

MARBLED GODWIT**Donald Shephard****Marbled Godwit photo Alan D. Wilson**

My wife and I vacationed in Costa Rica this year and some Marbled Godwits do the same. The prairie breeding and short migrations of most Marbled Godwits contrast greatly with the long Arctic to southern South America migration of Hudsonian Godwits. Most Marbled Godwits winter in coastal California or Mexico, and some range as far as South America.

Becky Bowen has a fond memory of a Marbled Godwit literally "escorting" a Hudsonian Godwit down the water's edge at Ten Mile Beach near the Ward Avenue

ramp. The date is seared in her memory: August 30, 2009. The next day she went to Ten Mile Beach on an SOS survey and found the same two together about half a mile north of the previous day's sighting. They foraged shoulder to shoulder. She sat down in the sand with the camera and after a while, they came nearer and nearer until they were about five feet away. They seemed to be perfect companions.

Save Our Shorebirds volunteers walking Ten Mile Beach may first spot a flock with Whimbrels and Long-billed Curlews, both large and brown like the Marbled Godwit. "Marbled" refers to the extensive speckled pattern of black and beige across the godwit's upper parts. "Godwit" refers to one of their calls. Walk with our friendly volunteers and they will point out a pale orange patch in the upper wing and a clean cinnamon under-wing, distinctive in flight. They will also guide you to the long, slightly upcurved bill with an orange tone from the base to about half its length, and then dark to the tip. No survey by an SOS member lacks interest. You may be surprised to see Marbled Godwits, like their rarer cousins, Hudsonian Godwits, sometimes foraging almost exclusively on plants during migration. So search among the bull kelp along the shore. In preparation for fall migration, this sandpiper gorges on algae and sago pond weed tubers, which constitute up to 86% of its diet by volume.

Never far from water during migration and on its wintering grounds, this godwit inhabits mud and sand flats, shallow tidal waters, and freshwater marshes. A Marbled Godwit moves slowly, probing for food under the mud with its sensitive bill, often inserting the entire bill into the mud, and completely submerging its head. They eat mollusks, crustaceans, and other aquatic creatures that live in the sand and mud. They consume clams, snails, crabs, and marine worms—especially bristle worms—by probing deeply or picking insects from surfaces.

They migrate in loose flocks that often rearrange their lines. Juveniles set out a few weeks later than adults. Marbled Godwits migrate south through this area from July through April and return through April and early May, and some stay in this area throughout this period. Females often depart the breeding grounds before males and juveniles.

MARbled GODWIT

continued

They breed on the prairies of western Canada and the north central Great Plains, near marshes or ponds. They usually nest in short grass in wet meadows or near water, preferring shallow seasonal pools or ponds. Should you vacation on a prairie, you would be extremely lucky to find a Marbled Godwit nest for they are not easily found. These birds do not readily flush from their eggs. Incubating adults can sometimes be picked up from the nest. Both parents share in incubation and brood care.

Monogamous pairs appear to reunite before entering the breeding grounds. Breeding territories are large – up to 220 acres. Courtship includes high aerial displays by the male, joint flights, and ceremonial scraping. The male selects a site and digs several scrapes, which the female inspects.

The female lays 3-5 pale yellow to olive eggs marked with small patches and lines of brown or purple. In 23-26 days, chicks emerge fully feathered and precocial. The young leave the nest soon after hatching and find their own food. Both parents protect and tend the young for the first 15 to 26 days, after which the female usually leaves. The male stays with the young until they can fly. Marbled Godwits defend their young vigorously from potential threats of all sizes: from ravens and cranes to foxes and bears.

Despite natural predation, the Canadian Wildlife Service estimates the population at 171,500 birds. Common in the 1800s, they were over-hunted in the early 1900's. Protection from hunting has helped the population rebound, but the destruction of grassland breeding habitat now limits the population. According to National Audubon, the San Francisco Bay area, where an estimated 10% of all Marbled Godwits stop in spring, has lost 85% of its tidal marshes.

Numbers appear to have increased slightly in some regions since the early twentieth century, when hunting of this species was banned. Probably because large portions of its former breeding habitats are now cropland, it has not increased in numbers to repopulate its former breeding range.

Godwits are collectively known as an "omniscience", "pantheon", or "prayer" of godwits. Next time you stroll along the beach or wander by a mudflat, you have a prayer of a chance to see this largest of the four godwits, but if you vacation on the prairie in breeding season you need to be omniscient to find one of their nests.

Marbled
Godwit
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