A Pocket Guide to *Great Plains Shorebirds*

By Suzanne Fellows & Bob Gress

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction • 2**
- **Identification Tips • 4**

Plovers

- *Black-bellied Plover* • **6**
- *American Golden-Plover* • **8**
- *Snowy Plover* • **10**
- *Semipalmated Plover* • **12**
- *Piping Plover* • **14**
- *Killdeer* • **16**
- *Mountain Plover* • **18**

Stilts & Avocets

- *Black-necked Stilt* • **19**
- *American Avocet* • **20**

Sandpiper

- *Spotted Sandpiper* • **22**
- *Solitary Sandpiper* • **24**
- *Greater Yellowlegs* • **26**
- *Willet* • **28**
- *Lesser Yellowlegs* • **30**
- *Upland Sandpiper* • **32**
- *Whimbrel* • **33**
- *Long-billed Curlew* • **34**
- *Hudsonian Godwit* • **36**
- *Marbled Godwit* • **38**
- *Ruddy Turnstone* • **40**
- *Red Knot* • **42**
- *Sanderling* • **44**

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Hudsonian Godwit

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Black-necked Stilt

Cover Photo:
Wilson's Phalarope
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- *Semipalmated Sandpiper* • **46**
- *Western Sandpiper* • **47**
- *Least Sandpiper* • **48**
- *White-rumped Sandpiper* • **49**
- *Baird's Sandpiper* • **50**
- *Pectoral Sandpiper* • **51**
- *Dunlin* • **52**
- *Stilt Sandpiper* • **54**
- *Buff-breasted Sandpiper* • **56**
- *Short-billed Dowitcher* • **57**
- *Long-billed Dowitcher* • **58**
- *Wilson's Snipe* • **60**
- *American Woodcock* • **61**
- *Wilson's Phalarope* • **62**
- *Red-necked Phalarope* • **64**
- *Red Phalarope* • **65**

- **Rare Great Plains Shorebirds** • **66**
- **Pocket Guides** • **68**
- **Acknowledgements** • **69**

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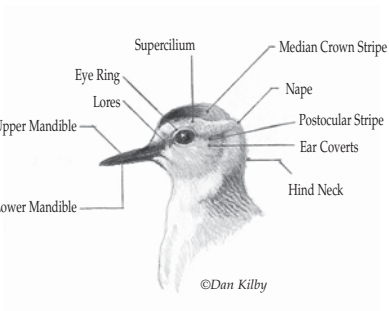
Western Sandpiper



Introduction

***S**horebirds, such as plovers and sandpipers, are a captivating group of birds primarily adapted to live in open areas such as shorelines, wetlands and grasslands. There are over 200 species found world-wide. Approximately 50 regularly breed, winter or migrate through the United States and Canada. About 40 of these can be found within the Great Plains in their appropriate habitat.*

As migrants, shorebirds are faced with many challenges. Often, their breeding and wintering grounds are thousands of miles apart and in different countries. While migrating, staging areas are needed for resting and feeding. Countries need to plan and communicate, at the international level, to ensure adequate conservation and provide breeding, wintering and migratory habitat for these species. Within the Great Plains, there are several spectacular migratory staging areas for shorebirds. These areas provide habitat for several different species at any time and can be good places to improve your identification skills.

Although most people associate shorebirds with wetlands and ocean shorelines, many species use shortgrass, tallgrass and mixed grass prairies. Several species, such as Long-billed Curlews, Upland Sandpipers and Marbled Godwits, are grassland specialists during the breeding season. Others, such as Buff-breasted Sandpipers, are found on shortgrass habitats and plowed fields during migration. Snowy Plovers are commonly found in the southern Great

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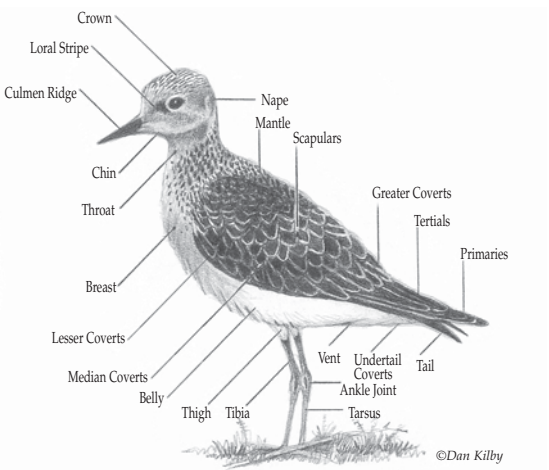
Plains on bare alkali flats. Mountain Plovers are bare ground specialists, often seen in plowed agricultural fields and freshly burned shortgrass prairies in the western Great Plains. These are among the species which have adapted to the grasslands and wetlands found in the region for at least part of their life cycle.

Species accounts and scientific names in this pocket guide are in taxonomic order and follow the 7th edition (1998) of The A.O.U. [American Ornithologists' Union] Check-list of North American Birds and its supplements (42-47). Name changes and reordering occur regularly as biologists learn more about species and how they are related.

This guide highlights key characteristics of the most visible and common species found in the Great Plains which includes the prairie states and provinces of central North America. The purpose of this guide is to help identify the different species and provide information on shorebird habitat and natural history. We hope it helps increase your enjoyment of these fascinating creatures.



Identification Tips:

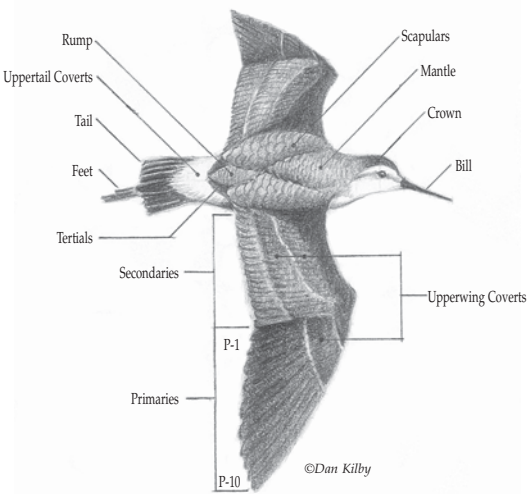
Shorebirds are highly variable in their appearance, behavior and life history making it difficult to define shorebirds as a group. Generalized, they are medium to small-sized birds with relatively long legs. Many have long, slender probing bills. Most nest on bare ground in sparsely-lined depressions or scrapes. Precocial young hatch from camouflaged eggs and leave the nest site within a few hours.

The best way to learn about a species is to observe it in its natural habitat, throughout its range and in different seasons. This guide uses morphology, distinctive behaviors, geographic range, preferred habitats and their seasonal occurrence to help identify the various species. Begin by answering the following questions as you observe the bird.

