continental United States south of its breeding range, as well as all of Mexico and Central America down into northern South America.

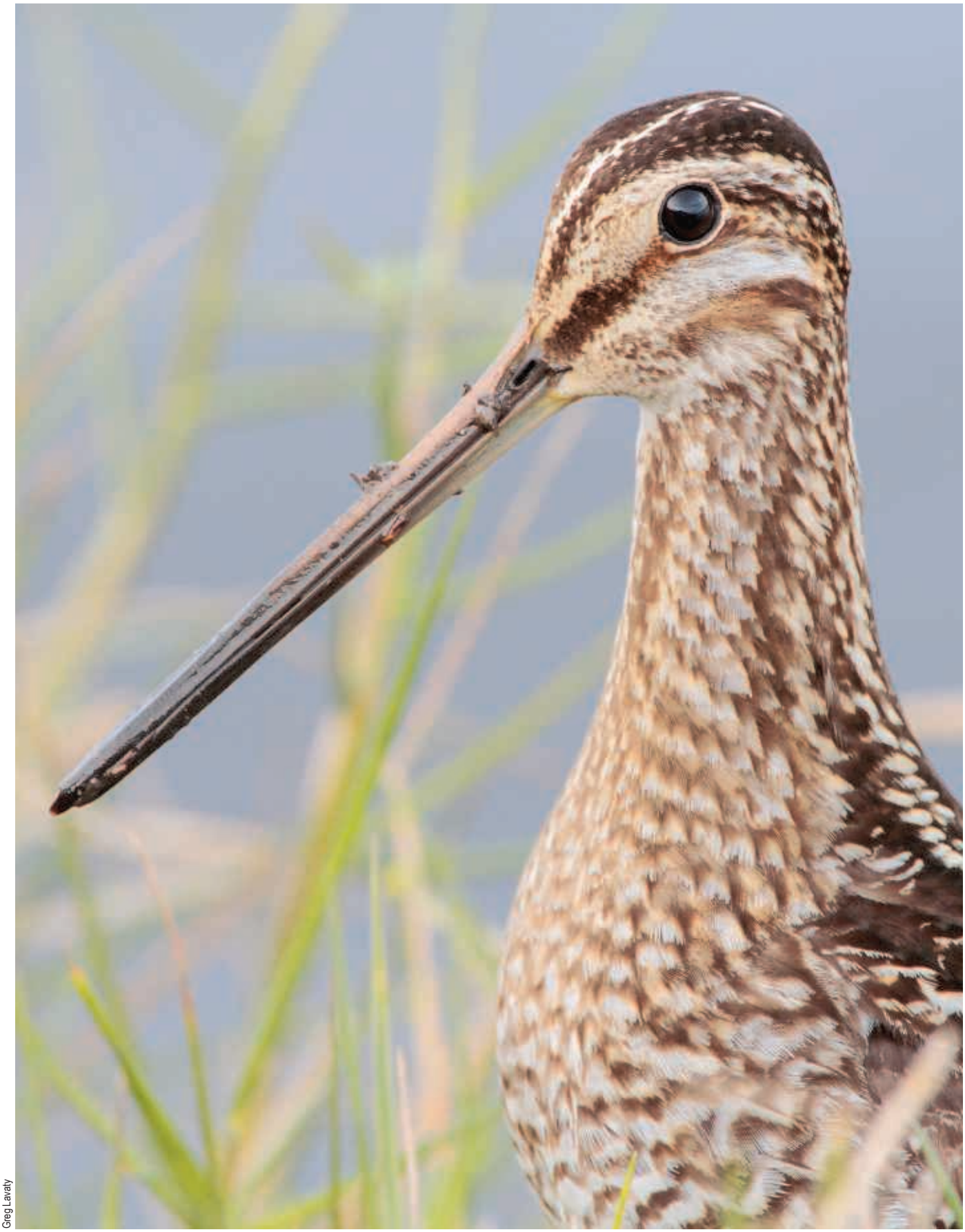
Due to the expansiveness of its range and its large, stable population, Wilson's Snipe is one of only two shorebird species that is still legally hunted in the United States.

