

WILLET

Donald Shephard



Willet in nonbreeding plumage

When we lived in Lodi, my wife and I used to drive east through vineyards and orchards out to the pastures and the foothills, birding all the way. In fall and spring, we sometimes saw Willets beside the similar Lesser Yellowlegs foraging vernal pools for insects. In breeding plumage, both species show a different appearance but, the Lesser Yellowlegs is a much smaller bird. The food garnered from these pools fuels Willets' eight ounce bodies on migration. The Willet has one of the greatest latitudinal ranges of temperate breeding shorebirds in North America – from the Canadian Maritimes to Venezuela – making it the only North American sandpiper with a breeding range

extending south of the North-temperate region.

Whether in mottled brown breeding plumage or gray winter colors, Willets in flight reveal a bold white and black stripe running the length of each wing. These long-legged, straight-billed shorebirds feed along beaches, mudflats, and rocky shores. Willets are common on most of the California coastline. Learn to recognize them and they'll provide a useful reference point for identifying other shorebirds.

Watch for a large, stocky shorebird with long legs and thick, a straight bill considerably longer than the head; wings broader and rounder than those of many shorebirds; and a short tail, squared at the base. Bluish-gray legs help separate them from Lesser Yellowlegs.

Take a walk with a Save Our Shorebirds volunteer and you will often observe a Willet by itself. They walk deliberately, pausing to probe for crabs, worms and other prey in sand and mudflats. They pick at insects, mollusks, crustaceans and marine worms, but also eat plant material. When startled, they react with a piercing call, often opening their wings and running rather than taking flight. In winter, Willets are easy to spot feeding along the water's edge.

As they're one of the largest common shorebirds, even though they're indistinctly marked they are quickly recognize by their overall chunky shape, subdued plumage, and thick, long bill. To be absolutely sure, check their distinctive black-and-white wing markings when they take flight.

In winter, Willets feed on beaches and rocky coasts, as well as mudflats and marshes. During breeding season the western population moves far inland to nest in grasslands and prairies near freshwater. Eastern Willets breed in coastal saltmarshes and on barrier beaches and islands.

The Willet loudly heralds the arrival of spring from aloft with its ringing "*pill-will-willet*" call, accompanied by flashing wing-beats.

WILLET

continued

Willetts breeding in the interior of the West differ from the Atlantic Coastal form in their ecology, shape, and subtly in calls. Western Willetts are slightly larger and paler gray. Eastern Willetts have stouter bills and more barring on their chest and back. Birders find it difficult to detect the difference between the calls of the two subspecies, east and west, but the birds can hear the difference and respond more strongly to recorded calls of their own type. The eastern subspecies of Willet breeds in coastal saltmarshes along the Atlantic, a very different habitat from the grasslands and Great Basin deserts used by the western subspecies.

Willetts take most of their prey from the surface, using their sensitive bill tip to grab up worms, snails, and insects. They also probe for sand crabs and other prey on mudflats and beaches, and take shellfish and small fiddler crabs from rocky shorelines. You'll usually see them on wet sand or wading close to the water's edge, but occasionally Willetts paddle in shallow waters to chase down small fish and crabs. In spring, the *pill-will-willet* call marks the arrival of Willetts on the breeding grounds. Willet pairs often remain together for several years and return to the same nest sites. Males loudly defend their nesting and feeding territories, challenging their neighbors with a ritualized walk along territorial boundaries that can escalate into physical attacks. Although both parents incubate the eggs and teach the young to feed, only the male Willet spends the night on the nest. The female Willet departs the nest site up to two weeks ahead of the male, leaving her mate to finish raising the chicks.

Willetts and other shorebirds were once a popular food. In 1871, John James Audubon wrote that the eggs were tasty and the young "grow rapidly, become fat and juicy, and by the time they are able to fly, afford excellent food." The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 banned market hunting and marked the start of the Willet's comeback.

If you are in the Central Valley in spring, listen for the onomatopoeic call, *pill-will-willet*, and you will have progressed from a visual birder to an aural identifier able to appreciate Willetts' recovery while it lasts.

Willet photo by Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com



WHAT BIRDS HAVE YOU SEEN IN YOUR YARD?

Toby tells me she saw her first new yard bird in about a year. The Western Meadowlark takes her lifetime yard bird count to 121, a respectable total for a mid-town Fort Bragg yard. She suggests we ask members to submit yard list totals including location, and the two or three rarest or most interesting birds. Send your data to the editor: P.O.Box 1031, Mendocino CA 95460 or donshephard@comcast.net