1. *What is the bird's body size? If you cannot estimate its measurements, compare its body size to that of a crow, pigeon, dove, robin or sparrow. Is its general body shape thin or chunky?*
2. *Are there any distinctive colors or color patterns on its body, head, legs or bill?*
3. *Is the bill short or long? How does it compare to the length of the bird's head? Is it straight, curved up or down or tapered from base to tip?*
4. *Are the legs relatively long or short? In flight, how does the length of the tail compare to the length of the legs?*
5. *Are there any feather crests or ruffs, eye rings or smudges, wing or tail stripes?*
6. *Is its posture upright and attentive or does it look hunched over?*
7. *When the bird is standing, how far past the tail do the wing tips protrude?*
8. *Is it feeding by probing in the substrate, picking things off the surface or turning pebbles over to grab food underneath?*

9. *Does it bob when moving or run short distances and stop suddenly?*
10. *Is the bird in a wetland, grassland (short or tall grass), deep water, mudflat or the vegetated edge of a wetland?*
11. *Is it alone or in a flock of similar species?*

Spend time looking at the bird and make notes before looking in the guide. Refer to the drawings for unfamiliar terms. Although colors may be described as "gray" or "orange," these are relative, subject to your interpretation and usually represent a continuum of light to dark and bright to dull. Differences in individual birds (such as age and sex) and the season, weather and lighting conditions can add confusion to identifying some species. Refer to the section on similar species under each of the species accounts to focus your observations and eliminate look-alike species. Above all, remember to have fun and enjoy your shorebird sightings.



Spring migrants show varying amount of black in breeding plumage.

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding

©Bob Gress

Black-bellied Plover (Grey Plover)

Pluvialis squatarola L: 10¾-12" WS: 29-32"

Description: Robin-sized and short-billed, this is the largest of the unbanded (those without breast bands) plovers. It has an upright posture. The striking black and white of birds in breeding plumage is unmistakable. In flight, the undertail is white and contrasts with the black belly. From above, the white wing stripe and white tail with black barring is noticeable.

Similar Species: American Golden-Plovers in nonbreeding plumage offer the most challenge. Black-bellied Plovers are noticeably larger than American Golden-Plovers. Look for a pure white undertail and black axillaries (wing pits) on Black-bellied Plovers in flight. Mountain Plovers are an overall gray-brown without any speckling.

Comments: Black-bellied Plovers are seen throughout the Great Plains during migration, although rarely while in full breeding plumage. They breed on the arctic tundra and winter on sandy beaches and wetlands in coastal areas from central North America through southern South America. During migration through the Great Plains, they use drier short grass fields as well as flooded fields and wetlands. The "run-stop-run again" pace and "look-and-lunge" foraging behavior is characteristic of plovers.

Note black axillaries (wing pits).

©Bob Gress

Breeding male

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding

©Norman Smith

American Golden-Plover

Pluvialis dominica L: 9½-11¼" WS: 23½-28¾"

Description: Robin-sized and short-billed, this unbanded plover has an upright posture. During the breeding season, look for the black belly extending from the throat to the end of the tail. Golden, black, brown and white marks are distinctive. They show an overall gray plumage with darker speckling during the nonbreeding season.

Similar Species: This species was formerly classified with Pacific Golden-Plover as Lesser Golden-Plover. Pacific Golden-Plovers and European Golden-Plovers have not been reported in the Great Plains but are similar in appearance. Black-bellied Plovers in nonbreeding plumage offer the most challenge for Great Plains birders. Look for the absence of black wing pits in flying American Golden-Plovers. American Golden-Plovers are noticeably smaller than Black-bellied Plovers.

Comments: This species breeds on the arctic tundra, winters in coastal and inland areas of southern South America and is primarily seen in the Great Plains during spring migration foraging in short grass areas including recently burned tallgrass prairies. Fall migrants are less common in the central and southern Great Plains than in the northern Great Plains.

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding

©Mark Chappell

Snowy Plover (Kentish Plover)

Charadrius alexandrinus L: 6-6¾" WS: 16½-18½"

Description: This is a sparrow-sized, light brown to tan and white plover. During the breeding season, look for a single, partial dark neck band, black forehead, dark legs and dark colored bill. Often a black smudge is seen behind and below the eye. In nonbreeding plumages, the markings are not as dark .

Similar Species: Dark legs and bill separate Snowy from both Semipalmated and Piping plovers.

Comments: Different subspecies and discrete populations of Snowy Plovers are found worldwide. Genetic studies have been used to distinguish subspecies. Characteristics such as behavior and geographic separation are used to distinguish distinct populations. Currently, the Pacific Coast population, considered distinct from the Great Plains population, is federally listed as threatened. Inland populations of the Great Plains subspecies are state listed as birds of concern throughout most of their range. Within the Great Plains, Snowy Plovers breed on alkali and dry mudflats and sandy areas along river channels. They spend the nonbreeding season on sandy beaches along the Pacific and Gulf coasts.

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding

©Bob Gress

Semipalmated Plover

Charadrius semipalmatus L: 6¾-7¼" WS: 17¼-20¾"

Description: This is a sparrow-sized, darkish brown and white plover. They have a single, dark neck band in all plumages. In breeding plumage, the short bill is black-tipped and orange-based and legs are yellow-orange. The forehead is white with black borders and a white dot is visible behind and above each eye. During the nonbreeding season, the black markings and their overall body color is lighter brown, the bill has little or no orange at the base and legs become lighter. A white supercilium extends beyond the eye.

Similar Species: Within the Great Plains, the darker body color and complete neck band separate it from Snowy and Piping plovers. Smaller body and bill size separate it from Wilson's Plover and the single neck band and smaller size distinguish it from Killdeer.

Comments: An arctic breeder, this plover is usually seen during spring and fall migration within the Great Plains. They can be found on open mudflats and on sandy shorelines.

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding

©Judd Patterson

Piping Plover

Charadrius melodus L: 6¾-7¼" WS: 18–18¾"

Description: This is a sparrow-sized, light tan to gray and white plover. During breeding, the single, partial black neck band, black forehead band, orange legs and black-tipped orange bill are indicative characteristics. In nonbreeding plumages, dark markings are not present, the bill is entirely black but the legs remain orange.

Similar Species: Piping Plovers are commonly confused with Semipalmated and Snowy plovers. Orange legs in combination with a light colored body will distinguish Piping Plover in all plumages from other small plovers.

Comments: Piping Plovers are a federally listed species throughout their range. Destruction of habitat and disturbance by humans are two main concerns. Like all shorebirds, they should be left to feed and nest without being disturbed. Found breeding in several areas in the Great Plains and wintering along coastal areas, they favor sandy beaches along the ocean, wetlands, lakes, rivers and reservoirs.

