

12 SHOREBIRDS

Every Montanan Should (Kinda) Know

*The “good enough” guide to identifying
Treasure State “shorbs”*

BY SNEED B. COLLARD III



EASY ID Though drab when standing still, the willet's distinctive black-and-white wing markings make the bird easy to identify when flying or flapping.

PHOTO BY RICK CLARK



My young son Braden, his friend Nick, and I were driving a dirt road south of Three Forks looking for burrowing owls, and we were striking out.

We had heard or seen plenty of sparrows, meadowlarks, swallows—even a northern harrier or two—but the owls eluded us. As we turned down a side road, Nick suddenly shouted, “Stop the car!” I braked and looked to where he pointed.

“Long-billed curlews!” Braden exclaimed.

My brain sputtered. *What? Shorebirds? In the middle of a field in central Montana?*

It didn’t make sense, but there they were, and on their nesting ground no less. It was a revelation—and the opening chapter in my discovery of one of Montana’s most interesting and unexpected bird groups.

FAR FROM SHORE

“Casual observers—nonbirders—are always surprised to find out about shorebirds in Montana,” says Dan Casey, co-author of *Birds of Montana* and a biologist who has studied shorebirds in many capacities. “Most people think of all birds associated with water as being more coastally oriented. It happens with gulls. People will be in the middle of Montana and say they can’t believe there are ‘seagulls’ there. The same thing happens with shorebirds.”

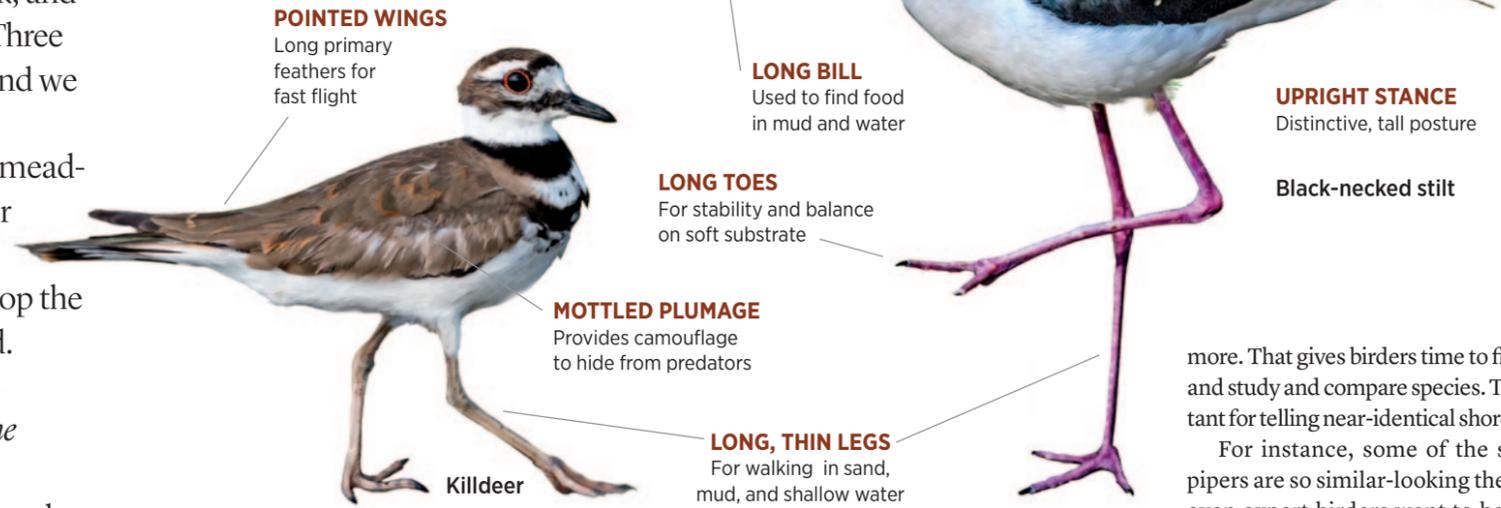
A key reason for that surprise is that relatively few people ever get a chance to see what my son and I call “shorbs” in Montana. Many species pass through the state only during narrow windows as they migrate to and from nesting grounds in the Arctic. Of the dozen or so species that do breed in the Treasure State, most are incredibly picky about the wetlands they use, which means most people never encounter the birds. Several species—like that long-billed curlew we saw south of Three Forks—avoid wetlands altogether, preferring to nest in remote, dry grasslands. But that elusiveness doesn’t mean a person can’t find where these beautiful birds hang out and learn about their fascinating habits.

