

BIRD CONSERVATION

The Magazine of American Bird Conservancy

Spring 2012



On the EDGE

“In the ecstasy of homecoming, the curlew now
hardly remembered that for three summers past he
had been mysteriously alone and the mating fire
within had burned itself out unquenched...”

Fred Bodsworth, Last of the Curlews



Most – but certainly not all – shorebirds spend critical parts of their lives on the thin edge where sea meets land. Unfortunately for them, and for those of us who love shorebirds, this is also where people like to be.

This continuing, intense competition between man and nature at the shoreline is not going well for nature. Around the world, man is gaining the edge: building houses; polluting; filling wetlands (such as the invaluable Saemangeum wetlands on the coast of South Korea, home to millions of wintering shorebirds, including, perhaps, our own Bar-tailed Godwit); vainly hardening shorelines as sea level rises; and damaging habitat with off-road vehicles, invasive, alien plants, and flotsam. It really isn't going that well for man either, now that I think of it.

But “shorebirds” is really a misnomer, since so many species in this group spend much or all of their time elsewhere, such as Upland Sandpipers nesting in grasslands, yellowlegs in the Boreal Forest, and Eskimo Curlews in history.

Yes, the Eskimo Curlew is gone forever, and in the words of American naturalist William Beebe, “Another Heaven and another Earth must pass before such a one can be again.” The last individual seen in North America was in 1962 on the edge at Galveston Island, Texas, and the absolute last confirmed Eskimo Curlew was shot in Barbados the following year. Other shorebirds such as the *rufa* Red Knot may follow the Eskimo Curlew into extinction.

Even those species that avoid the land/water ecotone altogether can be on or near the edge of survival and

extinction. The Mountain Plover's grassland habitats – and thus the bird – are disappearing as native grasslands are converted to marginal agriculture. Habitat loss, possibly in combination with pesticide poisoning, may cause the Buff-breasted Sandpiper to disappear over the horizon to another Heaven and another Earth too.

Many shorebirds, whose numbers seemed beyond affecting just a few years ago, are now disappearing before our eyes. Sanderlings – those birds we watched doggedly chasing the tide up and down the beach when we were children: way down (no more happy patter of little feet). Piping Plovers? Around 6,500 left.

Many birders I speak with tell me they steer clear of shorebirds: too hard to identify, they say. Most birders can walk out their front door and start to watch landbirds every day, but shorebirds are out on the edge of their imagination, in a faraway and, for some, even forbidding place. So, why care? The answers to this are many, and you have heard them before: we are borrowing from our children, we should adhere to the precautionary principle, maintain the intrinsic values of biodiversity, and the interconnectedness of all life.

I say care to save shorebirds because we can. Read the articles in this issue and learn how. It just takes will; yours and mine.

George H. Fenwick

George H. Fenwick
President, American Bird Conservancy





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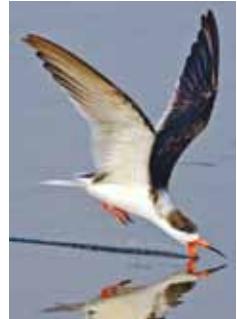


Mountain Plover: Greg Lavaty_www.texastargetbirds.com

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Diademed Sandpiper-Plover:
Dubi Shapiro



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ON the WIRE

Endangered Black-backed Thornbill Found at El Dorado Reserve in Colombia

In December 2011, biologists working with ABC partner Fundación ProAves observed and photographed a Black-backed Thornbill at the El Dorado Reserve. This hummingbird species, classified as globally endangered, is found only in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta of Colombia in humid and elfin forests, bush-covered slopes near the tree line, and in páramo (high-altitude grassland). The bird's already small range is shrinking drastically due to rampant deforestation, overgrazing, and burning. Its population is suspected to be in decline due to this ongoing habitat loss, making the sighting of this individual at El Dorado significant.

Black-backed Thornbills have very short, slightly downward-curving bills and purplish-black, forked tails. Males are mostly black above, while females are bronzy-green above and whitish below, speckled with green on the throat and sides.

"This rare little bird is a gem and will undoubtedly bring more attention to the fantastic El Dorado Reserve," said Benjamin Skolnik, Conservation Project Specialist with American Bird Conservancy. "You can add one more to a long list of endemic, threatened species you could see there."

The El Dorado Bird Reserve protects over 2,000 acres of critical habitat for



Male Black-backed Thornbill: Fundación ProAves

the Black-backed Thornbill and many other endemic species, such as the Santa Marta Parakeet, Santa Marta Sabrewing, and Santa Marta Bush-Tyrant.

ABC is presently supporting ProAves' efforts to acquire another key tract of land to add to the reserve, where palm trees used by the Santa Marta Parakeet grow.

New Government Initiative Will Benefit Golden-winged Warblers

A new program called "Working Lands for Wildlife" (WLW), unveiled in March 2012 by the U.S. Departments of the Interior and Agriculture, will provide a huge boost for Golden-winged Warbler conservation in the eastern United States, involving dozens of organizations across ten states, including federal and state agencies, universities, and not-for-profit conservation organizations. This effort is being facilitated by the Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture (AMJV) and ABC.

"The Golden-winged Warbler is one of the most seriously threatened, non-federally listed species in eastern North America. Everyone familiar with its plight will be excited about the WLW project

and the opportunity it provides to better engage private landowners in conservation. If we are going to have this bird around for future generations, we're going to need public and private collaboration," said Brian Smith, ABC's AMJV Coordinator.

The WLW initiative will focus on creating and maintaining the types of habitat necessary to sustain populations of warblers in and around their current breeding areas, particularly young forest. This will include efforts designed to also increase the amount of available habitat throughout the Appalachians.

"The additional funding from the WLW project will provide for increased on-the-ground habitat restoration, conservation, and

monitoring to benefit the Golden-winged Warbler. An education campaign will improve understanding of the importance of young forests and scrubby, open habitat to this bird," Smith explained.

ABC has already made the Golden-winged Warbler a major focus of its conservation, and is continuing to coordinate conservation measures in both the United States and on the bird's wintering grounds in Central and South America.



Photo by Laura Erickson

Protecting the Red Knot in South America

The *rufa* Red Knot has experienced alarming declines in recent decades — from well over 100,000 in the early 1990s to about 40,000 today — and is now in real danger of extinction within the next ten years. Populations of long-distance migrant Red Knots, which winter on Tierra del Fuego in southernmost South America, are of particular concern, having dropped from more than 50,000 in 1985 to fewer than 15,000 today. With numerous partners, ABC has advocated for the protection of one of the knot's essential food sources — the eggs of horseshoe crabs, the laying of which coincides with the knot's migration each spring.



The campaign's logo, seen on buttons, bumper stickers, and t-shirts, translates as "Choose the right path, protect our flock."



The Red Knot mascot, called Fabián Rojizo after a biplane pilot in a novel by Antoine de Saint Exupéry, is a popular figure around San Antonio Bay, Argentina. Photo: Mirta Carbajal



Red Knot at Delaware Bay. Photo: Jan van de Kam

But addressing threats to the species only in North America may not be enough to prevent extinction, as the knot also faces challenges to its stopover and wintering areas in South America.

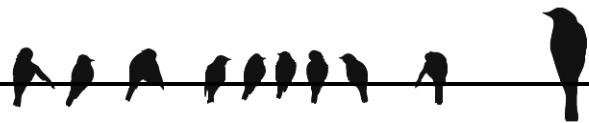
One important stopover site, the San Antonio Bay Natural Protected Area in Río Negro, Argentina, lies next to a resort town popular with tourists in

the Argentine summer months. Disturbance from beachgoers, especially those on 4x4 vehicles, can be severe.

A partnership among Rare, the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, and the Argentine non-profit Fundación Inalafquen recently led to the completion of a two-year social marketing campaign to reduce the disturbance to knots and other

shorebirds at San Antonio Bay. With a mascot, a play, songs, and celebrations, the campaign increased local knowledge of the importance of the knots, and increased local support for their protection. By building an alternative 4x4 trail away from the beach, it also provided the way for responsible 4x4 users to "Choose the Right Path," the campaign's slogan. Similar campaigns were also successful at two other locations in Argentina — the Costa Atlántica in Tierra del Fuego, and the Rio Gallegos Estuary in Santa Cruz. All three are sites in the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network.