Breeding

©Bob Gress

"Broken wing" distraction display

©Bob Gress

Killdeer

Charadrius vociferous L: 9¼-10½" WS: 23½-25¼"

Description: One of the most familiar shorebirds, the Killdeer is a robin-sized plover with two complete dark bands across its neck and chest and pale legs in all seasons. A bright red eye ring is visible during the breeding season. The orange-brown rump is obvious as the bird tries to lure intruders from its nest or chicks with a "broken wing" distraction display. Historically called the Chattering or Noisy Plover, the "killdeer" call is distinct.

Similar Species: The double breast band on this plover is diagnostic among the plovers found in the region. Downy Killdeer young show a single breast band at hatching. However, by the time they have attained juvenal plumage at about 17 days, they sport both bands.

Comments: Killdeer are found during the breeding season throughout the Great Plains in short grass habitats, agricultural areas and mudflats. Gravel is a preferred nesting substrate and Killdeer are often found nesting along roads. They winter from the southern Great Plains through northern South America. Migrants are seen throughout the region.

Young Killdeer

©Bob Gress

© Mark Chappell

Nonbreeding

©Bob Gress

Breeding

Mountain Plover

Charadrius montanus L: 8½-9½" WS: 21½-24"

Description: Light brown to gray in color, with pale legs and a black bill, this is a robin-sized plover. During the breeding season, a white forehead and supercilium, black marking on its forecrown and black lores add color. The light wing patch on top of extended wings and black-edged tail band are present in all plumages.

Similar Species: Other species of large plovers are often misidentified as Mountain Plovers. Unlike Killdeer, Mountain Plovers never have a breast band. Nonbreeding golden-plovers and Black-bellied Plovers are larger in size and speckled above.

Comments: Well camouflaged by both coloration and behavior, Mountain Plovers aptly earn the nickname "prairie ghost." They are found in open short grass or bare areas such as prairie dog colonies, bare agricultural fields and freshly burned prairies. Numbers have decreased due to habitat alteration. Within the Great Plains, they nest in arid western prairies and are seldom seen in the central or eastern parts of this region.

Breeding *©Bob Gress*

Black-necked Stilt

Himantopus mexicanus L: 14-15¾" WS: 29¼-32½"

Description: A graceful, pigeon-sized shorebird, the Black-necked Stilt has a long neck, legs and wings. The basic black and white body contrasts with pink legs. Juveniles and nonbreeding adults are duller by comparison but still distinctive.

Similar Species: Within the Great Plains, this species shouldn't be confused with other shorebirds.

Comments: Black-necked Stilts are found throughout wetlands within the southern Great Plains during the breeding season and during migration. They are extremely protective of their young and readily mob intruders. Their insistent, high-pitched, continuous calls can be quite distracting. Different races of this species are found throughout temperate and tropical zones around the globe.

Breeding female

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding male

©Bob Gress

American Avocet

Recurvirostra americana L: 17¼-18¾" WS: 29½-32½"

Description: A large-bodied, pigeon-sized shorebird, the American Avocet has long, blue-gray legs and a long, slender black bill which curves upwards. There are two distinct plumages. Breeding adults have an orange head, neck and chest, with black and white wing and back markings. During the nonbreeding season, the orange is replaced by gray.

Similar Species: Within the Great Plains, this species shouldn't be confused with other shorebirds. Occasionally, American Avocets are seen swimming or floating in deep water and behaving in a fashion similar to Wilson's Phalaropes.

Comments: American Avocets are found in wetlands throughout the Great Plains during the breeding season and migration. Often seen in large flocks, they wade through high water scything their bills back and forth to collect aquatic invertebrates. Males can be distinguished from females by a comparatively straighter bill.

Early spring flocks show both plumages.

©Bob Gress

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Juvenile

©Bob Gress

Spotted Sandpiper

Actitis macularius L: 7¼-8½" WS: 14¾-16"

Description: This robin-sized, chunky sandpiper has relatively short pink, yellow or orange legs. The breeding plumage consists of a brown back, wings, neck and head, with dark streaks and barring. The belly and undertail are white with a varying number of dark spots. The bill is medium-length, yellow, orange or pink and black-tipped. Nonbreeding plumage is similar but without the spotting, streaking or barring. The tail extends slightly past the wing tips at rest. The first impression of a Spotted Sandpiper is that of a constantly bobbing rear end. In flight, they have a unique "flutter-stall-flutter" pattern of shallow wing beats.

Similar Species: Solitary Sandpipers, although slightly larger and slimmer, are similar in plumage and bob like Spotted Sandpipers but their movements are slower paced.

Comments: Spotted Sandpipers breed throughout central and northern North America and winter along the North American coast and throughout northern and central South America. They are commonly found as single birds or in small groups along shorelines of rocky lakes, reservoirs and rivers. Females are slightly larger and more heavily spotted than males, defend a breeding territory and are polyandrous (attempt to mate with more than one male).

Nonbreeding

©Judd Patterson

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding

©William Hull
www.mangoverde.com

Solitary Sandpiper

Tringa solitaria L: 7½-9¼" WS: 22-23½"

Description: This robin-sized shorebird has dark greenish-brown shoulders and back with light colored spots. The head, neck and upper chest are streaked gray and dark brown with a white lower chest, belly and undertail. Green (rarely yellowish) legs, a prominent white eye ring and a greenish-gray based black-tipped bill, which may appear slightly drooped at the tip, are also characteristic. Their flight pattern is slow and floppy, similar to that of a swallow. Upon landing, Solitary Sandpipers often "wing stretch," pointing their wings to the sky before relaxing them to the side.

Similar Species: Green legs and darker plumage distinguish this species from both species of yellowlegs. Solitary Sandpipers "bob" in a manner similar to Spotted Sandpipers, are slightly larger and less "chunky" than Spotted Sandpipers, have a clean white underbelly and chest and light, rather than dark, spots on their back and wings.

Comments: They are often seen as a single bird as their name implies. They will feed for long periods of time in a relatively small area, moving slowly and carefully, while examining the water surface for food. They nest in trees in the taiga (northern coniferous forest) of North America, winter in South America and are seen throughout the Great Plains during migration, usually along freshwater ponds, water treatment facilities and open rivers.

Note the slightly upturned, pale based bill.

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding

©Bob Gress

Greater Yellowlegs

Tringa melanoleuca L: 11½-13¼" WS: 28-29½"

Description: Greater Yellowlegs are dove-sized birds with a relatively long, dark bill which may be slightly grayer at the base, a white eye ring and long, yellow-orange legs. Long wings protrude past the tail when standing. In breeding plumage, they show black markings on the back, breast and sides. The black markings are replaced by gray plumage during the nonbreeding season. Yellowlegs in flight have a distinctive dark body which contrasts with a square white rump and pale tail.