CONNECTING THE AMERICAS

Shorebirds are small to medium-sized birds that generally have thin bills and long legs. Most are smaller and more delicately featured than wading birds like great blue herons, cattle egrets, and bitterns.

The first thing to know about shorebirds is that they travel. Only killdeer and Wilson’s snipe can be found in Montana year round, and while some shorebird species make relatively modest migrations to

Shorebird basics



the coasts, others rank among the world’s most impressive migrating animals. “Many go not just to Central America, but to South America,” Casey says. “They make you fully realize the connectivity of our world.”

Shorebirds have suffered sharp declines because of wetlands destruction, agricultural conversion of prairie potholes, and long-term climate-related drought. Fortunately for Montana and visiting birders—not to mention the shorebirds themselves—Big Sky Country still holds significant amounts of important habitat. “Some of the larger reservoirs and refuges are key places

that large numbers of these migrants use,” Casey explains. “Places like Bowdoin, Benton Lake, and Medicine Lake [national wildlife refuges (NWRs)]—those really stand out, although Freezout Lake [state wildlife management area (WMA)] is also pretty darned important.” These areas are also vital for Montana’s breeding shorbs—and happen to be some of the best locations to observe these remarkable birds.

EXPLORING SHORBS

Like waterfowl, shorebirds often congregate in these and other areas and stay for weeks or

more. That gives birders time to find the birds and study and compare species. That’s important for telling near-identical shorebirds apart.

For instance, some of the small sandpipers are so similar-looking they can make even expert birders want to hang up their binoculars in frustration. But many shorebird species boldly differentiate themselves. Long-billed curlews, black-necked stilts, and American avocets are large, gorgeous “gateway” shorbs that beginners can easily identify. And only a little more effort will tease out differences among marbled godwits, upland sandpipers, and other species.

Spring can present large flocks of shorebirds such as Wilson’s phalaropes, but “fall” migration—which actually occurs in late summer, when other birding often grinds to a halt—can be even more fruitful. “On a good day during the fall migration you can see 13, 14, 15 species of shorebirds in one wetland,” Casey says.

A spotting scope is highly recommended. Keep it handy in the car, because shorbs can suddenly appear almost anywhere. The best Montana shorebird encounter my son and I ever had was in a large seasonal puddle next to a highway construction site only 10 miles from the North Dakota border. There, as a blazing sun set over the prairie, we saw 11 species—including a white-rumped sandpiper, a “life bird” (one that neither of us had ever seen).

Identifying shorebirds is definitely a challenge; even experts struggle sometimes. The descriptions on the following pages aren’t definitive guides, but they will help you make a “good enough” guess as to what that long-legged, long-billed bird might be. ▶▶

Dining, shorebird style

Many shorebirds feed by probing sand or mud with their long bill, but others employ a surprising variety of alternate feeding methods. Many hunt by sight, picking off prey both underwater (like small fish) and on dry land (such as grasshoppers). Some, such as the American avocet, “scythe” back and forth through shallow water with their bills, snatching any food morsel they touch. Others pick prey off rocks or even snatch flying insects from the air.

In both their larval and adult stages, insects make up a significant part of many shorebird diets. But shorebirds tend to be opportunistic, also bagging a wide variety of crustaceans, worms, amphipods, and other invertebrates along with minnows found in lake or pond shallows. Long-billed curlews sometimes feed on eggs of other birds, and spotted sandpipers have even been known to scavenge on carrion. ■



Sneed B. Collard III, of Missoula, is the author of more than 85 books for children and adults, including the award-winning adult memoir Warblers and Woodpeckers: A Father-Son Big Year of Birding. Keep up with his and son Braden’s adventures at FatherSonBirding.com.

LARGE SHOREBIRDS (about crow-size)



LONG-BILLED CURLEW

Largest Montana shorebird. Brown or russet feathers and uniquely long, downcurving bill. Body length: 23 inches.

