# Marbled godwit

*Limosa fedoa*

**By Dennis C. Joyes**

NICK FUCCI

**Scientific name**

***Limosa***, Latin for "muddy," refers to the wet areas where the birds feed; ***fedoa*** is an outdated English name for godwit. (The name godwit originates in Old English, with god meaning "good," and wit coming from *wihte*, meaning "creature.")

I was standing at the edge of a muddy slough, trying to replace a broken fence post, when a large, cinnamon-colored shorebird sailed low overhead. After a shrill *whit whit ker-whit*, it decided I posed no threat and went back to feeding along the water's edge. My visitor was a marbled godwit, a wading bird and a true prairie native, as much at home with grazing cattle as its ancestors were among herds of bison.

## Appearance

The marbled godwit is one of Montana's largest shorebirds, 16 to 20 inches long. Only the long-billed curlew is larger. From a distance the marbled godwit appears uniformly buff-brown. A closer look shows the upper parts are speckled, or "marbled," perfect camouflage for a bird that nests on prairie uplands. In flight, the wing underparts flash a bright cinnamon, while the bill has two colors, the forward half black and the base orange. Females are somewhat larger than males, but otherwise the sexes are indistinguishable.

You can easily tell a godwit from a curlew by the bill. The godwit's is long and curves up slightly. The curlew's is extremely long and curves down slightly (a memory aid is to think: *curl-low*).

## Sounds

Godwits have several distinctive and not easily forgotten calls. The sharp *whit whit ker-whit ker-whit* is usually heard in flight. A rapid-fire *ratica ratica ratica* is most often heard during spring courtship. The bird's distress call sounds something like a harsh *cor-ack*.

## Range

Except for small, isolated populations on the Alaska peninsula and the James Bay portion of Hudson's Bay, marbled godwits breed only in the northern Great Plains—the Canadian prairies, the Dakotas into western Minnesota, and the glaciated plains of northern Montana. The big birds winter along the coast of California and western Mexico and, less commonly, around the Gulf of Mexico and the Florida coast. Scientists have yet to discover the migration routes or wintering locations of specific Montana populations.

## Habitat

Godwits avoid cultivated fields and tall, dense vegetation. They are also ill adapted to non-native grasslands like CRP fields. Instead they prefer large blocks of moderately grazed native prairie with a variety of sparsely vegetated seasonal ponds and alkali wetlands. They maintain large territories, often more than 200 acres, and are most common in areas with a square mile or more of wetlands and prairie uplands.

## Food

Godwits feed on mudflats and in shallow to moderately deep water. They probe for pondweed tubers, aquatic insects, leeches, and small fish, often entirely submerging their heads. They also spend time in grassy uplands, where they feed on grasshoppers, spiders, beetles, flies, and crickets.

## Reproduction

The male selects a nest site in short prairie vegetation up to a quarter mile from water. The nest is a grass-lined depression in which the female lays four eggs, usually during mid- to late May. The spotted, buff- or olive-colored eggs hatch in 23 to 24 days. Like all shorebirds, godwit chicks can fend for themselves almost immediately. Under the watchful eye of their parents, they leave the nest within the first or second day. While nesting, godwits are all but invisible and will allow themselves to be nearly stepped on before flushing. They also feign injury to lead predators away from their nest and young. Although both parents share in incubating the eggs, they migrate and winter separately, reuniting again the following spring. Godwits are long lived and have been known to return to the same nesting area for 25 consecutive years.

## Conservation

The fate of marbled godwits depends on the fate of native prairie. Conversion of prairie to cropland and drainage of prairie wetlands eliminates habitat and may further reduce populations by forcing birds to nest in unfavorable areas. Collisions with power lines have also been reported, especially where lines are constructed near wetlands.

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*Writer Dennis C. Joyes lives in Ontario and frequently visits his home state of Montana.*