Similar Species: They are distinguished from Lesser Yellowlegs by a larger body and heavier, slightly upturned bill which is 1½ times the length of its head. Greater Yellowlegs tend to feed singly or in smaller groups and in deeper water. Listen for a three or four-note call versus the two-note call of the Lesser Yellowlegs. Willets are larger, have a stockier appearance and blue legs. Solitary Sandpipers are smaller, usually with greenish legs and darker backs.

Comments: Greater Yellowlegs are active feeders, often seen running or striding quickly while jabbing at food on the water surface. They breed in the taiga of central Canada and Alaska. The nonbreeding season is spent in coastal areas of southern North America and throughout Central and South America. They are seen in loose flocks during migration throughout the Great Plains.

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding

©Bob Gress

Willet

Tringa semipalmata L: 12½-16½" WS: 21½-28½"

Description: The pigeon-sized Willet has blue legs and a heavy, straight bill. Only slightly longer than the length of the head, the bill is black at the tip and gray-green at the base. In breeding plumage, it is heavily patterned with dark, gray-brown and white feathers on its back, neck, head and chest. Nonbreeding plumage is plain gray or brown. A bold black and white contrasting wing pattern is seen in flight.

Similar Species: This species is separated from both species of yellowlegs by being larger, stockier and having blue legs. Willets are grayer in plumage with a straight bill which is shorter and heavier than that of a curlew, godwit or dowitcher.

Comments: Willets breed in grassland-wetland landscapes in the central and northern Great Plains and winter along coastal areas from the southern United States through northern South America.

Note wing pattern.

©Bob Gress

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Fall migrant, note slim, straight, mostly dark bill and bright yellow legs.

©Bob Gress

Lesser Yellowlegs

Tringa flavipes L: 9¼-10" WS: 23½-25½"

Description: Lesser Yellowlegs are robin-sized with a relatively long, dark bill, slightly grayer at the base, a white eye ring and long, yellow legs. In breeding plumage, they show heavy, black markings on their back, breast and sides. Black markings are replaced by an overall gray in nonbreeding plumage. In flight, both species of yellowlegs show a distinctive dark body which contrasts with a square white rump and pale tail.

Similar Species: They are distinguishable from Greater Yellowlegs by a smaller body and thin, straight bill about the length of the head. They tend to feed in larger flocks in more sheltered areas than Greater Yellowlegs. Listen for the two-note call versus the three or four notes of the Greater Yellowlegs. Willets are larger, have a stockier appearance and blue legs. Solitary Sandpipers' legs are usually greenish. Stilt Sandpipers also have greenish legs, a slightly drooping bill and spend more time probing in a single spot.

Comments: Lesser Yellowlegs tend to feed by walking rapidly, seldom running, picking at the water surface. They breed in loose colonies on the tundra and taiga throughout northern North America. Nonbreeding season is spent in coastal areas of southern North America and throughout Central and South America. They are seen in flocks during migration throughout the Great Plains.

■ *Upland Sandpiper*

©*Bob Gress*

Upland Sandpiper

Bartramia longicauda L: 11¼-12¾" WS: 25½-27¾"

Description: Dove-sized, usually upright posture, long neck and tail, small head, big eyes, short bicolored bill and yellow legs characterize this species. Their plumage is straw-colored with dark streaks and a white belly. They have a distinctive "wolf whistle" call. The flight pattern consists of stiff, shallow wingbeats followed by glides. After landing, they often keep their wings raised momentarily before lowering them.

Similar Species: Buff-breasted Sandpipers migrating through the Great Plains are similar but smaller, stockier and buff-colored over the entire body with a shorter neck and legs. Upland Sandpipers have a straight, short bill and light colored legs which distinguish them from curlews and godwits.

Comments: Formerly called Upland Plovers, they are often viewed at close range perched on fence posts or other high points surveying their grassland surroundings. They feed alone or in small groups in grasslands and plowed fields. Grass cover in the tallgrass and mixed prairies of the Great Plains are required for breeding. They winter in the South American pampas.

Breeding *©Bob Gress*

Whimbrel

Numenius phaeopus L: 16-16¾" WS: 30½-35½"

Description: A large, pigeon-sized body and a long, decurved bill mark this species as a type of curlew. The bill may show red at the base. The plumage has a gray-brown base color with darker patterning across the body. Whimbrel legs are dull gray-blue and the head has distinctive dark, lateral crown and eye stripes.

Similar Species: Whimbrels are smaller and lighter colored than Long-billed Curlews, which appear richer in tone and show finer streaking on the head, rather than the bold crown and eye stripes. Godwits have straight or slightly upcurved bills. Willets are stockier with a straight bill and lack head and facial markings.

Comments: A circumpolar boreal or low arctic tundra breeder, this species is found in the Great Plains primarily during spring migration. They winter along coastal areas. Mudflats, rocky shores, beaches and flooded fields provide feeding areas.

Breeding male

©Bob Gress

Note cinnamon underwings.

©Bob Gress

Long-billed Curlew

Numenius americanus L: 20-26" WS: 30½-39½"

Description: Largest of the North American shorebirds, this species is crow-sized with long, dark legs and a long, decurved bill. Adult males and young have shorter bills than adult females. The bills may be pink to orange at the base of the lower mandible. Look for reddish-brown plumage with dark barring, streaking on upper and lower body parts and fine, even streaking on the head. Markings are more prominent during the breeding season. Cinnamon underwings are seen in flight.

Similar Species: Whimbrels are smaller, have distinctive crown stripes and are grayer with lighter bellies. Eskimo Curlews, although probably extinct, are smaller and have shorter, decurved bills. Godwits have straighter, slightly upcurved bills.

Comments: This species is found in large tracts of native prairie throughout the western Great Plains. They frequently feed in agricultural fields by probing in the soil or running after grasshoppers and other invertebrates. They also eat eggs and the young of grassland nesting songbirds. During winter, they use coastal areas where their bills allow them to probe deep into sand and mud for crabs.

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding

© Glen Tepke

Hudsonian Godwit

Limosa haemastica L: 14½-16¾" WS: 26¾-31½"

Description: This pigeon-sized shorebird has long, dark legs and a long, slightly upturned, two-toned bill. Look for a black tail, white rump, and dark red-brown to buff back mottled with black. The underparts are dark reddish to pale buff or gray depending on the season. They have an obvious dark loral stripe and white supercilium which runs from bill to eye. In flight, the white rump patch, contrasting dark tail, white wing "windows" seen above and the predominantly black underwings are diagnostic.