With its beautifully-cryptic plumage, the Wilson's Snipe presents a fine visage, particularly when sitting against bright-green short-grass fields, where the bold, alternating pale/dark longitudinal striping on its head, face, and back really stand out.

Generally, Wilson's Snipe forage in small, well-spaced flocks called "wisps," probing deeply for earthworms, leeches, grubs, and seeds. In muddier more sparsely-vegetated fields they can easily go unnoticed, until they are flushed up into the air, demonstrating their trademark towering, zig-zagging flight pattern, and uttering their harsh, grating "Kesh" flight call – from which the Cajun French nickname, "*cosh-cosh*" is derived.

In Louisiana, Wilson's Snipe is a common (north) to abundant (south) winter resident, from late fall through early spring; more sporadically encountered at other times. July is the only month in which this species has not been recorded in our state.

Greg Lavaty



Greg Lavaty

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Wilson's Phalarope

Phalaropus tricolor

Phalaropes are unique among the shorebirds in that they possess fleshy-lobed toes, more similar to that of coots. Like coots, they commonly swim with jerky, head-bobbing motions. Additionally, phalaropes are lightweight but densely-plumaged birds, allowing them to float high up on the water's surface as they hunt down tiny aquatic prey, which they strain from the water.

Also unique is the fact that female phalaropes are the more brightly-colored sex; and it is they – not the males – who initiate and exhibit courtship displays. Among all other shorebird species, only female Spotted Sandpipers share this behavioral trait.

Of the three phalarope species, Wilson's Phalarope is by far the most terrestrial. Though it commonly swims, it also forages on the wet ground of marshes and agricultural fields. Wilson's Phalarope breeds in the marshes of western North America, where, as shorebird expert Dennis Paulson puts it, "Flashy females pursue drab males until they convince one to be a single parent, then abandon them to migrate south." Indeed, soon after egg-laying, females leave the incubating and brooding chores to the males, departing almost immediately for points south.

Wilson's Phalarope migrates far south into the alkaline lakes of the Andes mountain range and the pampas marshlands of Argentina, utilizing wet fields, lakes, and coastal lagoons all along the way. Like the other phalarope species, Wilson's Phalarope can be often observed spinning in tight circles as it swims after prey in deep waters. The spinning motion creates an upwelling in the water column, pulling small prey up toward the surface.

Through the early part of the 20th century, Wilson's Phalarope was not very well-known in Louisiana. Oberholser (1938) called it a casual (irregular) spring transient within our coastal zone. At that time there were no definite Louisiana records in existence, but Oberholser mentioned that fellow ornithologist Stanley C. Arthur had observed it "every spring in Grand Chenier (Cameron Parish)" during the years that he worked in the state.

By the mid-20th century, George Lowery, Jr. considered it "moderately common" from late-April through early-May, with few August-September records. By 1974, and the 3rd edition of his Louisiana Birds, Lowery had extended several more weeks of both spring and fall records. He also mentioned the state's first inland record of a bird observed November 12-20, 1958 at the Natchitoches Fish Hatchery, as well as the first-ever inland winter record for the United States, of two birds found on December 24, 1969, nine miles west of Lafayette, LA.

Today, Wilson's Phalarope is considered a rare (spring) to uncommon (fall) migrant through the coastal zone and up through the northwestern portion of Louisiana, with a smattering of additional winter reports on file.

Greg Lavaty

Louisiana's Occasional and Accidental Shorebirds

Due to the far-flung migratory habits inherent to most shorebird species, it is not surprising that they are among the most commonly observed "vagrant" species in the bird world, turning up in all sorts of unexpected places, particularly during spring and fall migration periods; but also during the winter months as well. Vagrant birds are categorized as either "occasional" (also known as "casual"; species which appear irregularly at rates usually averaging less than once per year), or "accidental" (recorded on only a few total instances in any given region).