Charles Duncan, Director of Manomet's Shorebird Recovery Project, commented: "Using marketing techniques to change attitudes and behaviors was entirely new to us. Fortunately, our partner, Rare, is a world leader in their use for conservation. We learned to connect shorebird conservation to the quality of life of the people at the sites. Red Knots and their habitats are the beneficiaries."



New Conservation Area in Peru Protects Disappearing Cloud Forest Species

ABC has partnered with Asociación Ecosistemas Andinos (ECOAN) to establish a new conservation area in central Peru that will help protect the area's shrinking cloud forest and rich biodiversity.

The new, almost 2,000-acre Monte Potrero Municipal Conservation Area is characterized by steep topography and moist cloud forests, and is home to a number of endemic Peruvian bird species, such as the Fire-throated Metaltail, Baron's Spinetail, and Tschudi's Tapaculo. Other notable species include the Powerful Woodpecker, White-chinned Thistletail, White-browed Spinetail, Three-

striped Hemispingus, and White-browed Conebill. There are also small pockets of appropriate habitat where the globally vulnerable Bay-vented Cotinga and Rufous-browed Hemispingus may occur. In addition, the area protects habitat for the endangered Andean cat.

This new protective designation is the most recent in a series of important bird conservation efforts that ABC and our international partners have brought about in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia thanks to the generous support of the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation.



Powerful Woodpecker: Luke Seitz

First Millerbird Fledges on Laysan

An endangered Millerbird chick has fledged on Hawai'i's Laysan Island for the first time in nearly 100 years. This conservation milestone follows the recent historic reintroduction of the rare songbird to the island. This project is a cooperative venture between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and ABC, resulting from many years of research



This is the first Millerbird chick fledged on Laysan Island in nearly 100 years. Photo: Robby Kohley



The translocated Millerbirds settled right down in their new home on Laysan Island. Photo: Robby Kohley

and detailed planning by biologists and resource managers.

Approximately 775 Millerbirds remain in existence. Until recently, the species was confined to Nihoa Island, where they risked extinction from introduced predators and hurricanes. In September 2011, 24 Millerbirds were trapped on Nihoa and released on Laysan Island, 650 miles away, in an effort to create a

second population and minimize the risk of the species' extinction.

Millerbirds historically occurred on Laysan, but were extirpated sometime prior to 1923; a result of the devastation of the island's vegetation by rabbits and other introduced mammals.

Because of the difficulty of accessing Nihoa, a breeding population on Laysan will provide the first opportunity to observe the Millerbird's nesting cycle from start to finish, a significant advance in the study of this endangered species.

"This is another huge milestone in the effort to save the Millerbird from extinction. We still have a long way to go, but each victory like this is encouraging, and tells us that, so far, we, and the Millerbirds, are succeeding," said George Wallace, ABC's Vice President for Oceans and Islands.

HELP MEET THE ABC SPRING MIGRATION CHALLENGE!

Shorebirds are not the only migratory birds facing daunting challenges throughout their life cycles.

All our migratory birds — warblers, shorebirds, raptors, hummingbirds, seabirds, sparrows — need your help for their survival.

This spring, renowned author Jonathan Franzen and business executive Jeff Rusinow have generously teamed up with New York investor and philanthropist Robert Wilson to offer a challenge to you: help increase real protection for migratory birds this spring. Every dollar you donate between now and June 20 will be matched dollar for dollar up to \$100,000 — **with your help we can raise \$200,000 this spring for birds!**

Your challenge gift will mean:

- ✓ New and improved breeding and wintering habitat for declining species such as the Golden-winged, Red-faced, Cerulean, and Prairie Warblers.
- ✓ Work to protect the Lake Apopka Restoration Area – an ABC-designated Globally Important Bird Area – popular for migratory shorebirds such as the Western Sandpiper and Black-necked Stilt, as well as federally endangered species that include the Wood Stork and Florida Scrub-Jay.
- ✓ Expansion of a network of critically important Latin American and Caribbean bird reserves used by dozens of migratory species including the Baird's Sparrow, Bicknell's Thrush, Ovenbird, Hermit Warbler, and Long-billed Curlew. These reserves also protect habitat for some of the most endangered birds in the world.
- ✓ Increased efforts to protect raptors such as the Swainson's Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, and Burrowing Owl from the damaging aspects of wind power development.
- ✓ Continued cutting-edge work to prevent collisions with glass for birds such as the Wood Thrush and Ruby-throated Hummingbird.
- ✓ Protection of breeding and foraging grounds of albatrosses, shearwaters, and other threatened seabirds.

ABC is the only U.S. nonprofit dedicated exclusively to protecting birds and their habitats throughout the Americas. You already know ABC gets results — **donate today to help us get even more results for migratory birds.**



Please act now to help ABC meet the \$200,000 goal — use the enclosed envelope or visit www.abcbirds.org/membership. Challenge ends June 20!



RECOVERING SHOREBIRDS *in the* AMERICAS

If you let them, shorebirds will completely redefine what you thought birds are capable of.

Consider this: On August 22, 2011, a Whimbrel, named Chinquapin by biologists, headed southward from Canada's upper Hudson Bay carrying a tiny satellite transmitter. After two days and nights of non-stop flying, he encountered Hurricane Irene, with sustained winds over 111 mph. Ask anyone with a sailboat what this must have been like for a bird that weighs about a pound. To the amazement and relief of the researchers tracking him, Chinquapin flew on through the storm, then changed course and landed in the Bahamas for a several-week stay before resuming his migration. As I write, he is wintering in Suriname, exactly where he did last year, apparently none the worse for his experience.

Or this: In preparing to migrate north from Tierra del Fuego, at the southern tip of South America, Red Knots increase the mass of their flight muscles while simultaneously shrinking their digestive system. The change is so drastic that when they arrive at stopover sites in the United States, they are incapable of digesting the clams and mussels they eat most of the year. Yet if soft food, such as the eggs of horseshoe crabs, is

sufficiently available, they can almost double their weight in just two weeks. You could think of a 105-lb. human reaching 200 lbs. in that short time (but maybe it's better not to).

Or try this: a Red Knot named B95 has so far flown a cumulative distance equivalent to the Earth to the Moon and part way back – more than 350,000 miles! B95, now at least 18 years old, was photographed late last year by some of the same people who first caught him in 1995. They all look much older than in the earlier photographs, but he looks the same.



"Chinquapin," a Whimbrel, being fitted with a solar-powered satellite transmitter. Photo: M. Friel

Many—but not all—shorebird species aggregate at a small number of food-rich "stepping stone" sites along coastlines and inland wetlands during their lengthy migratory cycle. Some, such as the Sanderling and the

well-named Solitary Sandpiper, are "dispersed migrants" found in small numbers along extensive coastlines or rivers. Other shorebird species, endemic to South America, are among the world's least understood groups of birds in both their natural history and their conservation status (see page 26).

For all shorebirds, threats including loss of habitat through development, chronic disturbance from beachgoers and dogs, "coastal engineering" projects, climate change, and overfishing of their food resources, have taken their toll. In fact, the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan (www.fws.gov/shorebirdplan), shows that no species



Researchers use colored "flags" to follow the movements of Red Knots. This bird was first banded in Argentina at the San Antonio Bay stopover. Photo: Mark K. Peck

of breeding or migrant shorebird in North America is in the category of "not at risk," and half are classified as "of high concern" or "highly imperiled."

What then is to be done? Effective conservation of shorebirds must address three inherent challenges: 1) shorebirds are among the most migratory animals on the planet and require concerted action over an enormous geography; 2) for the many species that congregate in large



About the guest author: Charles Duncan is Director of the Shorebird Recovery Project at the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences (www.manomet.org). Manomet, one of the nation's oldest non-profit environmental research organizations, is dedicated to conserving natural resources for both humans and wildlife. Charles Duncan also serves as Director of the Executive Office of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network.