Similar Species: Marbled Godwits in flight are distinctively cinnamon to light brown. Long-billed Curlews have long, decurved bills. Willets are smaller, stockier with straight, heavy bills and blue legs. Dowitchers are also smaller with straight or slightly down-tipped bills and shorter legs.

Comments: Hudsonian Godwits breed in the taiga and winter in Argentina and Chile. They have an elliptical migration pattern and are commonly seen during spring migration within the Great Plains on mudflats, flooded fields, lakes and reservoirs. During the fall, they stage along the Hudson and James bays and migrate south across the Atlantic Ocean and are uncommon inland.

Note white rump, dark tail and black underwings.

©Bob Gress

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding

©Bob Gress

Marbled Godwit

Limosa fedoa L: 16¾-19¼" WS: 28-32"

Description: The Marbled Godwit is a large, crow-sized shorebird with long, dark legs and a long, slightly upturned, bicolored bill. The entire body is buffy orange-brown including the tail and underwing linings. During the breeding season, underparts are barred, they show a dark brown back and have a heavily patterned neck and head. During the nonbreeding season, barring on the underparts is lacking. Females are larger and have longer bills than males.

Similar Species: Hudsonian Godwits have a distinctive bicolored wing pattern in flight. Often seen in close association and similar in coloration to Long-billed Curlews, Marbled Godwits are slightly smaller and lack the long, decurved bill of curlews. Willets are smaller, stockier and have straight, stocky bills and blue legs. Dowitchers are smaller with straight or slightly down-tipped bills and shorter legs.

Comments: Marbled Godwits breed on the grasslands of the northern Great Plains and spend their winters in coastal areas. They feed by slowly moving across mudflats and probing deep under the surface for invertebrates.

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Nonbreeding

©Bob Gress

Ruddy Turnstone

Arenaria interpres L: 8½-10½" WS: 20-22¾"

Description: Turnstones are chunky, robin-sized birds with short, orange legs; short, pointed, slightly upturned black bills; and distinctive coloration. The breeding plumage includes a bright rufous, black, gray and white pattern. In nonbreeding plumage, heads are brown and upper parts brown to blackish with little ruddy coloration. A brown bib is present and the legs remain orange. They are boldly patterned in flight.

Similar Species: Within the Great Plains, Ruddy Turnstones shouldn't be confused with other species of shorebirds.

Comments: Turnstones characteristically "turn stones" and flip over shoreline debris with their bills to look for invertebrates. They nest on the arctic coastal tundra and winter along rocky, sandy and muddy shorelines along both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. They often fly without stopping across the central Great Plains during migration. When they are seen, they are usually found singly or in small groups. Large concentrations of Ruddy Turnstones are primarily found in southern coastal Texas or in the southern to central Canadian Prairie Provinces. A turnstone in the central portion of the Great Plains is a great find for birders.

Nonbreeding

© Judd Patterson

Breeding

©Jim Burns

Red Knot

Calidris canutus L: 9¼-10" WS: 22¾-24½"

Description: Red Knots are robin-sized, with short, olive, dark gray or black legs and a short, black bill. They are bright rufous below with black, white and gray patterning on their wings and back during the breeding season. In the nonbreeding season, knots become nondescript light gray sandpipers with barring on their flanks. They appear chunkier and flatter than most other sandpipers. In flight, white wing linings and gray barred rumps are characteristic.

Similar Species: Sanderlings, Dunlins or the rare Curlew Sandpiper can offer some confusion. Sanderlings are smaller and whiter in nonbreeding plumage and in breeding plumage have a white belly. Red Knots are chunkier with a shorter, straight bill than Dunlins and Curlew Sandpipers.

Comments: Red Knots breed on the arctic tundra and winter along coastal sandy beaches, mudflats and interior lakes and reservoirs. Like Ruddy Turnstones, Red Knots often fly without stopping across the central Great Plains during migration. They are usually not found in large flocks within the central portion of the region. A visit to Delaware Bay on the Atlantic coast during spring migration is an awe-inspiring phenomenon as tens of thousands of Red Knots feed on horseshoe crab eggs with Ruddy Turnstones, Semipalmated Sandpipers and Sanderlings.

Nonbreeding

©Bob Gress

Breeding

© Judd Patterson

Sanderling

Calidris alba L: 7-8¼" WS: 16-18"

Description: Sanderlings are the size of large sparrows with short, black legs and short, straight, black bills. They appear rather chunky. In breeding plumage, they are rufous-orange on the shoulders, back and upper breast and white below. In nonbreeding plumage, they appear to be the whitest of the sandpipers. In flight, the white wing stripe bordered by dark is conspicuous.

Similar Species: Sanderlings are most likely to be confused with other small calidrine (birds belonging to the genus *Calidris*) sandpipers during the nonbreeding season. However, Sanderlings are the lightest colored of the sandpipers during the nonbreeding season. They are not likely to be confused with other North American sandpipers in their breeding plumage.

Comments: Sanderlings are among the most northerly breeding shorebirds. They are found throughout the world on sandy coastal beaches during the nonbreeding season. On coastal beaches, Sanderlings are commonly seen running back and forth between surging and receding ocean waves. Within the Great Plains, they are commonly encountered during fall migration on river sandbars, shallow alkaline and saline lakes and reservoirs.

Intermediate

©Bob Gress

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Semipalmated Sandpiper

Calidris pusilla L: 5¼-6" WS: 13½-14¾"

Description: Semipalmated Sandpipers are sparrow-sized with black legs and a short, straight bill. In nonbreeding plumage, they are plain gray-brown above with fine dark streaks across the breast, a brown loral stripe and white supercilium. The breeding plumage shows more mottling with dark brown and black above and a few dark streaks on the sides.

Similar Species: Semipalmated Sandpipers can be difficult to distinguish from other small sandpipers. Their wing tips do not extend past the tail, which distinguishes them from White-rumped and Baird's sandpipers. Western Sandpiper bills are usually longer, thinner and have a drooped tip. However, the bills of male Western and female Semipalmated sandpipers can overlap in length. The Semipalmated Sandpiper's black legs and larger size distinguish it from the Least Sandpiper. Smaller size and black legs distinguish it from the Pectoral Sandpiper.

Comments: Semipalmated Sandpipers breed on the low arctic tundra and winter on mudflats, sandy beaches and freshwater lakes and ponds of Suriname, Guyana and northern Brazil. They are highly gregarious and flocks can be large.