In Louisiana, vagrant shorebird species were not often recorded prior to the mid-20th century. By the 1950s, the number of observers skilled enough to identify shorebirds grew, resulting in increased geographical and seasonal coverage across the state on a more regular basis. Through the present, eight occasional and accidental species have been documented from Louisiana.

Mountain Plover

Greg Lavaty

Lesser Sand Plover

Charadrius mongolus

Known until recently as the "Mongolian Plover," the Lesser Sand Plover is an Old World species, breeding in disjunct populations from the Himalayas northward through northeastern Siberia (occasionally into Alaska), and winters on the beaches of eastern Africa and Australasia.

Beyond Alaska, this species has also been recorded on a number of occasions along the California coast, and once in southern Alberta, Canada. But the first record of this species in North America outside of Alaska came from Grand Isle (Jefferson Parish) on April 22, 1975 where it was photographed by a couple of visiting out-of-state birders.

On October 18, 1986, Louisiana's second Lesser Sand Plover was recorded from a beach in Cameron Parish.

Mountain Plover

Charadrius montanus

Slightly smaller than a Killdeer, the Mountain Plover is a North American species that breeds in the arid short-grass prairies of the western Great Plains and Great Basin, and winters in similar habitats from southern California southeastward through northern Mexico and the southern Rio Grande Valley.

With both breeding and wintering ranges that extend into Texas, one would think that this species should have been recorded long ago in nearby Louisiana. Yet it was not until December 14, 2012 that Louisiana's first Mountain Plover was documented from the agricultural lands of southwestern Jeff Davis Parish during the Lacassine NWR – Thornwell Christmas Bird Count.

Black-tailed Godwit

Limosa limosa

This Old World species breeds from Iceland eastward across northern Europe and into central Asia, and winters throughout western Europe, India, Africa, and Australia, utilizing mostly inland freshwater habitats. During migrations, it has strayed to North America on a number of occasions, mostly along the Atlantic seaboard.

One of only a few North American records for Black-tailed Godwit outside of the Atlantic coastal plain occurred in a Vermilion Parish rice field, just a few miles north of Kaplan, LA, where a breeding-plumaged bird was viewed by numerous birders May 11-13, 1994.

Purple Sandpiper

Calidris maritima

The closely-related Purple and Rock sandpipers are "book-end" species in North America, with the latter breeding along the northwestern Alaskan coast and the former on the arctic islands of northern Canada. Adapted to rocky habitats, both species are short-legged, short-winged, and quite cold-hardy, wintering relatively short distances south of their respective breeding grounds.

The Purple Sandpiper's usual wintering grounds extend from eastern Newfoundland southward through coastal North Carolina, with vagrants fairly commonly recorded along the Great Lakes, the reservoirs of the mid-South, and along the southern Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the United States. Since 1974, the Purple Sandpiper has been recorded on seven occasions in rock "rip-rap" settings along coastal Louisiana; five times in Cameron Parish, once in Grand Isle (Jefferson Parish), and once in Orleans Parish. Most of these records are from mid-winter; but two (April 4, 1974 in Cameron and April 3-29, 1994 at Grand Isle) were documented fairly late into the spring.

Curlew Sandpiper

Calidris ferruginea

Like our regularly-occurring Dunlin, the Curlew Sandpiper is a mid-sized shorebird with a fairly long, gently decurved bill, but is slightly longer-legged and longer-winged, and possesses a pure white rump versus a white rump bisected by a dark stripe on the Dunlin. With deep rust-colored body feathers above and below, breeding plumaged males are hard to mistake for any other species.

The Curlew Sandpiper is an Old World species, breeding in the arctic tundra of Siberia, and wintering in southern Asia, Africa, and Australasia. Many records of vagrant birds exist throughout the United States and Canada, nine of which come from Louisiana; two from Cameron Parish, two from Acadia Parish, and

five from Vermilion Parish. Most of our records have been of spring migrants, occurring primarily in early May. Only three involving fall migrants (mid- August – mid-September).

