

Illinois wetlands provide mid-migration fuel for shorebirds migrating and nesting grounds in Illinois—and beyond.

A Shorebird Challenge



Story By Thomas V. Lerczak
Photos By Adele Hodde



The yearly pageant of bird migration that crosses Illinois provides an endlessly revolving sequence of species to observe.

Except for a few weeks in June and January, at different times and locations, species from waterfowl to blackbirds are on the move. Some, such as ducks and geese, are easy to observe. Others, such as the enigmatic shorebirds, occur mainly in highly specific habitats. Many people are unaware these winged creatures routinely pass through or over Illinois twice a year—literally from the far ends of the earth.

Of the 319 bird species that can regularly be found in Illinois, 37 are collectively referred to as shorebirds. They are

categorized into three families: plovers, stilts and avocets, and sandpipers, snipes and phalaropes. Only seven species nest in Illinois: black-necked stilt, killdeer, spotted sandpiper, upland sandpiper, Wilson's snipe, American woodcock and Wilson's phalarope.

The remaining species merely pass through Illinois between wintering and breeding habitats. The semipalmated plover, for example, travels from as far away as the coast of Argentina to the far reaches of northern Canada above the Arctic Circle. Such a bird has probably seen more of the world in one year of its intense life than most folks see over a lifetime.

The challenges faced during a migratory journey are numerous. Stormy conditions, stealthy predators, habitat alteration by humans and hostile environments take their toll. Habitat loss has been a particularly important threat to shorebirds because most species are associated with a particularly vulnerable habitat—wetlands.

Identification of sandpipers is often aided when mixed-flocks are present, providing a clue to size of individual birds. Above, a pectoral sandpiper (third from right) and dunlin (right) share a mudflat with four "peep" sandpipers. Left, a least sandpiper stands behind a lesser yellowlegs.

rating northward to

l e n g e



And herein lies a special challenge presented to these birds by today's Midwestern landscape. About 90 percent of Illinois' original wetland habitats have been drained and converted to agriculture, roadways and urban areas. Shallow-water and mud flat habitats, rich in the small invertebrate life needed by migrating shorebirds, are now few and far between. If appropriate habitats cannot be found, most migrating shorebirds must pass right over Illinois in search of habitats elsewhere.

But Illinois also supports several managed wetland areas that attract migratory shorebirds. In fact, 11 of the 48 Important Bird Areas of Illinois were designated as such by the National Audubon Society due to their outstanding value to shorebirds (see table). One

During migratory periods, both short- and long-billed dowitchers may be present in Illinois. The white rump patch on this species extends higher up on the back than that of other shorebirds.



site, Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge, along the Illinois River in central Illinois, has an elaborate system of levees and water-control structures, allowing manipulation of water levels for the benefit of shorebirds. The levees buffer the refuge's wetland plant communities and mud flats from the frequent flooding associated with the unnaturally variable water levels of the river. Even so, spring floods typically pour over the levees, inundating shorebird habitats with deep, muddy water. In early summer, though, the water is specifically drawn low to expose mud flats. And the mud flats start attracting shorebirds on the fall migrations that begin in July.

Most migratory birds are opportunistic and may exploit suitable habitats with the proper habitat structure, protection from disturbance and availability of food resources. If high-quality wetlands are not available in spring, shorebirds may move to wet agricultural fields and forage among the previous year's crop stubble. Migrating shorebirds can even be found at sewage treatment lagoons, which tend to support an abundance of invertebrate prey. Intrepid birders with access to such sites may be rewarded with a once-in-a-lifetime viewing of a rare bird.

The shallow wetlands created on the Double T State Fish and Wildlife Area in Fulton County provide feeding habitat for many species of shorebirds, and nesting habitat for the state-endangered upland sandpiper.

When a rarity is sighted—or when thousands of shorebirds can be seen in one place—word quickly gets around the birding community, facilitated greatly by the Internet. During migratory periods, just about any shorebird inhabiting the western hemisphere is a possibility, and birders know this. Obtaining an accurate identification, though, can be another matter.

Most birders are intimidated by shorebirds because many have similar shapes and plumage characteristics. It is not uncommon to have a bird in the group of sandpipers commonly known as “peeps” within a clear view only to end up repeatedly looking back and forth between the field guide and the bird. Sometimes the birds almost seem to be taunting the observers, challenging them to get a positive identification, before flying off and leaving the observer in a wake of frustration. Even experienced birders must become serious when identifying “peep” sandpipers.





Other species, such as the American avocet, are “all field mark,” as the saying goes. They are so unique and strange, no other bird compares.

The wide variety of shapes and sizes of shorebirds is related to the way in which they partition their habitats. Peeps typically use moist mud flats with little surface water, longer-legged species such as greater yellowlegs use shallow-water areas, avocets forage in deeper water and sanderlings prefer sandy beaches. Dowitchers, with their long bills, can probe deeper within the substrate than other species. Large plovers, such as the killdeer, tend to forage on dryer ground, picking at surface prey items.

Habitat partitioning reduces competition among species, allowing many

An uncommon summer resident, the spotted sandpiper (left) prefers open or early successional areas near water around ponds, lakes, reclaimed surface mined areas and gravel pits. A flock of avocets (above) feeds in the shallow waters of a spring wetland.

species to co-exist within a given area. The availability of a high diversity of habitat types is directly related to the ability to support a large number of species. The challenge, though, is managing a site to provide the many necessary habitat types.

At the Double T State Fish and Wildlife Area in Fulton County, a series of shallow wetlands exist on a former surface-mined area. Upland sandpipers nest in the surrounding grasslands, and a multitude of

feeding shorebird species are easily observed from the adjacent county road.

Restorations such as this inspire optimism, showing that within the fabric of our society we have the knowledge and wherewithal to rise to our challenges and make things right again. If we can continue along this path, for the shorebirds and associated wetland species, finding wetland habitats in Illinois will be that much less of a challenge.

And the pageant of bird migration across the state may continue uninterrupted.



Thomas V. Lerczak is a natural areas preservation specialist with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission.

Important Bird Areas (IBA) of Illinois* with Special Value to Shorebirds.

Site Name	Specific Importance
Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area	Wilson’s snipe
Midwin National Tallgrass Prairie	upland sandpiper
Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (UMR NWFR)	migration
Lost Mound Unit of UMR NWFR	upland sandpiper
Chatauqua National Wildlife Refuge	migration
Banner Marsh State Fish and Wildlife Area	migration
Rice Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area	migration
Double T State Fish and Wildlife Area	upland sandpiper
Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge, Long Island Division	migration
Prairie Ridge State Natural Area	migration, upland sandpiper
Oakwood Bottoms (Shawnee National Forest)	migration

*Important Bird Areas of Illinois are designated by the National Audubon Society.

NOTE: Carlyle and Rend lakes host important concentrations of shorebirds. Important Bird Area designations are being confirmed for these and other sites.