The following facts give a sense of the situation:

- The number of long-distance migrant *rufa* Red Knots has dropped from 50,000 to 15,000 since 1985.
- Numbers of migrant shorebirds using Delaware Bay have declined by 80% since 1982.
- Semipalmated Sandpipers have dropped by 80% — from 1.8 million to 350,000 birds — in their core winter range in northern South America since 1982.
- Populations of shorebirds using Kachemak Bay, Alaska, have fallen by 70% since the 1990s.

Solitary Sandpiper: Greg Homel

groups, their critical stopover sites are essentially irreplaceable; and 3) coastal and wetland habitats have been lost or degraded even faster than other habitat types. Climate change exacerbates all three of these challenges.

Faced with these challenges, it quickly becomes obvious that no single group, corporation, government, or treaty organization in the world has enough resources—or authority—to recover shorebird populations on their own. The only way forward is through “collective impact,” where many organizations from various sectors work towards the same goal, and measure progress the same way. Success depends on having a backbone organization that actively coordinates actions and shares lessons learned among participating groups.

One of the best-known and most effective organizations is the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN, www.whsrn.org). Begun in 1985, and now comprising 85 sites covering some 30 million acres in 13 nations, WHSRN is a voluntary, non-regulatory coalition whose mission is to conserve shorebirds and their habitats through a network of key sites across the Americas.

WHSRN enrolls sites based on two simple criteria: 1) importance to shorebirds as demonstrated by annually hosting at least 20,000 shorebirds or 1% of a population, and 2) a simple letter of commitment from the landowner(s) agreeing to make shorebird conservation a priority at the site. WHSRN’s Executive Office, with staff in Maine and Massachusetts; Baja California, Mexico;

and Santiago, Chile, is operated by the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, and serves as the critical “backbone organization.” A Hemispheric Council, made up of 16 influential members of governments and non-profits in the Americas and beyond, shapes the WHSRN strategy and makes decisions on new site nominations.

Curiously, the very power of WHSRN is that it has no formal legal or treaty basis, and maintains a low barrier-to-entry. Rather than placing prerequisites on landowners and managers (such as having a functioning shorebird management plan), WHSRN first helps them appreciate their connection to the rest of the hemisphere and provides them not only the will (pride of place) but also the way (knowledge, tools, and connections) to ensure effective conservation of the site.

A second area where collective impact for shorebird recovery is necessary is in building a scientific foundation for action. What are the drivers that have caused shorebirds to decline?

Answering this and similar questions is the purpose of the Shorebird Research Group of the Americas (www.shorebirdresearch.org), a consortium of researchers from academia, government, non-government organizations, and the public, whose purpose is to encourage collaborative research, provide communication among individuals and groups, and to be a clearinghouse for emerging ideas and issues related to shorebirds.

The work of the Arctic Shorebird Demographic Network (ASDN) exemplifies the enormous geographic scale and complexity that finding answers to shorebird declines presents.

ASDN’s work combines unprecedented and sophisticated understanding of experimental design and biostatistics with the almost



The work of the Arctic Shorebird Demographic Network (ASDN) exemplifies the enormous geographic scale and complexity that finding answers to shorebird declines presents.

Sanderlings: Greg Lavaty, www.texastargetbirds.com



unimaginable logistical challenges of placing qualified teams of field biologists at sites across the Arctic breeding grounds (and getting them safely home).

Using carefully formulated scientific protocol, ASDN will provide information on the mechanisms behind declines (e.g., poor reproductive success or low adult survival), and also help determine when shorebird population sizes are likely to be limited (e.g., breeding, migration, non-breeding). The results will make future conservation actions more efficient and surgically targeted. ASDN is coordinated by Manomet, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Kansas State University. The project is funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Canadian Wildlife Service, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, and several generous individual donors.

Any conservation effort needs to hold itself accountable by providing measures of success. For shorebirds, recovered and stable populations are the best measure of the success of conservation efforts. However, measuring and quantifying this requires a baseline from which to start, and ongoing monitoring at

thousands of sites. Fortunately, in 1974, Brian Harrington, organized the International Shorebird Survey (ISS), one of the first large-scale “citizen-science” projects, with hundreds of volunteer teams counting shorebirds during spring and fall migrations. With modest financial resources, the ISS has contributed reliable data on shorebird populations for nearly 40 years, with over 69,000 surveys and total observations of more than 60 million shorebirds at more than 1,500 locations across the Western Hemisphere.

With the companion Atlantic Canada Shorebird Survey, the ISS has become among the most significant sources of monitoring information for shorebirds in North America.

Recently, statistician Dr. Paul Smith collaborated with Manomet to analyze the ISS data from 1974 through 2009 for 41 species (80% of all regularly occurring shorebirds in North America). The results demonstrate that shorebirds continue to face significant conservation challenges. Although ongoing declines for many species warrant concern, the analyses also suggested some reasons for optimism. For all shorebirds combined, the troubling declines observed through the 1990s may have slowed,

perhaps because of conservation efforts by WHSRN and many other groups. Five species were found to be increasing. These include the American Oystercatcher, the subject of significant management efforts, and the Semipalmated Plover, not previously known to be increasing.

Despite these encouraging trends, the estimates also suggest that declines are ongoing for 23 species, and at statistically significant rates for five species. These include some already known to be of conservation concern, such as the Red Knot and Long-billed Curlew, but others, such as the Black-bellied Plover, for which there was previously no specific conservation concern.

What can you do? Help others understand how amazing these heroic little birds are and why they deserve our protection; contribute to knowledge by reporting sightings (<http://ebird.org/content/iss/>); avoid disturbing roosting or feeding shorebirds; and contribute financially to conservation groups such as ABC and Manomet.

Together we can create a conservation success story equal to that of waterfowl in the 1920s or raptors in the 1980s.

Threats to shorebirds

North American shorebirds, known for their epic migratory journeys, run a gauntlet of man-made threats as they wing their way between wintering and nesting grounds. Some of these threats impact only a few species, while others pose major problems for all. Cumulatively, these threats are causing declines across the entire shorebird family, with 22 species in such steep decline that they are now listed on the U.S. WatchList of birds of conservation concern. Some, such as the Eskimo Curlew, were never able to recover from the assault, and slipped into extinction – a sad reminder that all of these threats must be addressed before we lose any more species.



Breeding Site Habitat Loss

For the most part, shorebird breeding habitat in arctic Canada and Alaska is plentiful and well protected, but breeding habitats in the contiguous United States and southern Canada are threatened by agriculture and urbanization. For example, Marbled Godwits are steadily declining due to the conversion of prairie grasslands for farming in the northern Great Plains states and southern parts of central Canadian provinces. Draining of marshland has caused problems for Wilson's Phalaropes on their breeding grounds, and the species can no longer be found at some traditional sites. Fortunately, the adaptability of this species in finding new areas is helping minimize declines.



Wintering Site Habitat Loss

The status of many shorebird wintering sites is poorly known. It is likely that most are stable and are not the limiting factor for populations, but specific threats, such as habitat loss, water pollution, and hydrologic alteration from shrimp farming, likely do impact some species. For example, in the State of Sinaloa on the west coast of Mexico, over 50,000 acres of intertidal and mangrove swamps important to shorebirds have been converted to shrimp farms. Similar problems have occurred in northeastern Brazil along the coast of Ceará and portions of Rio Grande do Norte states.

In 2007, ABC, with a generous donation from the Mitsubishi International Corporation Foundation, worked with Pronatura Noroeste to purchase 865 acres of coastal wetlands to conserve key shorebird habitat in Bahia Santa Maria, Mexico. The grant leveraged substantial federal funding to restore necessary water flow to an additional 7,410 acres of wetlands.

Threats to shorebirds

Reuben Walder, Marine Photobank



Stopover Site Habitat Loss

Habitat loss at migration stopover sites is likely the biggest problem for our shorebirds, preventing them from rebuilding sufficient fat reserves in between long-distance flights. Many birds that are still able to make it to their breeding grounds may not have the resources left to breed. Conversion of habitat to farmland and other uses is a significant problem, as is the phenomenon of “coastal squeeze”. Urban development encroaching on shoreline habitat from the inland side combines with erosion from the ocean side to create a pincer-like movement that squeezes shorebirds into an ever-thinner sliver of habitat. So-called “beach nourishment” programs and flood control projects exacerbate the problem, particularly on the bay sides of barrier islands.

