

Wildlife Express

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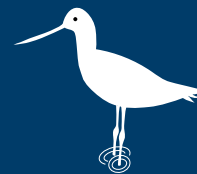
SHOREBIRDS



Spotted Sandpiper Photo: CC-BY Daniel Taieb at Flickr.com

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SHOREBIRDS

Shorebirds are a large group of birds made up of sandpipers and phalaropes, plovers, and avocets and stilts. They tend to be long-legged with long slender beaks. As their name says, they mostly live along shores. Ocean coasts, lake shores, the shores of rivers and other places where water and land meet can be shorebird habitat. Wetlands like mudflats, marshes and estuaries are also used by shorebirds. Because they wade in water, they are also called waders. Almost 217 species have been identified around the world.

Shorebirds eat mainly invertebrates. This includes worms of all kinds, insects and aquatic insect larvae, small crustaceans like shrimp, and mollusks such as clams and snails. They also eat small fish and the eggs of aquatic animals. Flocks of shorebirds can often be seen hunting in shallow water, usually less than four inches deep. Watching one of these flocks rise suddenly into the air in a tight formation is an amazing sight.

Of the shorebirds, sandpipers are the largest group with 87 species. They have long legs with slender toes and long tapered wings. Sandpipers also have a wide variety of beak types from short to long and some that curve downward. This group ranges in size from the tiny six-inch least sandpiper to the long-billed curlew, the largest shorebird in North America. Many sandpipers nest in the Arctic. The rest of the year is spent near open water.

Plovers are another large group of shorebirds. Unlike sandpipers, most plovers have short, straight beaks. Plovers live in open habitats like grasslands, marshes and tundra, but they still spend a lot of time near water. They are visual hunters, using their large eyes to find food even at night. Plovers will also hunt by foot-tapping. Tapping their feet disturbs the water or soil. This makes prey animals move, so the plover can see the prey and grab it. Plovers often hunt much like the robin you might see in your yard. They run and stop, run and stop.

Plovers are famous for their broken-wing displays. You have probably seen a killdeer pretending that its wing was injured. It was trying to lure you away from its nest. A possible predator will be fooled by the bird and follow it away from the nest. As soon as the parent bird is sure the intruder is far enough away, it flies off. Because plovers and other shorebirds nest on the ground, the broken-wing act is a good way for plovers to protect their nest.

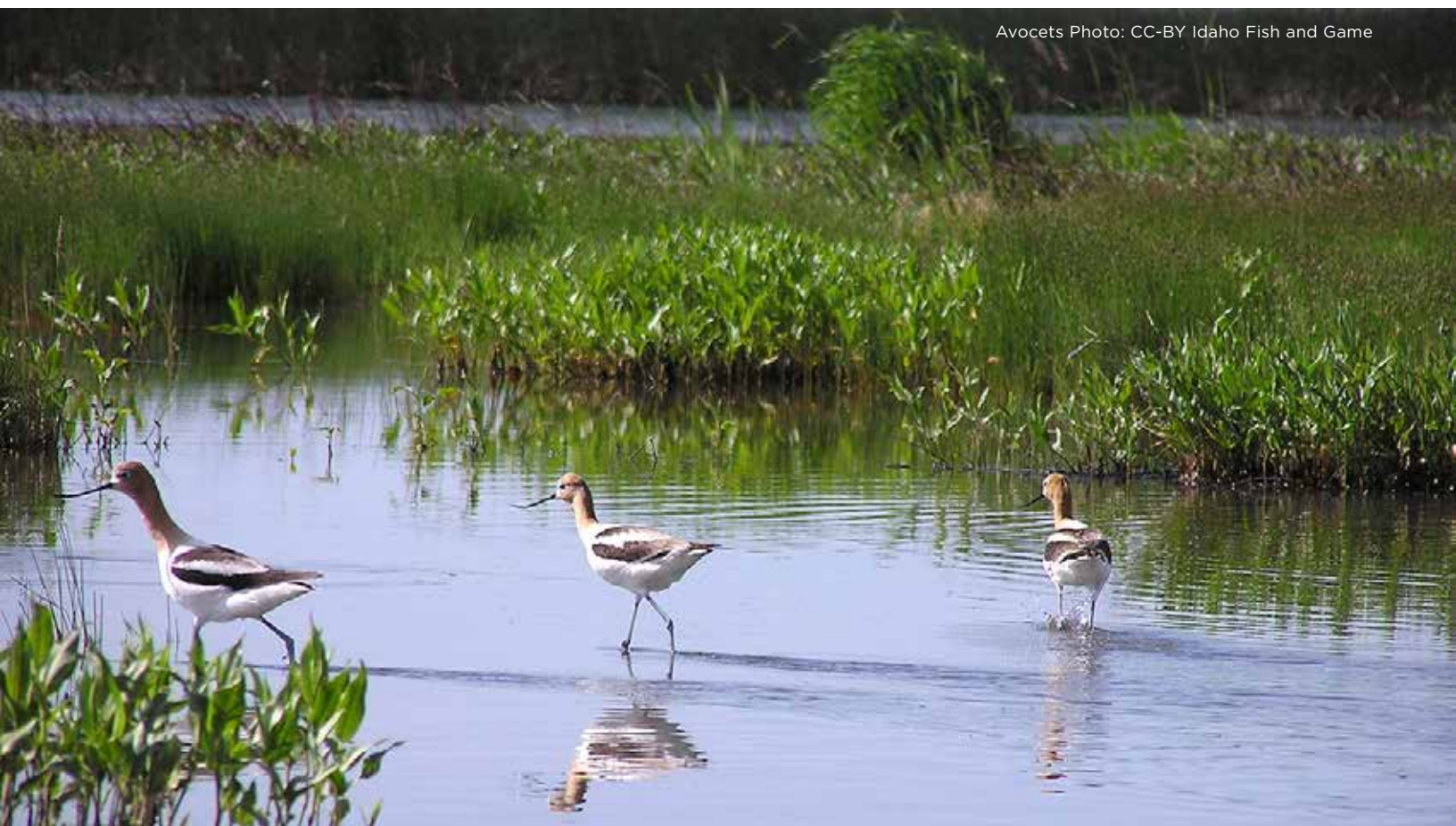
The last group of shorebirds are the avocets and stilts. Only two species are found in North America, the American avocet and the black-necked stilt. You can see them both in Idaho. They are tall with long legs and long slim bills.