Ruff
Philomachus pugnax

Slightly larger than a Killdeer, this plump, long-legged sandpiper is an Old World species, breeding in marshes and wet meadows throughout much of northern Europe and Asia. Like many of our North American sandpipers, the Ruff gathers into large post-breeding flocks, spending the winter months within a huge geographic region that includes much of Europe, southern Asia, Africa, and Australia.

As with the Curlew Sandpiper, vagrant Ruffs have been extensively documented across much of the United States and southern Canada. Here in Louisiana, the Ruff has been documented on at least 30 occasions. As with the Louisiana encounters with the Curlew Sandpiper, most of our Ruff records come from the rice fields of southwestern Louisiana: fourteen from Vermilion Parish, seven from Acadia Parish, two from Jeff Davis Parish and one from Lafayette Parish. Other Louisiana coastal zone records originate from Cameron, Jefferson, and Orleans parishes. Perhaps the most exciting record of all – Louisiana's second – came on August 12-13, 1978 from the campus of the University of New Orleans.

Thirteen Louisiana Ruff records are of spring migrants, seven are of fall migrants, and ten involve overwintering birds. Apparently, 1988 was a good year for vagrant Ruffs, with seven records generated in that year alone.

Red-necked Phalarope
Phalaropus lobatus

Of the three phalarope species, the better-known Wilson's Phalarope nests and winters in both coastal and inland marsh settings throughout the Americas, whereas both Red-necked and Red Phalaropes migrate and winter at sea. In the Louisiana coastal zone, Wilson's Phalarope is observed annually during both spring and fall migrations. Conversely, Red-necked and Red Phalaropes are only rarely observed in our coastal settings, and their wintering population densities in the Gulf of Mexico itself are still poorly understood. For these reasons, observing either of the latter two requires a bit of determination along with a healthy dose of luck.

Also known as the Northern Phalarope, the Red-necked Phalarope breeds at low-arctic and sub-arctic zones around the world, including Alaska and northern Canada in North America. In late-summer through early-fall, millions of birds regularly congregate off Maine in the Bay of Fundy. From there, the far-flung Red-necked Phalarope can turn up in almost any lower-latitude marine habitat, as well as in inland coastal ponds. Eventually it settles in to winter at its favored southern-hemisphere locales, including the southeastern Pacific Ocean off Peru, the southeastern Atlantic Ocean off west Africa, the Arabian Sea and the South China Sea. In spring, the migration procession is reversed.

Though the migration routes for North American Red-necked Phalaropes are primarily over the eastern Pacific and western Atlantic Oceans, the U.S. Gulf of Mexico annually receives a number of both fall and spring migrants. To date, around two dozen records of this species have been documented for coastal Louisiana. Over half of our records involve fall migrants. A December 22, 1985 record from Cameron is the most intriguing, coming at a season when Red-necked Phalaropes are assumed to have vacated the northern hemisphere.

Nine of our Red-necked Phalarope records are from back-beach marsh ponds and other impoundments of coastal Cameron Parish; and six records originated from the pelagic waters of offshore Louisiana. The remaining records came from the coastal parishes of Plaquemine, Lafourche, Jefferson, and Terrebonne. To date, only three records have been generated from inland Louisiana (Pointe Coupee, Iberville, and Vermilion parishes).

Red Phalarope
Phalaropus fulicaria

In non-breeding plumages, Red-necked and Red phalaropes bear a substantial degree of similarity, both possessing mostly white bodies, black "masks" and gray upperparts. By comparison however, the Red Phalarope is a bit larger (8.5" long vs. 7.75" for Red-necked), huskier, and shorter/thicker-billed. For inexperienced observers, these comparative features may be of only marginal identification assistance on

single-bird sightings of either species during non-breeding seasons. A good look at the upperparts of either species might offer some help, as the Red Phalarope's gray upperparts are most often streaked with pale and dark markings, whereas that of the Red-necked tends to be plain pale-gray. Here though, juvenile (fall) plumages present a conundrum, as the backs of sub-adults of both species can be quite dark and streaky.