Sea Level Rise

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in the last century, sea levels along the Mid-Atlantic and Gulf Coasts rose five to six inches more than the global average because coastal lands there are subsiding. The International Panel on Climate Change estimates that on average, sea level will rise 7-24 inches in the next 100 years due to melting of polar ice caps and glaciers caused by global warming. Rising sea levels inundate wetlands and other low-lying lands, erode beaches, intensify flooding, and increase the salinity of rivers, bays, and groundwater tables. Some of these effects may be further compounded by other effects of climate change such as the increased frequency of severe storms.

Eskimo Curlew, Terry Evans



Lucy Kemp, Marine Photobank



Unregulated Hunting

While the unregulated hunting that plagued so many of America's birds at the turn of the 20th Century, including putting an end to the Eskimo Curlew, has long since ceased, shooting free-for-all's are still occurring in parts of the Caribbean, in particular, the islands of Guadeloupe, Barbados, and Martinique. ABC and other organizations have drawn international attention to this issue and have formally requested France, which administers these islands, to stop this practice.

Beach Disturbance

Cars and ATVs driven along beaches can have a significant impact on shorebirds by crushing nests and causing birds to expend excessive energy avoiding the vehicles. Even beachgoers on foot can cause problems if they approach too close to breeding colonies. Unleashed pet dogs can scare birds away during critical nesting periods, and kill chicks and adults. Fencing, roping off, or posting key nest sites can make a big difference, particularly for species such as the endangered Piping Plover.

Eileen Romero, Marine Photobank



Pollution: Oil

According to the U.S. Congressional Research Service, the number and volume of oil spills in U.S. waters declined steadily between the mid-1970s and early 2000s, likely a result of both improved international standards that went into effect in 1983, and the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 that was passed after the Exxon Valdez spill. But the Deepwater Horizon disaster of 2010, which spewed 210 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, sharply reversed that trend and served as a stark reminder of the threat oil poses to our coastal habitats and the birds that rely on them. Birds are particularly sensitive at migratory stopover and wintering sites, where vast numbers concentrate in relatively small areas.

Steve Spring, Marine Photobank



Pollution: Effluent

Discharge and runoff of industrial waste, pesticides, and sewage from both onshore and offshore sources causes direct toxicity as well as oxygen depletion that can render coastal environments dead zones. Various federal regulations, particularly the U.S. Clean Water Act of 1977, have helped reduce the discharge and runoff of these pollutants that ends up on our shores, as have new standards for the treatment and release of effluent aboard ships adopted by the Marine Environmental Protection Committee of the International Maritime Organization in 2006; yet effluent pollution continues to threaten shorebird habitat.

Gavin Shire, ABC



Threats to Food Supplies

In a few cases, shorebirds are at risk from overfishing of their food supply. The *rufa* subspecies of the Red Knot has been in free-fall over recent decades due to the excessive harvesting of horseshoe crabs in Delaware Bay for use as bait in conch and eel pots. The reduction in the crab population has limited supplies of their eggs. As a result, migrating knots that stop in the bay to refuel on their long migration north are unable to gain the weight needed to complete their journey and breed successfully. ABC has campaigned for over a decade to protect the Red Knot and the horseshoe crab. In 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to expedite listing of the *rufa* subspecies under the Endangered Species Act.

Greg Homel, Natural Elements Productions



Predation

Cats, dogs, rats, and other introduced predators can devastate shorebird and colonies. Populations of native predators can also become artificially high as a result of coastal development and other human activities. Predator eradication programs can have a very beneficial and almost instantaneous impact. Caution must be taken with poisons used to kill rats, however, as they can also harm shorebirds. Feral cat colonies are a problem in many U.S. coastal areas, particularly those fed by seasonal beachgoers and year-round residents. ABC opposes so-called “managed” cat colonies because they exacerbate the threat to birds.



Shorebirds Use Diverse Habitats - Even in the Far North

Few people have had the opportunity to see large numbers of shorebirds on their nesting grounds. We are mostly just treated to brief spring and fall “fly-bys” as they funnel through our lakes, coastal areas, and grasslands on their way to and from the “far north”. While the tundra is vast, and there is plenty of room for these birds to spread out, there are still a lot of them (thankfully), and there is hot competition for prime nesting areas. Spring migration is a race to arrive in time to capture a prime territory, but not too early to find cold winds, snow, and little food.

In order to deal with the issue of competition, like other birds, shorebirds each have their niches. The vista on these pages shows the variety of micro-habitats that some shorebirds use – from the Solitary Sandpiper, that likes to choose the old abandoned nests of songbirds in boreal trees, to the Buff-breasted Sandpiper, that favors more open “dancing grounds” where the males can show off their moves.



KEY: 1: Lesser Yellowlegs; 2: Merlin; 3: Buff-breasted Sandpiper; 4: Red-necked Phalarope; 5: Whimbrel; 6: American Golden-Plover; 7: Pectoral Sandpiper; 8: White-rumped Sandpiper; 9: Surfbird; 10: Semipalmated Plover; 11: Wilson's Snipe; 12: Hudsonian Godwit; 13: Spotted Sandpiper; 14: Solitary Sandpiper. Artwork by Chris Vest.



FAR FROM SHORE, BUT UP A CREEK



UPLAND SANDPIPER

“Grasspipers” belong to one of the most threatened groups of birds in North America

Shorebirds sometimes belie their name by commonly occurring in other habitats — some species once flourished (and still occur) throughout the vast open grasslands of North America’s interior. These birds live most of their lives far from any coast, but are still in the same family, and often the same genus, as the more familiar sandpipers along our shores.

Unfortunately, many of these species, sometimes known to birders as “grasspipers”, have been suffering severe population declines in recent years. While loss of grassland breeding habitat is the primary cause, other factors such as the increased use of pesticides and other toxic chemicals, invasive plant and animal species, and perhaps most significantly, loss of wintering habitat have played a role in these declines.

Loss of habitat affects these birds across their life cycle, on wintering as well as breeding grounds, and also along their migration routes.

Upland Sandpiper – The Upland Sandpiper breeds mostly on the tall-grass prairies of the Great Plains, so is especially affected by conversion of grasslands for agriculture. Although somewhat tolerant of altered conditions on their breeding grounds (for instance, they can breed successfully on well-managed ranchland), this species, along with the Buff-breasted Sandpiper and American Golden-Plover, also faces changed habitat on its wintering grounds in the northern pampas of Uruguay, Argentina, and Paraguay, where agriculture has also replaced grasslands.

Recent Breeding Bird Survey data show that populations in the species’ core habitat are increasing, but Upland Sandpipers are still considered a

high priority for conservation, since their core range has been so severely reduced.

Long-billed Curlew – The largest North American shorebird and a Great Plains endemic, the Long-billed Curlew breeds in the western Great Plains and northern Great Basin north to British Columbia; in areas that have undergone significant habitat change, again due to the spread of agriculture and human settlement.

Although they are very resilient to habitat degradation, and will even nest in invasive species such as cheatgrass, they are categorized as “highly imperiled” in the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan (www.fws.gov/shorebirdplan) because of population declines and significant threats to both breeding and wintering areas. Continued loss of grassland breeding habitats is thought to be the greatest threat to population stability.

The same threat faces Long-billed Curlews in Mexico's Chihuahuan desert grasslands, where significant numbers winter. These southern grasslands are also being lost through conversion for agriculture. These curlews (primarily birds breeding in the Great Plains) winter largely in El Tokio, on the eastern edge of the Chihuahuan Desert, where ABC has worked with Pronatura Noreste to save this important wintering habitat (see article page 22). Further west, our Chihuahuan Desert Grasslands project will also be dealing with the problem of habitat loss.

The curlew is one of five species dependent on grassland and sagebrush-steppe habitats targeted as a focal species for conservation by the Intermountain West Joint Venture. The other species are Grasshopper, Brewer's, and Sage Sparrows, and Sage Thrasher. Habitat modeling done by ABC is being used to identify those areas of public and private lands where conservation action will have the most potential to maintain or increase Long-billed Curlew populations.