©*Bob Gress*

Western Sandpiper

Calidris mauri L: 5½-6¾" WS: 14-15"

Description: This sparrow-sized sandpiper has black legs and a relatively long, black bill which droops at the tip. Breeding plumage shows rufous on the crown, scapulars and ear coverts and chevron marks on the breast and sides. In nonbreeding plumage, adult Western Sandpipers are gray above with lightly streaked white breasts and white superciliums. Juveniles have rufous coloration on the scapulars.

Similar Species: Western Sandpipers can be difficult to identify, especially in nonbreeding plumage. Their wingtips do not extend past the tail which eliminates Baird's and White-rumped sandpipers. Unlike the Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper bills are longer and have a drooped tip. Be aware that the bills of male Western and female Semipalmated sandpipers can overlap in length. Western Sandpipers tend to probe more and are more often found in the water than Semipalmated Sandpipers.

Comments: Western Sandpipers are often seen in large flocks. They primarily nest on the tundra of western Alaska and winter on beaches and mudflats along the coasts of the United States to northern Peru.

©*Bob Gress*

Least Sandpiper

Calidris minutilla L: 4½-5" WS: 13¼-14"

Description: Sometimes described as a "feathered mouse," this is the smallest of the shorebirds. In all plumages, it is browner than other calidrine sandpipers and has short, dull greenish-yellow to bright yellow legs and a black, somewhat down-curved bill. In breeding plumage, a thin white "V" may be apparent on the mantle. They are often seen feeding in a "scrunched-down" position in the upper vegetated portions along the edges of wetlands, rather than on open mudflats with other calidrine sandpipers.

Similar Species: Like other "peeps" (the small, confusing *Calidris* sandpipers), Least Sandpipers can be difficult to distinguish. However, their yellow legs, small size and overall browner coloration help single them out from larger sandpipers.

Comments: Relatively common throughout North America, Least Sandpipers are often encountered while looking for shorebirds. They breed in a broad band throughout the subarctic and boreal regions of northern North America and winter in northern South America.

©David Seibel

White-rumped Sandpiper

Calidris fuscicollis L: 6-7" WS: 16-18"

Description: This sparrow-sized sandpiper has short, black legs. The base of the lower bill is dull red but appears black in most instances. The wings extend beyond the tail when at rest. In all plumages, a noticeable supercilium, white rump and prominent black stripes and chevrons mark the breast and sides. They often forage in the vegetated edges of wetlands and in flooded fields.

Similar Species: White-rumped Sandpipers can be an identification challenge. Both White-rumped and Baird's sandpipers have wing tips which extend past the tail, which eliminates Semipalmated and Western sandpipers. Compared to Baird's, White-rumped Sandpipers are greyer in color and have prominent superciliums. The presence of a white rump, seen in flight or when the wings are raised, is definitive.

Comments: An arctic tundra nester, White-rumped Sandpipers winter on beaches and mudflats in southern South America. They arrive in the Great Plains later during spring migration than other sandpipers. A circular migration pattern, which is closer to the Atlantic Ocean on their southbound journey, makes them rare during fall migration.

©*Peter LaTourette*

Baird's Sandpiper

Calidris bairdii

L: 5¾-7¼" WS: 16-18½"

Description: Another black-legged, black-billed, sparrow-sized sandpiper, Baird's Sandpipers show strong demarcation between a white belly and heavily streaked breast. There are no markings on the sides. The wing tips extend beyond the tail. They commonly forage in small flocks or as single birds in dry, vegetated areas around wetlands.

Similar Species: A challenging "peep,"Baird's can be distinguished from Semipalmated and Western sandpipers because their wingtips extend beyond the length of the tail. White-rumped Sandpipers are also long-winged, but lack the strong demarcation between belly and breast. With markings on the sides, White-rumped Sandpipers are less buffy-colored and have a prominent supercilium and white rump. Baird's also appear "squattier" than these other three species. Pectoral Sandpipers are larger with yellow legs.

Comments: Baird's tend to be early spring and fall migrants in the Great Plains. They are dry coastal and alpine tundra nesters and winter along beaches and mudflats in southern South America.

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Pectoral Sandpiper

Calidris melanotos

L: females: 7½-8" males: 8½-9¼" WS: 16¾-19½"

Description: This robin-sized sandpiper has yellow legs and a slightly decurved, dark bill, often with a yellow or dull green base. In breeding plumage, look for a buffy, black-streaked back, white supercilium, dark loral stripe and a light brown neck and breast with blackish stripes. In all plumages, there is a strong demarcation between the breast and white belly.

Similar Species: Pectoral Sandpipers are most likely confused with other yellow-legged sandpipers. They are larger than Least Sandpipers and the strong demarcation between the upper breast and white belly distinguish them from Stilt, Upland and Buff-breasted sandpipers, Ruffs and yellowlegs. Pectoral Sandpipers tend to use wetter, more densely vegetated areas than other sandpipers. Baird's Sandpipers are smaller with black legs.

Comments: Pectoral Sandpipers winter in southern South America and nest in low to mid-arctic tundra. During courtship, promiscuous males inflate and deflate pendulous breast sacs and create foghorn-like "hooting" while performing undulating aerial displays.

Breeding

©Judd Patterson

Intermediate

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Dunlin

Calidris alpina L: 6½-8¾" WS: 12¾-17½"

Description: Dunlins are sparrow-sized sandpipers with long, black, droopy bills and relatively long, black legs. In breeding plumage, Dunlins are comparatively easy to identify because of the conspicuous black belly patch and rufous cap and mantle. In the nonbreeding season, they are plain gray-brown on their upper parts and white below. A prominent white wing stripe, seen in flight, is present in all plumages.

Similar Species: In nonbreeding plumages, Dunlins are easily confused with other calidrine (birds belonging to the genus *Calidris*) sandpipers. Sanderlings are whiter. Baird's and White-rumped sandpipers are smaller and their wings project farther past the tail. Western and Semipalmated sandpipers are also smaller. Least and Pectoral sandpipers both have lighter colored legs. Red Knots are chunkier. All have shorter, straighter bills. Dowitchers are much larger, with longer, straighter bills. Stilt Sandpipers have longer, greenish legs. Curlew Sandpipers are rare in the region and are longer legged, with a longer, more evenly decurved bill and a distinctive white supercilium.

Comments: Large flocks are seen within the northern Great Plains during migration between tundra breeding areas and coastal wintering grounds. Within the southern Great Plains, Dunlins are not as common. At least nine subspecies of Dunlins are found throughout the world.