Populations of many shorebirds are decreasing. Habitat loss is a major reason. Because these birds are highly migratory, they need healthy habitat for both nesting and wintering. Another problem is disturbance by people. We like to enjoy the beach, but many shorebirds nest on beaches. Our activities can disturb the birds, damage their nests and even kill their chicks. Fortunately, people are working to help shorebirds by protecting their habitats. They are also educating beach users, helping them understand why staying away from nesting areas is important. By learning about shorebirds, you can understand what they need and how to help.

Black Neck Stilt Photo: CC-BY Dogman5 at Flickr.com

Avocets Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game



MIGRATORY CHAMPIONS



Rebecca Bowater

Bar Tailed Godwits Photo: CC-BY Rebecca Bowater at Flickr.com

Many shorebirds are long-distance migrants. Of the 38 species that have been seen in Idaho, most only visit our state for brief stops during migration.

One of the truly long-distance shorebird migrants is the bar-tailed godwit. This dove-sized shorebird makes a nonstop journey of 7200 miles, traveling from Alaska to New Zealand for the winter. Another super migrator is a sandpiper called a red knot. One banded red knot has flown the distance between the Earth and moon and half-way back in his lifetime of 21-plus years. This equals 358,500 miles! Amazing for a bird that only weighs as much as a deck of cards. How do these small birds make such incredible journeys?

Before migration begins, all migratory birds do a lot of eating. All the extra food becomes fat. This stored fat provides the energy that fuels their muscles during flight. Birds that make nonstop flights, like the bar-tailed godwit, also shrink some of the body organs they do not need during migration. Since they will not eat or drink on their journey, their intestines, salt glands and other organs are not needed. By shrinking these organs, the birds are lighter. In addition, the energy used to maintain these organs can be used for flying.

Once migratory birds arrive at their destination, they eat and eat and eat. This helps their bodies recover from their long migrations. Healthy habitat is critical for migrating birds. It provides a safe place to rest and eat before the next part of their journey.

NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON'T

Most shorebirds are colored a lot like their habitat. This helps them blend in and not be seen. They have what is called cryptic coloration. This is coloration that allows an animal to match the colors of its surroundings.

When you think about wild animals, what colors do you think of? Brown, tan, buff, gray, black, white, and reddish come to mind. Really bright colors do not. How about patterns on fur, skin, scales or feathers? Do we see many wild animals with big colorful stripes or checkerboard patterns? No, but we do see animals with small streaks, dots, patches, or stripes. We also see animals that are pretty much one color. These colors and patterns help the animal match its surroundings.

If you are a predator, you do not want your prey to see you coming. A bright red bobcat with yellow stripes could not sneak up on its prey very easily. But prey animals do not want to be seen, either. An orange rabbit with big white spots could easily be seen by a predator. But a brown rabbit sitting still in dry grass would be hard to find.

Staying still plays an important role in cryptic coloration. Have you ever noticed an animal because it moved? Only its movement gave it away. That's cryptic coloration at work.