► **Key ID tip:** Often confused with the marbled godwit. But the curlew's bill curves down while the godwit's curves up. **Memory device:** "curl-low."

Habitat: Breeds on shortgrass prairie and rangelands, often far from water. Winters in wetlands in central Mexico and on both Mexican coasts down to Central America.

Worth knowing: Long-billed curlews are known for their mesmerizing, looping calls and showy aerial courtship displays. The birds once bred as far east as Michigan and as far south as coastal Texas, but habitat loss and market hunting decimated many populations by the end of the 19th century.

Best places to see them: Large agricultural valleys and grasslands in western, central, and northeastern Montana.

Montana conservation status: A Montana species of concern because of long-term population declines largely due to agricultural conversion of grassland habitat.



MARBLED GODWIT

Second largest Montana shorebird. Plain brown appearance and dark legs. Long, gently upcurving pink or orange bill with dark tip. Body length: 18 inches.

► **Key ID tip:** Often confused with long-billed curlew. But the godwit's bill curves slightly up, while the curlew's curves down.

Habitat: Breeds in the northern Great Plains in sparse grass close to wetlands. Winters along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts to Central America.

Worth knowing: Marbled godwits have some of the highest survival rates of any shorebird. Biologists have documented some tagged birds living up to 30 years.

Best places to see them: East of the Continental Divide, especially national wildlife refuges, north of I-90 and I-94.

Montana conservation status: Stable globally, with Montana numbers increasing between 1966 and 2010.



AMERICAN AVOCET

Black-and-white body, bill that visibly turns up near the tip, and, in breeding males, a distinctive rust-colored head and neck. Body length: 18 inches.

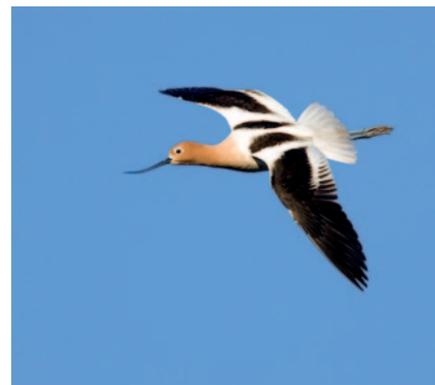
► **Key ID tips:** In addition to the slender upturned bill, look for the broad black-and-white stripes on its back and the breeding male's rust-colored head and neck.

Habitat: Breeds mainly in the interior West and Great Plains near shallow, often intermittent wetlands. Winters on both coasts of Mexico south to Central America.

Worth knowing: Avocets often feed on the water in compact groups.

Best places to see them: Benton Lake and Bowdoin national wildlife refuges and Freezout Lake WMA during breeding; almost any body of water during migration.

Montana conservation status: Secure in Montana.



MEDIUM-SIZED SHOREBIRDS (about pigeon-size)



WILLET

Stocky, overall drab gray or buff, thicker bill than many other similar-sized shorebirds. Body length: 15 inches.

► **Key ID tip:** Broad black-and-white wingstripes when flying.

Habitat: Breeds in grasslands near wetlands in the Big Basin and the Great Plains; salt marshes, beaches, islands in New England. Winters on coasts south to South America.

Worth knowing: An ornithologist once told me, "If you don't know what else it is, it's a willet."

Best places to see them: Freezout Lake WMA plus Benton, Bowdoin, and Red Rock Lakes national wildlife refuges in breeding season.

Montana conservation status: Secure, though possibly declining.



BLACK-NECKED STILT

Black-and-white, slightly smaller than—and often accompanying—avocets, distinctive long pink legs. Body length: 14 inches.

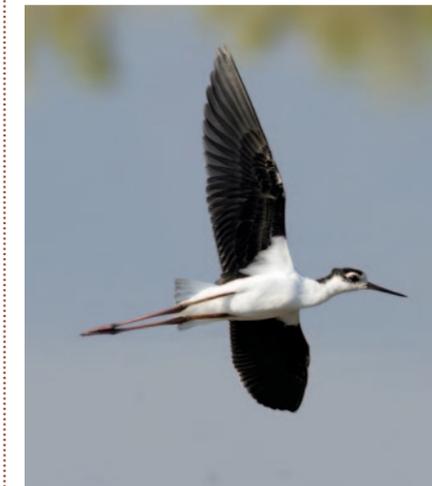
► **Key ID tip:** Nicknamed "tuxedo birds," these shorebirds are extraordinarily tall and slender with black wings in flight.