Nonbreeding

©Bob Gress

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Intermediate

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Stilt Sandpiper

Calidris himantopus L: 8-9¼" WS: 17¼-18¾"

Description: This robin-sized sandpiper has a long neck; long, greenish legs; and a droopy, black bill with a thick base. Stilt Sandpipers feed in a characteristic rapid, sewing machine-like fashion in relatively deep water. During the breeding season, they are heavily patterned, appearing "tiger-striped." They have a distinctive reddish crown with a white central stripe, rufous lores and ear coverts and a strong, white supercilium. The leg color, dark eye stripe and white supercilium are maintained during the nonbreeding season when birds are a basic gray-brown with dark breast streaking.

Similar Species: Dowitchers appear similar but are bulkier, with a longer, straighter bill. Yellowlegs lack the side streaking and head pattern and have richer, yellow legs.

Comments: Stilt Sandpipers breed on the low arctic tundra and are highly site faithful, even returning to the same nest cup used in a previous year. This species is seen in the Great Plains during both spring and fall migration.

©Bob Gress

Buff-breasted Sandpiper

Tryngites subruficollis

L: 7¾-8" WS: 17¼-18¾"

Description: This robin-sized sandpiper has bright, yellow legs and a short, black bill. It has dark patterning on its upperparts and a light straw-colored appearance to its underparts. Their eyes appear large and dark, isolated within buff-colored facial feathers, appearing rather "pigeon-headed." They feed primarily in upland areas while making bobbing movements as they walk. In flight, white underwings with a dark wrist "comma" are visible.

Similar Species: Buff-breasted Sandpipers are more compact than Upland Sandpipers and have proportionately shorter necks and legs, cleaner, buffy-colored faces, necks and chests and black bills.

Comments: Male "buffies" gather on leks in the high arctic during the breeding season. They flash white underwings to females who have gathered to choose a mate. They are seen during spring and fall migrations within the Great Plains in short grass habitats such as sod farms, grazed pasture land, cut alfalfa fields and fallow fields. They spend their nonbreeding season on the short grasslands of southeastern South America.

©Bob Gress

Breeding *©David Seibel*

Short-billed Dowitcher

Limnodromus griseus

L: 9¼-11½" WS: 18-20½"

Description: This dove-sized shorebird has a long, straight, black bill and light green legs. Breeding birds are primarily light reddish-orange below with spots along the sides and underbelly and mottled buff and black above. Nonbreeding birds are dull gray-brown. In flight, the white diamond pattern on the back is characteristic of dowitchers. Vocalizations are a "tututu" call. They feed by probing, often appearing stationary, in an oil pump fashion.

Similar Species: Unlike Wilson's Snipe, dowitchers do not have a striped appearance. Stilt Sandpipers are more delicate in appearance. To distinguish from Long-billed Dowitchers, listen for the call and look for a flat-backed appearance (rather than rounded) and spots (versus bars) along the sides and underbelly. Short-billed Dowitchers often arrive later in the spring and earlier in the fall than Long-billed Dowitchers.

Comments: Short-billed Dowitchers breed in muskegs of the boreal forest and winter primarily in coastal areas through northern South America.

Nonbreeding

©Bob Gress

Breeding

©Bob Gress

Spring migrants show varying amounts of breeding plumage.

©Bob Gress

Long-billed Dowitcher

Limnodromus scolopaceus L: 9½-11¾" WS: 18¼-20½"

Description: Similar and often indistinguishable from the Short-billed Dowitcher, this dove-sized shorebird has a long, straight, black bill and light green legs. Breeding birds are deep reddish-rufous below and heavily mottled buff and black above. Nonbreeding birds are dull gray-brown. The sides and underbelly are often barred. In flight, a white diamond pattern on the back and prominent bill are characteristics of dowitchers. The vocalization is usually a single or repeated "peep" or "keek" call. They feed by probing, often appearing stationary, in an oil pump fashion. Females have a longer, slightly drooped bill.

Similar Species: Unlike the Wilson's Snipe, dowitchers do not have a striped appearance. Stilt Sandpipers are less robust in appearance. To distinguish from the Short-billed Dowitcher, listen for the call and look for the barring (as opposed to spots) along the sides and underbelly and a more rounded back during feeding.

Comments: During the fall migration, Long-billed Dowitchers appear in the Great Plains during July and continue through late fall. They breed on the tundra and winter in fresh and saltwater marshes and mudflats both in coastal areas and inland throughout southern North America and Central America.

■ *Wilson's Snipe*

©Bob Gress

Wilson's Snipe

Gallinago delicata L: 10-11½" WS: 17¼-19½"

Description: A dove-sized, secretive, long-billed, chunky bird with relatively short, gray to greenish legs, Wilson's Snipe have pointed wings and rust on the tail. They have a dark brown striped appearance from above. The brown breast is striped and barred and the underparts are white. Snipe are commonly found in fresh and saltwater marshes and flooded fields. When feeding, they "stitch" like dowitchers and Stilt Sandpipers. Snipe fly in a distinctive zig-zag pattern, often erupting quite suddenly.

Similar Species: Dowitchers do not have the striped appearance characteristic of snipe and have longer necks and legs.

Comments: Wilson's Snipe were formerly grouped with the Old World Common Snipe. They are one of the few species found breeding and/or wintering throughout most of North America in appropriate habitat. Males makes a peculiar sound, called winnowing, during the breeding season when they descend from high in the air and the wind rushing through the tail feathers creates the sound. Snipe are one of two species of shorebirds legally hunted in the Great Plains.

©Gerald Wiens

American Woodcock

Scolopax minor L: 10-12½" WS: 16½-20¼"

Description: American Woodcocks are adapted to year-round forest life. Well camouflaged, they often go unnoticed until flushed. They are chunky, dove-sized birds with long, dull pinkish black-tipped bills; dull pink, gray, yellow or greenish-brown legs; and short, rounded wings. Mottled black, pale-brown and cinnamon upperparts have conspicuous wide black bars. Underparts are unbarred orange-buff. Underside tips of the tail are bright silver white.

Similar Species: Other long-billed shorebirds are usually not inhabitants of woodlands in the Great Plains. American Woodcocks have shorter legs, darker, shorter bills, more rounded wings and darker underparts than Wilson's Snipe.

Comments: The eastern Great Plains is the western edge of woodcock range. Most active at night, "timberdoodles" are found in moist mixed or deciduous woodlands where they probe deeply into the substrate for earthworms and other invertebrates. Males have display stations from which they attract females with spectacular displays, including a "peenting" call, aerial dives, trills and whistles. They are legally hunted in several areas across North America.

Breeding female

©Bob Gress

Breeding male

©Bob Gress

Wilson's Phalarope

Phalaropus tricolor L: 8¾-9½" WS: 15½-17¼"

Description: Smaller than a robin, Wilson's Phalaropes are sexually dimorphic in both size and plumage. Females sport a black neck stripe, orange foreneck and breast, plain gray crown and are chestnut and gray above in breeding plumage. Males are smaller and duller. In nonbreeding plumage, both sexes are basic gray above and white below with plain wings and a white tail showing in flight. They are often observed floating in deep water in large groups. Spinning like tops in tight circles to bring food to the surface, they use long, slender, needle-like bills to pick invertebrates out of the water column.