As part of our burgeoning initiative to enhance range-wide conservation for the species, ABC is working with the Montana and Idaho Bird Conservation Partnerships, Environment Canada, and other partners to

identify land needing protection or management. We also plan to host managers' workshops to implement best management practices for the species throughout its western breeding range. These activities will be combined with improved monitoring techniques to identify key staging and wintering areas for different segments of the curlew population.

Mountain Plover –Improved monitoring has shown this plover of arid shortgrass prairie to be more numerous than formerly believed. However, their numbers have declined enough compared to historic levels to keep them a species of concern; Mountain Plovers are included on ABC's Watch-List as a species of highest conservation concern. This plover depends on native grazers such as prairie dogs and bison to maintain the short grass it needs to nest successfully. It can also nest on lands grazed by cattle, but most other agricultural development deprives it of suitable breeding habitat.

Like the Long-billed Curlew, a large percentage of Mountain Plovers migrate to Mexico's Chihuahuan grasslands for the winter – an area being gobbled up by farm fields and other agricultural development by the day.

A smaller number of Mountain Plovers migrate west to winter in

the southern San Joaquin Valley of California. Unfortunately, much of that wintering ground has been taken over for oil and gas development. The 250,000-acre Carrizo Plain National Monument provides protected wintering habitat for the species; the Central Valley Joint Venture also works with area landowners to improve land management practices to benefit the Mountain Plover and other birds in this area.

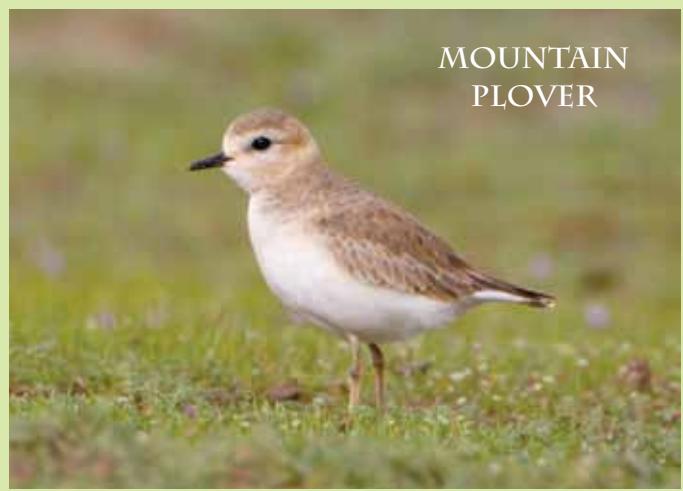
"Although none of these species faces immediate catastrophic loss, they continue to contend with threats from expansion of agriculture and habitat loss on their wintering grounds," says David Pashley, ABC's Vice President of Conservation Programs. "The curlew and Upland Sandpiper are reasonably well-monitored compared with other shorebirds, so we know that they have relatively large populations that are in gradual decline. The Mountain Plover is cryptic and breeds largely on private lands, so our knowledge of this bird is much poorer, but it seems tolerant of some less intensive forms of farming. All three species need more conservation efforts on their wintering grounds. With continued habitat improvement, we hope to have these birds in relatively large numbers for a long time to come."

LONG-BILLED CURLEW



Greg Lavaty, www.texastargebirds.com

MOUNTAIN PLOVER



Peter LaTourette, <http://birdphotography.com>

AMONG THE ISLANDS

A closer look at Mexico's Laguna Madre

The name Laguna Madre is Spanish for “Mother Lagoon”. Not to be confused with the U.S. lagoon of the same name to the north in Texas, Laguna Madre, Mexico is a shallow, hyper-saline body of water, 100 miles long and 15 miles wide, at the mouth of the Río Soto la Marina in the state of Tamaulipas. The Laguna Madre wetland complex was designated as the first binational WHSRN site (see page 9) in 2000.

Laguna Madre, Mexico is separated from the Gulf of Mexico on the east by a number of barrier islands, and contains dozens more small islands that provide food, water, and shelter for nearly 220 species of birds. ABC is working with the Mexican organization Pronatura Noreste in this area to improve breeding and wintering habitat for dozens of bird species, many of high conservation concern.

The Laguna Madre ecosystem may seem somewhat homogeneous from afar, but its bays, inlets, creeks, barrier islands and algal flats serve as prime real estate for some of North America's most threatened species.



by Andrew Rothman, International Conservation Officer, ABC

The region is perhaps best known for its importance to Redheads. Hundreds of thousands—potentially more than two-thirds of the global population—descend upon the Laguna Madre to feed on its nutrient-rich aquatic grasses.

Snowy and Wilson's Plovers (both U.S. WatchList species of conservation concern) find this habitat ideal for breeding, while as many as 10,000 pairs of colonial-nesting waterbirds, including Reddish Egrets, Gull-billed Terns, and Black Skimmers (all U.S. WatchList species as well) take advantage of the vast expanse of suitable breeding habitat.



Wilson's Plover:
Chuck Tague



Redheads: Greg Lavaty,
www.texastargetbirds.com

Red Knots, Buff-breasted Sandpipers, and Mountain Plovers stop on migration or overwinter here, along with one of the United States' most endangered species, the Piping Plover. These birds are present in small but critical numbers, and the health of Laguna Madre is important to their populations.

Because of its importance to breeding, migrating, and wintering birds, Laguna Madre has been identified as a priority area for conservation by the Rio Grande Joint Venture (www.rgvj.org), as well as within both the United States Shorebird Conservation Plan and The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan.

The great majority of nesting beaches and islands in Laguna Madre are uninhabited by people and look like pristine breeding areas. But looks can be deceptive. These isolated habitats, also make great encampments for local fishermen, who bring dogs with them. These dogs, which are usually strays from the ever-reproducing local dog population, are often abandoned on the islands. Left to fend for themselves, the dogs, along with other introduced species including cats and goats, wreak havoc. They chase birds along the beaches, causing the birds' precious energy reserves needed for breeding and migrating to be wasted.

Reddish Egret: Greg Lavaty,
www.texastargetbirds.com

and developing a campaign to educate fishermen about the effects of dogs on the islands. The partners are also working with the local health and animal control authorities to better manage the populations of stray and feral dogs in the communities surrounding Laguna Madre.

Dogs are not the only threat to Laguna Madre. Due to poor land management in the surrounding areas, erosion, sedimentation and pollution threaten the quality of habitat in and around the lagoon. While the high salt levels of Laguna Madre (which can be 50% greater than water in the nearby ocean) provides a smorgasbord of vegetation for Redheads and other ducks, this salt accumulates in the ducks, and they must find freshwater to rid themselves of this excess. The preservation of the freshwater ponds, rivers and creeks that flow into or exist around Laguna Madre is critical to supporting populations of these birds.

Currently, ABC and Pronatura are working with a family that owns over 20,000 acres of property at the southern end of Laguna Madre to improve three 50-acre ponds that will ensure suitable fresh water for some of the area's bird life. The ponds, which have been degraded by increased sediment loads caused by erosion of surrounding areas, need to be dredged. Once the sediment is removed and the original water depth restored, the pond's usefulness for ducks and other birds will be improved. The landowner has also agreed to fence these ponds to prevent access by cows, and also agreed to put nearly 5,000 acres of his property into a conservation easement for 15 years, further helping to support bird conservation.

Pronatura Noreste is also working on a ground-breaking project to return more fresh water to Laguna Madre. Water from a new sewage treatment facility will now be routed to the creek bed of Arroyo del Tigre, instead of simply being pumped back to the ocean. This creek, which once provided fresh water for Laguna Madre, has been running dry for almost 50 years due to water diversion for the city of Matamoros, excessive irrigation, cattle management, and erosion. The restoration of this waterway will prove invaluable to wildlife of the region, and help to restore key natural processes within the Laguna Madre system.