Not all animals are cryptically colored; some are brightly colored. Think about birds and butterflies. Many birds are colorful during the breeding season. Bright colors help males show off and defend a territory. Once summer is over, the bright colors are not needed. Male birds lose their colorful feathers, becoming more cryptically colored. Bright colors can also be a warning. These colors warn that some critters taste bad, sting or are venomous. Their bright colors are like a sign saying "Leave me alone or else!"



BIRD BEAKS

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The basic structure of all bird beaks is the same. Beaks are bony jaws covered with a layer of skin. This skin is usually hard and horn-like. In birds like ducks and sandpipers, the outer skin is leathery. This skin is made up of several layers. The outer layer is dead skin. It gets worn away as the bird uses its beak. Living layers underneath renew the outer dead skin. The tip of the beak grows almost constantly but is worn down with use.

Because shorebirds find their food in mud or sand, they need a long beak. While most shorebird beaks are long and slender, these characteristics vary a lot between species. The tiny least sandpiper's beak is about as long as the bird's head. It helps these birds find the tiny animals they eat. Long-billed curlews have curved beaks as long as the short side of notebook paper. This long beak can fit into the tunnel of a crab. A sandpiper called a ruddy turnstone has a short, stout beak. It uses its beak to turn over shells, plants and stones, looking for prey. Can you guess why this bird is called a turnstone?

The tips of some sandpiper beaks have special receptors. These receptors help the sandpipers use touch, smell and pressure changes in the sand to catch prey. The Wilson's snipe has a flexible bill tip. It allows this sandpiper to open its bill tip while the rest of the beak stays closed. The snipe can eat without removing its beak from the soil. This is an advantage when a lot of prey is in a small area.



Long Billed Curlew Photo: CC-BY Troupial at Flickr.com

Because a bird's beak is so important, birds are careful to clean their beaks. This is especially true for shorebirds. Constantly sticking their beaks in sand or mud could leave quite a mess. The birds clean up by bill-wiping. They wipe their beaks on a twig, grasses, their feathers or other surfaces. A bird keeping its beak clean is just like you keeping a tool clean---it will work well when you need it.

LEAVING HOME

Very young birds can be grouped into two broad categories---precocial and altricial. What group they are in depends upon the kind of bird.

Precocial (pre-CO-shall) birds leave the nest as soon as they hatch and dry off. This is often within 24 hours of hatching. These birds include shorebirds, grouse, ducks, geese, swans, cranes, gulls and terns. Being able to leave the nest right away is important, because they nest on the ground. A nest of baby birds would make a great meal for a predator.

Precocial birds hatch covered with down. Their eyes are open. They can walk, swim and feed themselves soon after hatching, but still depend upon their parents to keep them safe and warm. The parents keep a careful watch over their youngsters, taking them to places where they can find food and shelter. Precocial baby birds stay warm by snuggling underneath

their parents. Young shorebirds tuck themselves under their parent's wings, leaving their long legs dangling. That's quite a sight!

The opposite of precocial is altricial (al-TRISH-all). Like you, these youngsters hang around the nest and grow up before they leave home. Songbirds, hawks, owls, herons, hummingbirds, swallows and woodpeckers are altricial.

When altricial birds hatch, they have very little down. Their eyes are closed, and they are helpless. They depend upon their parents to feed them and keep them warm. Altricial birds like songbirds, grow quickly. They leave the nest in about 10 days to two weeks. Hawks and owls spend longer in the nest, and eaglets may spend three months in their nest. Birds with altricial young hide their nests or build them high in trees or on cliffs to avoid predators. In spring, you can spot these hidden nests before the trees leaf out.

Killdeer Momma Photo: CC-BY Brenda L. Schultz
at Forest Preserve District of Will County



COMMONLY SEEN IDAHO SHOREBIRDS

Killdeer

- Named for its loud “killdeer, killdeer” calls.
- Often seen in open habitat, including lawns and parks.
- Famous for its broken-wing act to protect its nest.
- Some killdeer spend the winter in southern Idaho.



Killdeer Photo:
CC-BY Gary Ellwein
at Flickr.com

Wilson's snipe

- Yes, this is a real bird not a summer camp joke!
- Prefers wetlands, such as marshes and swamps.
- During courtship, males dive through the air, making a winnowing sound as air flows through the outer tail feathers.
- Extra-large flight muscles allow snipe to fly up to 60 miles per hour.



Snipe Photo:
CC-BY Steve Jones
at Flickr.com

Spotted sandpiper

- Most widespread North American sandpiper.
- Common along rivers and lakes.
- Females establish and defend territories while males incubate eggs and care for young.
- Also called teeterpeep for its habit of bobbing up and down when it stands still.



Spotted
Sandpiper Photo:
CC-BY Daniel Taieb
at Flickr.com



Long Billed Curlew Photo:
CC-BY Troupial at Flickr.com

Long-billed curlew

- Largest North American sandpiper, weighing a little more than a loaf of bread.
- Has a long, slender, downward-curving bill about eight inches long.
- Sometimes searches for food in groups, walking side-by-side to flush prey.
- More long-billed curlews once nested in southwest Idaho than anywhere else in the U.S.