Habitat: Shallow wetlands. Year-round resident in California, Florida, Texas, Mexico, Caribbean, and South America. Also breeds in the Great Basin and in central Montana east of the Continental Divide.

Worth knowing: Black-necked stilts did not begin widespread breeding in Montana until the severe Great Basin (Nevada) drought of 1977.

Best places to see them: Freezout Lake WMA and Benton and Bowdoin NWRs during breeding.

Montana conservation status: Stable, but harmed by DDT residues, selenium, and other pollutants.



GREATER YELLOWLEGS

Vivid yellow legs, brown spotted back, pale spotted or streaked underparts. Body length: 14 inches.

► **Key ID tip:** Those namesake legs.

Habitat: Widespread aquatic locations during migration; breeds around ponds in boreal spruce forests; winters from coastal U.S. throughout Latin America.

Worth knowing: Larger size and slightly upturned bill distinguishes it from similar lesser yellowlegs and much smaller solitary sandpiper.

Best places to see them: Almost any body of water during spring and fall migration.

Montana conservation status: Thought to be stable, but very little data available. ►►

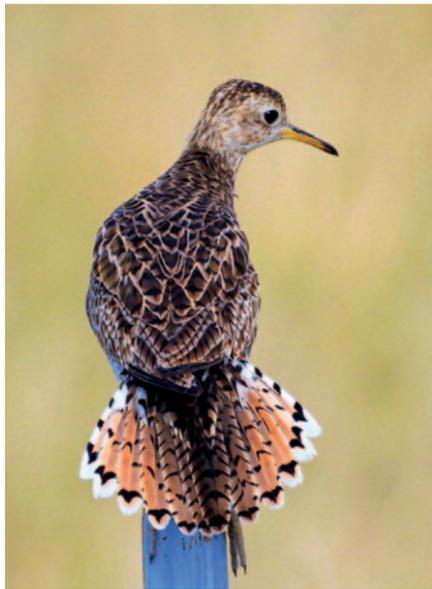


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DONALD M. JONES; BOB MARTINKA; ERIN BRAATEN; NEAL & MUMSHLER; RODNEY SCHLEGEL; PAUL SHLER

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BOB MARTINKA; DOUG MCSPADDEN; GARY KRAMER; CHUCK HANEY; STEVE PARKER; DOUG MCSPADDEN

MEDIUM-SIZED SHOREBIRDS

SMALL SHOREBIRDS (robin-size and smaller)



UPLAND SANDPIPER

Tall erect posture; brown back with short yellow bill with dark tip; hyper-alert, almost comical stance and expression. Body length: 12 inches.

► **Key ID tips:** The relatively short bill. One call resembles a slide-whistle. Often perches on fenceposts and can be visible as you drive past—even along a freeway.

Habitat: Nests in dry grasslands; considered an indicator species for healthy native prairie; winters on South American pampas grasslands.

Worth knowing: Upland sandpipers are known for their remarkable flight displays and long-distance migrations to and from South America.

Best places to see them: Major refuges and along almost any valley road east of the Divide.

Montana conservation status: Stable but of concern from continued loss of grassland habitat; suffered from widespread unregulated market hunting in the early 20th century.



SPOTTED SANDPIPER

Brown-backed, solitary bird distinguished by yellow legs and frequent bobbing motion. Spots on white breast during breeding season. Body length: 7–8 inches.

► **Key ID tips:** Short legs and neck compared to other shorebirds, and sporadic short bursts of flight when around other shorebirds.

Habitat: Breeds near all types of aquatic habitats across most of North America and Canada. Winters in southern U.S. through Mexico and South America.

Worth knowing: Like Wilson's phalaropes, females practice sex role-reversal, attracting and mating with multiple males who assume parental care of eggs and young.

Best places to see them: Next to almost any body of water in Montana, especially along rivers, at most elevations.

Montana conservation status: Stable.