Like so many places in Central and South America, Laguna Madre could easily be out of sight and out of mind for bird lovers in the United States. But if we lose it, we will feel the repercussions echo across a suite of "our" migrant shorebirds and other waterbirds. The region's unique threats require innovative and highly targeted responses, and ABC and Pronatura are rising to the challenge of saving the habitats of the Mother Lagoon.

Dogs also find and destroy bird nests along the beaches and among the shrubs and bushes, eating eggs, young, and even adults if they can catch them. With nearly 10,000 fishermen using Laguna Madre, the number of dogs brought to the islands — and their impact on birds — can be tremendous.

The protection of key beach-nesting and rookery sites is critical to maintaining and improving shorebird and waterbird populations. With funds from the BP Exploration and Production, Inc. and National Fish and Wildlife Federation, ABC and local partner Pronatura Noreste are beginning efforts to trap and remove dogs and other feral animals from the islands of Laguna Madre, erecting fencing around key breeding locations,





Beach-nesting Bird Conservation in the Gulf

Artwork by Chris Vest

It seems like just yesterday that I set out on a three-week trip to see important colonial nesting bird sites along the Gulf Coast that would be the focus of a new Beach-nesting Bird Program under a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). That was July 2011, and now ABC, a growing network of 12 partner groups, and many other supporters, are launching regional programs to increase protection and public awareness for colonial beach-nesting birds. Least Terns and Black Skimmers, two species that were heavily impacted by the Deepwater Horizon spill of 2010, are a primary focus. Thousands of birds perished as a result of that spill, and many more were unable to successfully breed during the beach cleanup efforts that followed. This new program will help regional populations of these species recover from the spill by lessening human disturbance at nesting sites while increasing public awareness about the needs of these and other beach-nesting birds.



by Kacy Ray, Beach-Nesting
Bird Conservation Project
Officer, ABC

In Texas and Louisiana, much of the nesting habitat for colonial-nesting waterbirds is on bay islands rather than mainland beaches. This spring, ABC, the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will post signs at federal- and state-owned islands on the upper coast of Texas to warn boaters and fishermen who approach these islands during breeding season that birds are raising their young.

“The bay islands where these birds nest are particularly vulnerable to human disturbance from recreational boaters and fishermen who flush adult birds off their nests and away from their young, putting the chicks in jeopardy from heat stress and predation,” says Susan Heath of the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory.

ABC has also partnered with Houston Audubon on the upper coast of Texas

to launch a monitoring and public outreach program. At Bolivar Flats, an ABC-designated Globally Important Bird Area, a Least Tern colony will be posted with protective signs; a Black Skimmer colony in Texas City will also be protected.

In Louisiana, I’ve worked with partners National Audubon Society, Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program, and Grand Isle State Park to launch a community-based outreach and protection program for Least Terns at Grand Isle, one of the areas most heavily impacted by the



*Fish, Swim and Play
from 50 Yards Away!*

Tricolored Heron nestlings: Chuck Tague



Deepwater Horizon disaster. Least Tern colonies at the park and on adjacent private lands will be identified and posted with signs created by local students. Educational kiosks sponsored by ABC at the state park will be used as stations for conducting public outreach and implementing a bird stewardship program which will station volunteers near nesting areas to teach the public about the birds and how to avoid disturbing them during the breeding season. An intern living on site will assist in coordinating this program and making sure the terns are protected and monitored throughout the season.

"Audubon is proud to protect and monitor Least Terns where they were so devastated by the Deepwater Horizon oil disaster," said Melanie Driscoll, Audubon's Director of Bird Conservation for Gulf Conservation and the Mississippi Flyway. "Through this strong partnership and with the community of Grand Isle, we are expanding our decades of community and chapter-driven Gulf Coast beach-bird stewardship into Louisiana."

ABC is also planning a third monitoring and outreach program with the Florida Park Service throughout the state's panhandle this breeding season. The Florida panhandle has the largest expanse of habitat for beach-nesting birds in the state, and is home to many solitary and colonial species such as Snowy and Wilson's Plovers, Willet, American Oystercatcher, Least Tern, and Black Skimmer.

As in Texas and Louisiana, an on-site biologist will assist in identifying, posting, and monitoring beach-nesting bird sites. Public outreach will be a major component of this effort. The biologist will assist the Florida Park Service in improving

their educational program and will work closely with Audubon of Florida to better integrate their bird stewardship program with the state's. This role is crucial in building an ongoing network of volunteers to advocate for beach-nesting birds.

With NFWF support, ABC is providing funding for extra law enforcement on busy holidays at Honeymoon Island State Park, Indian Shores, and Big Marco Critical Wildlife Management Areas. While these sites are often fortunate enough to have bird stewards, the influx of people and dogs near nesting areas during the holidays is significant, and



Daniel Gatz, Reel Simple Productions

Gary P. Nunn,
Ambassador of
Texas Music

extra law enforcement can serve as reinforcement for the volunteers.

There aren't too many opportunities to meet celebrities in the conservation business, and so one of my 2011 highlights was working with country singer, Gary P. Nunn, who has contributed his services for a televised public service announcement asking fishermen and recreational boaters to "Fish, Swim, and Play From 50 Yards Away" from nesting islands. The 30-second spot will air in Texas from March through August in Houston and Corpus Christi.

"ABC's Beach-Nesting Bird Program has been a critical partner in advancing conservation of Texas' coastal birds," said David Newstead of Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program, who came up with the concept for the PSA. "By partnering

with regional entities that are locally engaged, the program is helping grow ideas into actual projects that benefit birds. The broad scope of the program also allows new ideas to be shared between regions. It has been a refreshing and valuable contribution, and we look forward to continuing to develop this relationship for the recovery of imperiled birds."

Texas isn't the only state to have a well-known musician speak out for Gulf birds. Renowned Louisiana bluesman Tab Benoit and over 50 musicians from southern Louisiana will join with the partnership and the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program to advocate awareness for colonial-nesting waterbirds throughout the state's many islands

I knew Tab was the perfect spokesman for our televised Louisiana public service announcement as he has established his own non-profit organization, Voice of the Wetlands (www.voiceofthewetlands.org). This group is working to raise awareness and promote education about the state's wetland loss and the dire need for continued restoration and preservation efforts. Their message is well-matched to our own –people and the birds depend on this habitat for survival.

Together, these efforts make for an exciting year of much-needed help for beach-nesting birds along the Gulf. Keep a lookout for posted areas and remember: Fish, Swim and Play from 50 Yards Away!

In addition to the generous grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, ABC is grateful to the hundreds of supporters who have made donations to help birds affected by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.



The Chihuahuan grasslands of Mexico balance precariously on an ecological knife edge. Desertification threatens the sensitive shortgrass prairie and thorn scrub habitats, driven by the twin stresses of overgrazing and water-intensive potato farming, accelerated by ongoing drought.

This vast swath of semi-arid landscape, two hundred miles or more wide in places and stretching for over six hundred miles from the New Mexico border southeastwards alongside Texas, is cleaved down the middle by the Sierra Madre Occidental. On the mountain range's southeastern side, as the peaks give way to a high plateau that gently slopes down to the Gulf Coast, lies the El Tokio grasslands. Given the stark beauty of this vast, austere, and scrubby-looking land, one could be forgiven for overlooking some of its smaller inhabitants, in particular, the plain, unassuming Worthen's Sparrow. The Worthen's Sparrow is one of Mexico's



RESERVE PROFILE EL CERCADO, MEXICO



Worthen's Sparrow: Antonio Hidalgo

31 endemic bird species and is confined to these threatened grasslands. Its population (fewer than 1,000 individuals) and range are so small that the Alliance for Zero Extinction has identified El Tokio, the bird's last remaining sliver of habitat, as one of 581 sites in the world most in need of protection to prevent imminent extinctions.

In 2007, ABC and Mexican partner Pronatura Noreste purchased a small (585 acres) but critical piece of the El Tokio grassland mosaic in the state of Coahuila, called El Cercado, for the protection of the Worthen's Sparrow.

The Worthen's Sparrow is nomadic, following the irregular seasonal rains across El Tokio, which makes conservation particularly difficult, but regular sightings of the bird have been recorded at El Cercado.