Black-necked stilt

- Striking black-and-white bird with bubblegum-pink legs.
- Have the second longest legs compared to its body size than any bird except a flamingo.
- Prefers shallow wetlands.
- Uses a “popcorn” display where adult birds leap into the air to drive intruders away from nests.



Black Neck Stilt Photo: CC-BY Dogman5 at Flickr.com

KNOW YOUR TARGET



Photo: CC-BY Idaho Department of Commerce at Flickr.com

Responsible recreational shooters and hunters know where and when they can legally shoot and how to properly identify their target.

One of the biggest threats to long-billed curlews in Idaho is illegal shooting. In one southwest Idaho study, almost half of the adult curlews tagged by scientists were illegally shot. Irresponsible people shoot these birds by accident or on purpose. Adult birds are killed, leaving baby curlews to starve without their parents to take care of them.

Most of this illegal activity happens during the spring nesting season. Curlew courtship makes the birds very visible. In addition, parent curlews aggressively defend their nests. They

crouch and run at intruders to scare them away. This must scare some people who react instead of thinking about why the bird might be acting that way.

Irresponsible people give responsible shooters a bad name, and that's not okay.

If you witness illegal shooting of curlews or other wildlife, call the Citizens Against Poaching hotline at 1-800-632-5999.

BE OUTSIDE—GO BIRDING!



Photo: CC-BY Bruce Ackerman at Idaho Fish and Game



If you are enjoying reading about shorebirds, you might want to check out bird watching. Millions of people of all ages around the world enjoy birding.

It is easy to watch birds. Just spend some time outside and you will probably see a bird. Spring is a great time, because you can also hear many kinds of bird songs. Male birds sing to set up their territory and attract a mate. If you spend some time in your backyard just listening, you might be amazed at all the different bird songs you will hear. And the birds you can see. Having a bird guide is very helpful. Check out your school or local library to look at different guides. The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology

has a bird identification app called Merlin. It's a great tool to help you learn to identify birds. It's free, so ask your parents about downloading it on a phone.

Another great way to learn about bird watching is to go on a bird walk. Check out your local nature center or park to see if they offer bird walks. Contact your local Audubon Society for a schedule of their bird walks and programs. Most experienced bird watchers enjoy helping new birders, especially students. And most of those experienced birders got their start just like you, watching birds in their backyard.

SENSATIONAL SHOREBIRDS

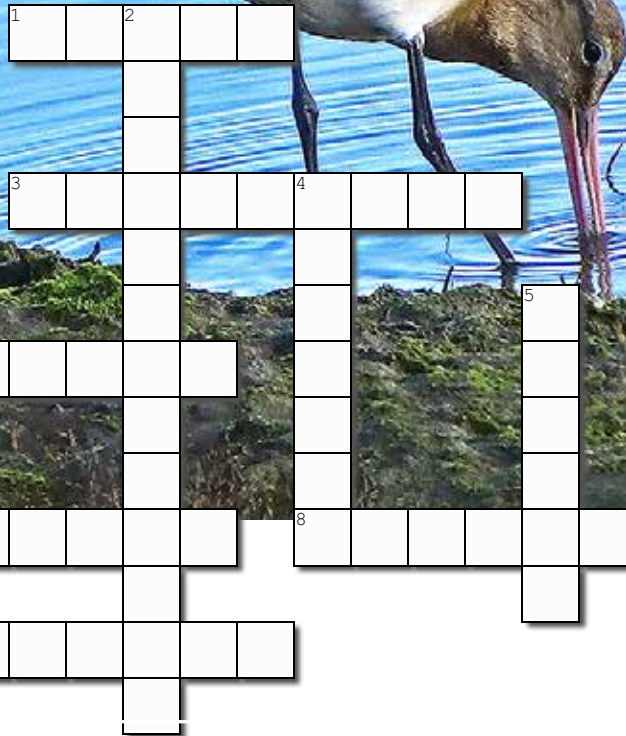


Photo: CC-BY Ron Hill at Flickr.com

Across

1. The Wilson's _____ can flex the tip of its bill.
3. This word means a baby bird can leave the nest soon after hatching.
6. This bird is known for acting like it has a broken wing to protect its nest.
7. This word tells you that a baby bird depends on its parents for food and warmth after hatching.
8. The long-billed _____ is the largest shorebird in North America.
9. These shorebirds have short, straight beaks.

Down

2. Shorebirds mainly eat _____.
4. This coloration helps an animal match its surroundings.
5. Shorebirds like to live along these.
7. This shorebird's bill curves upward.

Created using the Crossword Maker on TheTeachersCorner.net

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to: adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov or Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707