Ruff

Greg Lavaty

American Avocet

Greg Lavaty

SHOREBIRD CONSERVATION

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, overhunting of many shorebird species by market hunters and sportsmen alike was the primary conservation issue of the day. The passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918 solved that problem. Today, only two shorebird species, Wilson's Snipe and American Woodcock, may be legally hunted in North America. Both of these have demonstrably large and stable continental populations.

For the remainder of the 20th century and now into the 21st century, much has changed on a global basis, with many nations currently involved in developing natural resource-based economies. Thus, for most shorebird species, the far-flung distances between breeding and wintering grounds, combined with the specific nature of the wetland habitat types which they require, presents a unique set of conservation issues.

It is fortunate that the majority of the world's shorebirds breed far north in arctic/sub-arctic habitats where agricultural and residential development are not feasible. For some species that breed farther south, however, such development issues have become problematic.

Among some of the plovers in particular, conservation and management of North American breeding habitats is needed for several species. For beach-nesting species such as Wilson's, Snowy, and Piping plovers, increasing residential and commercial development and recreational use of beaches is an issue of primary concern. Recent changes in management considerations along the Atlantic Coast beaches in particular have resulted in modest increases in the Piping Plover population there.

Within North America's interior, conversion of some habitats to agriculture has become an issue for other species. Conversion of arid short-grass habitats to agriculture, for example, is considered a primary causal issue involving declines in the U.S. endemic Mountain Plover population.

Among some long-distance migrants such as Red Knot, Semipalmated Sandpiper, and Western Sandpiper, the majority of their respective North American populations annually use single staging areas (Delaware Bay, Bay of Fundy, and Alaska's Copper River Delta respectively) in order to fatten up for their spring or fall migration. With these, the primary area of concern involves the ongoing environmental quality of their respective staging ar-

eas; for if anything should go wrong with any of these places, then the entire continental populations of these species would be in immediate jeopardy.

Small North American population sizes of the Willet, Long-billed Curlew, Hudsonian Godwit, Stilt Sandpiper, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper, among others, has been of ongoing concern. In eastern North America in particular, population declines of Whimbrel, Sanderling, Red Knot, Least and Semipalmated sandpipers, and Short-billed Dowitcher have been detected over the past 30 years. Habitat loss in both migratory stopover sites and wintering ranges is blamed for most of these declines.

In Louisiana, where the primary migratory stopover and wintering habitats for shorebirds were converted to rice agriculture a century ago, it is indeed fortunate that rice-farming has proven compatible with the needs of not only shorebirds but also of wading birds, waterfowl, raptors, and many others.

In the 2005 document, Louisiana Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (also known as the "Louisiana Wildlife Action Plan"), published by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, a "species of conservation concern" listing was generated for our state. This listing was made using multiple data sources, including those of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Partners in Flight Program, as well as that of the LDWF's own Louisiana Natural Heritage Program.

In this publication, Snowy Plover, Wilson's Plover, Piping Plover, American Oystercatcher, Marbled Godwit, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitcher, and American Woodcock were all listed as Species of Conservation Concern in Louisiana. Biological objectives were established for these species, mirroring the objectives put forth in the 2001 United States Shorebird Conservation Plan, 2nd Edition, published at the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences in Manomet, MA.

In the Louisiana Wildlife Action Plan, the primary shorebird conservation issue involves the condition of the state's coastal and barrier island beaches. The beach-nesting Snowy Plover, Wilson's Plover, and American Oystercatcher have all been designated as "critically imperiled" due to increasing human disturbance issues along the beach habitats that these birds use to nest. The Piping Plover (placed on the Federal Endangered Species List back in 1986), which does not breed in Louisiana, but spends many months of each year along Louisiana beaches, has been listed as "imperiled" in Louisiana as well.