Similar Species: Wilson's Phalaropes can be confused with Red-necked Phalaropes. Look for the prominent gray crown and tricolored pattern of the Wilson's Phalarope during the breeding season. They lack the black eye spot in nonbreeding plumage.

Comments: Phalaropes are polyandrous (females attempt to mate with more than one male). Incubation and chick rearing are done by males. Wilson's Phalaropes breed throughout wetland areas in the central through northern Great Plains. Large flocks of staging birds are found on saline lakes and marshes in July. Most winter on saline lakes, primarily in mountainous areas of South America.

Nonbreeding

©Bob Gress

Breeding female ©Bob Gress

Red-necked Phalarope

Phalaropus lobatus

L: 7¼-7½" WS: 12¾-16¼"

Description: Red-necked Phalaropes are the size of a large sparrow. Breeding females are dark slate-gray above and along the sides of the breast, with a broad buff mantle, mostly black head, white throat and a white spot above their eye. Males are duller. The nonbreeding plumage is gray above appearing striped with white due to the pattern of their scapulars and tertials. They have a prominent, dark postocular stripe and dark ear patch. In flight, they show a white wing stripe.

Similar Species: Red-necked Phalaropes are the smallest of the phalaropes, are darker and have a prominent eye spot during the nonbreeding season. Red Phalaropes are chunkier in appearance and have shorter, thicker bills.

Comments: Red-necked Phalaropes nest on the arctic tundra and muskeg ponds and spend winters on the open ocean, in coastal bays and freshwater lakes. They are seen on wetlands within the Great Plains during migration.

Nonbreeding ©Glen Tepke

Nonbreeding ©David Seibel

Red Phalarope

Phalaropus fulicarius

L: 8-8¾" WS: 16-17½"

Description: Red Phalaropes are the most heavyset of the phalaropes and almost robin-sized. They have short, light colored legs, yellow-lobed toes and a short, yellow and black-tipped bill. Breeding plumage females have black and white heads, vividly striped backs and rufous necks and underparts. Males are duller in color. Nonbreeding birds are plain gray above and white below. A white wing stripe is apparent in flight.

Similar Species: Distinguish Red Phalaropes from other phalaropes during the nonbreeding season by their chunky appearance, lighter colored back and head and thicker, shorter bill. The phalarope shape, swimming behavior and their bill will separate them from Red Knots and Sanderlings when in breeding plumage.

Comments: Red Phalaropes are circumpolar on the arctic tundra breeding grounds. Like other phalaropes, this species is polyandrous. They primarily spend the nonbreeding season in large groups on the open ocean. The most pelagic of the three phalarope species, Red Phalaropes are uncommon within the Great Plains.

Breeding female ©Mark Chappell

Rare Great Plains Shorebirds

Because of the similarities of these vagrants to the more common Great Plains shorebirds, be sure to use more detailed resources to confirm any of the following.

Wilson's Plover – ***Charadrius wilsonia***

L: 6½-8" WS: 15½-19½"

Found along the southern Atlantic and Gulf coasts, inland birds have been reported from Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas. The robin-sized body and black bill separate it from Semipalmated, Snowy and Piping plovers and the single breast band separates it from Killdeer and Mountain Plover.

American Oystercatcher – ***Haematopus palliatus***

L: 16-17½" WS: 29¼-32½"

Found along the southern Pacific, Gulf and Atlantic coasts, inland birds have been reported from Oklahoma and Texas. The large size, dark brown and white body, black head and chest, pink legs, yellow eye and heavy, chisel-shaped red-orange bill are distinctive.

Spotted Redshank – ***Tringa erythropus***

L: 11½-12½" WS: 24½- 26¾"

This Old World species has been reported in Saskatchewan, Kansas and Texas. Breeding birds are black with red legs and a red and black, slightly drooping bill. Nonbreeding adults and juveniles are reminiscent of yellowlegs but dark lores, white supercilium, red legs and the red base of their lower mandible are distinctive.

Eskimo Curlew – ***Numenius borealis***

L: 12-14¾" WS: 28¾-33¼"

Because of historic market shooting and habitat destruction this once abundant boreal breeder has not been verified since the 1960s. The elliptical migration pattern took large flocks from southern South America north through the Great Plains to northern Canada in spring, then south through the Canadian Maritimes and across the Atlantic back to the wintering grounds. Within the Great Plains, they associated with American Golden-Plovers on grasslands. Similar in appearance to Whimbrels, Eskimo Curlews are slightly smaller, but also

have a short, black bill, which may show red at the base of the lower mandible and a dark lore which reaches the base of the bill. Unlike Whimbrels and Long-billed Curlews, their long wings extend well beyond the tip of the tail. Characteristics to look for include cinnamon-colored underwings, unbarred primaries, chevron marks on the sides and an indistinct crown stripe.

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper – ***Calidris acuminata***

L: 6¾-8" WS: 16¾-19¼"

Breeding in Siberia and wintering in the South Pacific, this species resembles Pectoral Sandpipers. They are differentiated by greenish legs, shorter and darker bill, shorter legs, black-streaked rufous cap, white eye ring, dark loral stripe and white supercilium. The breast lacks the distinct demarcation as seen in Pectoral Sandpipers. Single birds have been observed in several areas across the Great Plains.

Curlew Sandpiper – ***Calidris ferruginea***

L: 7¼-7½" WS: 16¾-18½"

This Old World species has been documented in several areas within the Great Plains. It is similar in shape and size to Dunlins. Curlew Sandpipers may also be misidentified as Stilt Sandpipers which are larger with green-yellow legs. The red breeding coloration also suggests Red Knots, Red Phalaropes or dowitchers so look for long, decurved bills and daintier physiques.

Ruff – ***Philomachus pugnax***

L: females: 7¾-9¾" males: 10¼-12" WS: 19¼-23¼"

This species shows sexual dimorphism in both size and plumage. Males are dove-sized and females (called reeves) are almost robin-sized. Breeding males show plumage variations with different body color and head tufts, ruffs and loss of feathers around the face. Like grouse, they form leks, communal areas where males compete for females through intricate displays. Juveniles, females and birds in nonbreeding plumage are similar to smaller Buff-breasted and Pectoral sandpipers. In flight, look for a distinctive V-shaped white rump patch on Ruffs. They have been seen at several locations in the Great Plains.

Pocket Guides

Bob Gress, Editor

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