WILSON'S PHALAROPE

Delicate shorebird with slender neck and knitting needle-like bill. Drab gray except during breeding season, when female assumes rust-colored chest and a dark stripe from the bill through the eyes and down both sides of the neck. Body length: 9 inches.

► **Key ID tips:** Small head and thin bill. Breeding female's distinct coloration noted above.

Habitat: Breeds across much of the northern U.S. and southern Canada in short grasslands next to wetlands; spends most of its time on water.

Worth knowing: Brightly colored females compete for males and "let" them assume parental care. Known for "twirling" on the water, a behavior thought to draw prey up from the depths.

Best places to see them: Major national wildlife refuges and almost any other open lakes, ponds, and potholes.

Montana conservation status: Stable but of concern due to major importance of key migration sites such as the Great Salt Lake.



KILLDEER

The most well-known shorebird. Brown back with two distinctive black collars across a white chest, vivid orange eye ring. Body length: 9 inches.

► **Key ID tips:** Distinctive call when agitated. Dark collars on neck.

Habitat: Year round in open habitats through much of the U.S.; also breeds farther north and winters farther south. Usually nests on gravel including rooftops, parking lots, and roadsides.

Worth knowing: Killdeer are famous for pretending to have broken wings to lure predators away from eggs laid on open ground and newly hatched chicks.

Best places to see them: Lake shores, stream banks, fields, and other places close to water.

Montana conservation status: Common and widespread, but declining due to pesticides, habitat loss, and direct mortality from increasing numbers of vehicles and feral cats.



MOUNTAIN PLOVER

Drab brown, well camouflaged with pale breast and black wingtips visible in flight. Body length: 9 inches.

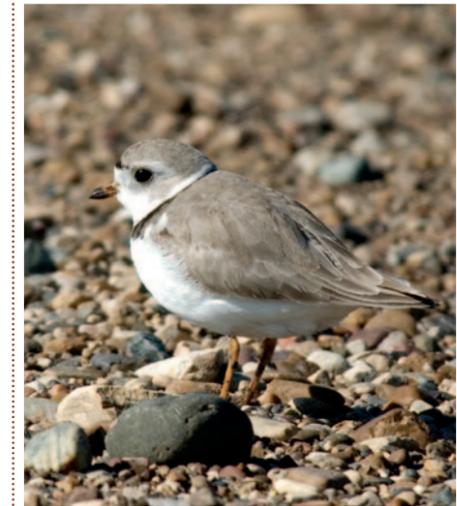
► **Key ID tip:** Resembles a killdeer but without the black neck bands.

Habitat: Dry upland bird known for association with prairie dog towns and similar, mostly open sites. Breeds east of the Rockies from southern Canada into New Mexico and Texas. Winters from California to central Mexico.

Worth knowing: Called the "prairie ghost" because of its habit of turning away from observers and sitting down, relying on its camouflage to "disappear."

Best places to see them: Backroads of Phillips, Valley, and Blaine counties; areas north of Harlowton and Roundup.

Montana conservation status: At risk because of small, declining populations and limited, declining habitat.



PIPING PLOVER

Pale brown-backed bird with orange legs, orange-and-black bill. Body length: 7 inches.

► **Key ID tip:** Bill is paler, stockier, and stubbier than that of other shorebirds.

Habitat: Breeds on shorelines of central Great Plains, Great Lakes, and north Atlantic coast. Winters mainly on south Atlantic and Gulf coasts.

Worth knowing: Facing a vulnerable population of fewer than 10,000 birds, scientists have made extensive efforts to tag, monitor, and protect piping plovers. Northeastern Montana provides a small but important breeding habitat for these birds.

Best places to see them: Alkali wetlands in Sheridan County, Medicine Lake, and Missouri River from Fort Peck Reservoir to the North Dakota border.

Federal conservation status: Near-threatened due to habitat destruction, flooding of human-controlled waters, beach recreation, predation, and trampling of eggs and chicks by people and cattle. 🐄



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: SHARON DEWART-HANSEN; KURT CUNNINGHAM; JULIE BETTS; SHARON DEWART-HANSEN; DONALD M. JONES; KERRY T. NICKOU

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: CRAIG AND LIZ LAROCK; BOB MARTINKA; BOB MARTINKA; JOHN CARLSON; SHEILA RUBLE