ABC Conservation Officer Andrew Rothman recently returned from a visit to the region, where he learned more about some of the challenges



Long-billed Curlew: Greg Lavaty
www.texastargetbirds.com

the sparrow is facing and how Pronatura Noreste is working to combat them.

"The property is fenced to keep out cattle whose overgrazing devastates the delicate habitat, turning it into a dust bowl. But in places, the fence wires have been damaged and perhaps deliberately cut by farmers on neigh-

boring *ejidos* (community-owned land) to allow their cattle to stray into the reserve," says Rothman. "Better fences alone aren't enough to stop this. What's needed is a way to stem the systemic overgrazing."

To address this problem, Pronatura is now developing a work plan with the National Forest Commission of

...dozens of other birds call this area home for some or all of the year, including the Sprague's Pipit, Horned Lark, Savannah Sparrow, Burrowing Owl, Ferruginous Hawk, Mountain Plover, and in particular, the Long-billed Curlew.



Burrowing Owl: Alan Wilson



Sprague's Pipit: Greg Lavaty, www.texastargetbirds.com



RESERVE PROFILE



Worthen's Sparrow: Ricardo Canales

Mexico to improve soil conditions and conduct reforestation with native juniper and pine trees for the El Cercado property. They will also be educating *ejido* farmers across El Tokio on how to reduce overgrazing. With better grazing regimes, the soil will be more productive, grassland habitat for bird species will improve across the whole region, and there will be less need for ranchers to graze their cattle inside the reserve.

Through agreements with ranchers and farmers to create reserves within certain areas of the *ejidos* where cattle ranching and agriculture is prohibited, and by training cattle ranchers on best management practices, Pronatura has so far helped improve more than 80,000 acres of habitat throughout El Tokio. The organization is currently working to enhance a further 66,000 acres. The benefits will be felt not only by the Worthen's Sparrow, but by dozens of other birds that call the area home for some or all of the year, including the Sprague's Pipit, Horned lark, Savannah Sparrow, Burrowing Owl, Ferruginous Hawk, Mountain Plover, and in particular, the Long-billed Curlew.

El Cercado and the surrounding El Tokio grasslands are home to a significant number of wintering Long-billed Curlews. Some 15% of the entire

North American population winters here between October and February. ABC is working with Pronatura to study and protect the curlews, particularly at one pond located on the Hediondilla *ejido* land, where up to 4,000 birds gather.

ABC is grateful for vital support from the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, David and Patricia Davidson, and Southern Wings, with participation from the states of South Dakota, Nebraska, and Oklahoma, which makes possible this work in El Cercado and the El Tokio grasslands.



Ferruginous Hawk: Tom Grey



Once suitable breeding habitat for native birds and a stopover site for migrants, this land in EL Tokio is now a potato field.
Photo: Pronatura Noreste



Black Skimmer:
Alan Wilson

THIS BIRD -



THIS HABITAT -

YOUR LEGACY.

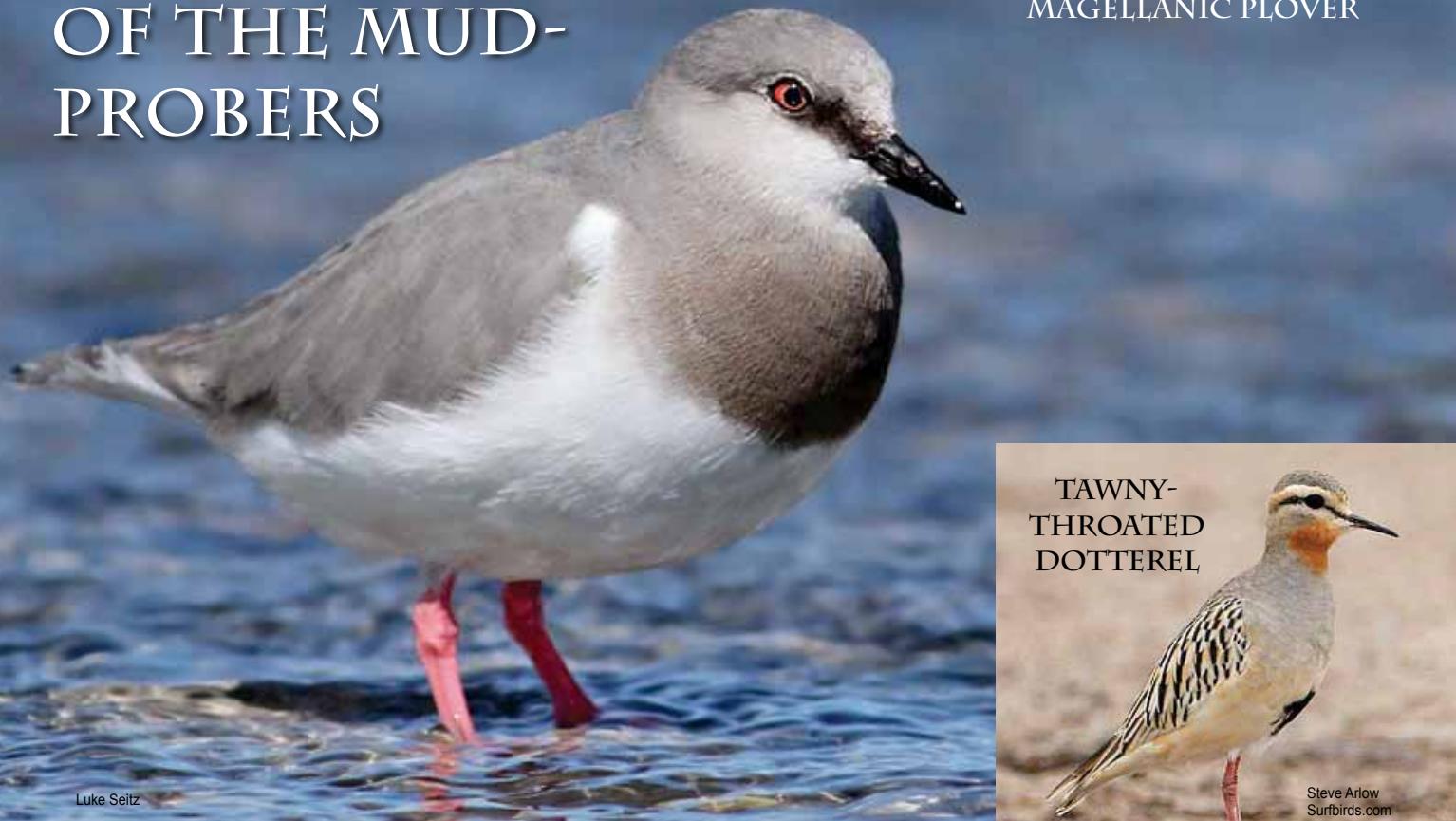


Owen Deutsch

Your bequest to American Bird Conservancy will help protect the birds of the Americas, and their habitats for generations to come. Join ABC's Legacy Circle with an estate gift through your will, retirement plan, trust, or life insurance policy and help secure the future for birds. [If you would like more information](#), or if you have already included ABC in your estate plans, please contact ABC Planned Giving Director, Jack Morrison, at 540-253-5780, or at jmorrison@abcbirds.org.

MONARCHS OF THE MUD- PROBERS

MAGELLANIC PLOVER



Which is the most wonderful and unusual of all the shorebirds — the monarch of the mud-probers? Well, there are many “atypical” members of the *Charadrii*, that’s for certain. For starters, along with the expected sandpipers and plovers, the suborder includes the jacanas, sheathbills, seedsnipes, thick-knees, and quite a few other birds that you won’t find dipping their bills in coastal mud. I think any bird that waits until you are right on top of it before it flies is always a class act, and the group also includes the snipe, woodcock, and in South America, the seedsnipes. There are also the super-graceful avocets with their curious upturned bills, and the “misfits” such as the Magellanic Plover. Then, perhaps the most magnificent of all, there’s the tiny, funky Spoon-billed Sandpiper, accidental in our region, but a fantastic bird nonetheless.

Here is a quick look at a few of my favorite “strange and wonderful shorebirds” from South America; each both amazing and majestic in its own way.



by Michael Parr,
Vice President, ABC

The tiny gray and white **Magellanic Plover** is unique among the shorebirds—nothing else looks quite like it. It has the soft look and coo of a dove, yet has a devilish glint in its beady red eye. Genetic studies have shown that this unusual bird has affinities with the sheathbills, but for now it resides in its own family, the *Pluvianellidae*. This odd plover is also unusual among shorebirds in that it regurgitates food to feed its chicks, while the young of other shorebirds are able to feed on their own within hours of hatching.

This species (the only one in its genus) has a tiny population of fewer than 10,000 birds that nest along rivers in southern Chile and Argentina and winter along the region’s coastline.

The gray-brown **Tawny-throated Dotterel** blends perfectly into its surroundings and hides by standing upright and turning its camouflaged back to predators. Its colors are a subtle mix of hues that seem to grow from the brown earth of the Andes themselves. My first sighting of this species was along the shore of Lake Titicaca in Peru, where the dotterel matches the clay-colored fields and houses that also inhabit the windswept plain. It is another species that is the sole representative of its genus, although in this case, it has an extinct relative known from fossil remains.



South American Shorebirds Aren't Always What You'd Expect

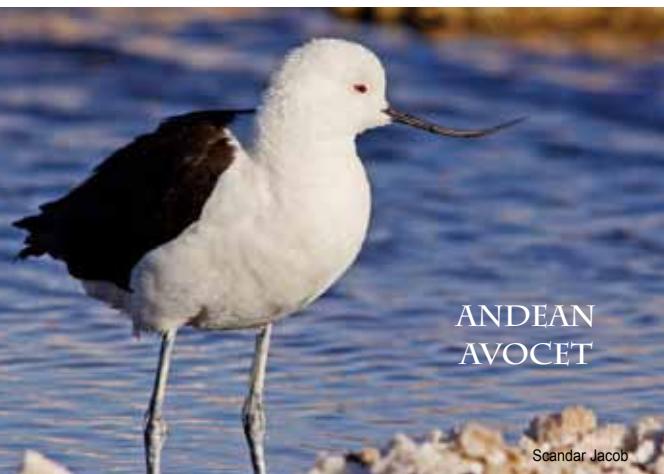
The dotterel is a partial migrant and is found from Peru to Tierra del Fuego. It has suffered from hunting in Chile and Argentina.

The **Andean Avocet** shares the high-altitude lakes of the Andes with Wilson's Phalaropes and Baird's Sandpipers during the austral summer. It is perhaps the least-known of the world's four avocet species and can be found on Peru's Lake Junín and Titicaca, as well as on other alkaline lakes that dot the flat punas (mountain grasslands) of Bolivia and Chile. The Andean Avocet, along with three species of flamingo, may be threatened by habitat loss caused

by lithium mining for batteries. This elegant bird may be the real monarch of the shorebirds, with its majestic appearance and lofty habitat. Catching a glimpse of one in a mixed feeding flock of flamingoes is one of the great sights of South America.

The **Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe** only just qualifies as a shorebird. In fact, maybe it shouldn't! This strange-looking bird is more like a cross between a ptarmigan and a sandgrouse. It inhabits only the most barren Andean tundra and puna, where it can be found in small flocks, foraging along bogs and tussock grass clumps. It has a regal aspect when seen close-up, and is bedecked by intricately patterned feathers that help to keep it concealed from predators—until the very last moment before it flees in an explosive leap from the ground. It likes to feed on cushion plants, which fortunately are common across the species' large South American range, and this unusual bird appears secure despite the harshness of its chosen environment.

Along with the Diademed Sandpiper-Plover (see Species Profile, page 28), the Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe is a species that stands to benefit from a project to protect habitat in central Peru, where ABC is working with its Peruvian partner, ECOAN, to create a high-altitude community reserve.



ANDEAN
AVOCET



RUFOUS-BELLIED
SEEDSNIPE

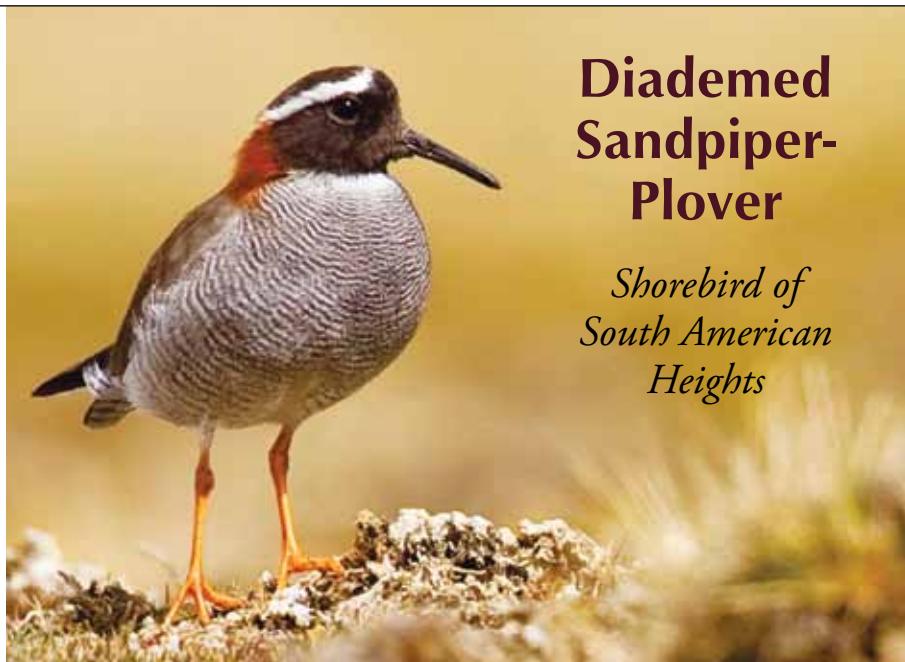
SPECIES PROFILE

The beautiful Diademed Sandpiper-Plover is a far cry from the “average” shorebird. To find this rare species of the high Andes, it may be necessary to climb to heights of 14,000 feet or more! Despite its name, the species is indeed a plover. It ranges from the high Andes of central Peru south to western Bolivia, northern Chile, and central Argentina. Most birds are resident, but some in the southern part of the range move to lower altitudes during the winter.

Its preferred habitats are alpine bogs matted with cushion-plants, sedges, and grasses in wet, montane grasslands known as puna, or on grassy plains along clear, gravelly lakes or streams.

The Diademed Sandpiper-Plover is a spectacular-looking bird with a black head, rufous nape, and white band all round the crown, which forms the diadem (crown) of its name. It uses its long, thin, down-curved bill to probe the soft bog for its invertebrate food.

Classified globally as Near Threatened, the world population is estimated to be fewer than 10,000 individuals, and that population is thought to be decreasing due to a lack of suitable habitat. Valleys in the southern portion of the species’ range in particular are influenced by man-made threats such as overgrazing, mining, off-road vehicles, and hydro-electric projects. Because of the species’ dependence



Dub Shapiro

Diademed Sandpiper-Plover

Shorebird of South American Heights

on wetlands throughout the year, climate change may pose serious risks to populations through changing hydrology and wetland drying. This colorful species has benefitted from a project to protect habitat in southern Peru, where ABC has worked with Peruvian partner, ECOAN, to create private conservation areas in the Vilcanota mountain range. These reserves protect *Polylepis* forests as well as wetlands, including some where Diademed Sandpiper-Plovers occur. ABC is also working with ECOAN to create protected areas in Lima and Junín to protect high Andean bogs that will benefit the Diademed Sandpiper-Plover and threatened endemics such as the White-bellied Cinclodes.

Its scarcity and striking plumage make the Diademed Sandpiper-Plover a must-see for birders in South America. However, finding Diademed Sandpiper-Plovers is far from easy due to their remote habitats, plus their small size and unobtrusive behavior. One might think that such a colorful bird, especially with its bright yellow legs, would easily stand out in a flat Andean bog, but the mental fuzz that sometimes accompanies a birder’s quick ascent into the oxygen-deprived highlands, coupled with the hilly terrain, can make them especially difficult to find. But it is so worth it when you do.