Regarding all beach-dependent shorebird species, specific threats to Louisiana beach-habitat include commercial, industrial, and residential development; presence of invasive exotic plant and animal species; and increasing recreational usage. Equally important is the loss and erosion of Louisiana's barrier islands and headland beaches. Resulting conservation objectives include partnering with other state, federal, and non-governmental agencies in 1) increasing public education regarding the needs of beach-dependent wildlife, 2) working with parish governments to recommend limits on recreational vehicle use, and 3) coordinating and implementing habitat conservation recommendations such as invasive exotic species control/eradication, shoreline stabilization, and habitat restoration projects.

Many barrier island restoration projects across coastal Louisiana have been completed over the last two decades while many are being planned for the near future. In fact, most barrier islands have either been restored or will be. Our understanding of the impacts during restoration and the expected positive response by both migrating and nesting shorebirds to these restoration efforts are poorly understood. Efforts should be undertaken to link the ecological response of shorebirds to these restoration projects. Furthermore, the addition of project features including the construction of overwash flats and near shore intertidal flats are important components to include in the discussion and planning of future barrier island restoration projects.

Over the last decade, the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program and its partners including the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority have begun to assess populations of both nesting shorebirds and, in some cases, wintering shorebirds across coastal Louisiana. Plans are underway to add to that knowledge by continuing monitoring efforts and correlating that information to the restoration of Louisiana's barrier shoreline.

What Can You Do?

Educate yourself! Become aware of the efforts of conservation organizations that help protect and manage Louisiana's wild habitats and the shorebirds that rely on them.

Keep your cats indoors and make sure that they are spayed or neutered! Each year it is estimated that cats kill hundreds of millions of birds.

Limit your vehicle access along Louisiana beaches and never drive over and destroy dunes. Park at designated access sites and walk with your kids along the beach to your desired location. Remember to bring out your trash when you leave.

Avoid nesting shorebirds. Typically nesting shorebirds are both vocal and somewhat aggressive and many use a broken-winged display to lead you away from their nest. If you encounter this behavior, leave the area immediately.

Apply affective techniques that prevent birds from flying into your glass windows both at home and at work. It is estimated that hundreds of millions of birds die annually by flying into plate glass windows. This is particularly the case when habitat is reflected by large panes of glass, or when transparent glass allows views of habitat on the other side of a building or home.

Participate in local Christmas Bird Counts! Each year around Christmas, many small groups of people at the local level join in the counting of birds over a one day period. Much of our understanding about bird distribution particularly in winter comes from these efforts.

Help with habitat restoration! Several of the organizations below have volunteer corps that help make the numerous projects initiated each year a success. These organizations are always looking for new volunteers. Finally, go birding and enjoy what you have learned.

For more information on what conservation organizations and government agencies are doing to protect birds or how you might get involved, visit the following websites:

Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program www.BTNEP.org 1-800 259-0869

Louisiana Ornithological Society www.losbird.org

Louisiana Bird Resource Center www.lsu.edu/science/birdoffice

Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries http://wlf.la.gov 1-800 256-2749

Louisiana Wildlife Federation www.lawildlifefed.org 225 344-6707

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory www.gcbo.org 979 480-0999

American Bird Conservancy www.abcbirds.org 888 247-3624

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service www.fws.gov/birds

* It is illegal to harass or kill species of shorebirds outside of defined and managed hunting seasons. Report violations to the appropriate agencies.

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries 1-800-442-2511

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1-337-291-3114

Become a volunteer and help with coastal restoration or bird habitat restoration/monitoring programs. The Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program maintains a volunteer program and is always looking for new members. Call us at 800 259-0869 or visit the web site http://volunteer.btnep.org/

BTNEP
BARATARIA-TERREBONNE NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM