

WHIMBREL**Donald Shephard**

Pam Huntley, in her radio talk on Spotted Sandpipers (page 3), said you often hear them before you see them. "Heard before seen" could also be the motto of the Whimbrel. Its characteristic rippling note carries a long way and is given frequently. A common colloquial name in England is the "seven whistler", as the single note is frequently given about seven times. Just to create confusion, it also emits a *cur-lee* reminiscent of a curlew call. Other Brits call it the "May bird" because it arrives on their shores during that month.



Whimbrel photo Andreas Trepte

This large, relatively short-legged shorebird shows a long down-curved bill, striped head, brown speckled upperparts and light underparts with streaking on the neck and upper breast. The underwings are light. Juveniles are buffier with lighter feather edgings on the back and wings. On a foggy day along our coast, you might confuse a Whimbrel, a Long-billed Curlew and the very rare Bristle-thighed Curlew as they are similar species. The Long-billed Curlew, as its name suggests, has an extremely long bill. It lacks the dark crown striping, has a buff belly, and is cinnamon-colored under the wings. Cinnamon also distinguishes the Bristle-thighed Curlew. In this case, the cinnamon is bright on the rump and upper tail. Identify the Whimbrel in flight by its large size, strong wing beats, plain color, and pointed wings. At a distance, distinguish curlews, including Whimbrels, from godwits by pale gray legs and more graceful foraging actions.

The Whimbrel (*Numenius Phaeopus*) is a wader in the large family Scolopacidae. One of the most widespread of the curlews, it breeds across much of subarctic North America, Europe and Asia. In Europe it is found as far south as Scotland particularly around Shetland, the Orkneys, and the Outer Hebrides as well as the mainland at Sutherland and Caithness.

It migrate along coasts in Africa, South America, south Asia into Australasia and southern North America. You might even come across this species around one of Australia's inland seas. I saw them along the Essex coast of my youth in England, in irrigated pastures and shallow wetlands of the Central Valley in my middle years, and now here in my dotage.

A Whimbrel uses its long, down-curved bill to probe deep in the sand of beaches and

WHIMBREL**continued**

mudflats for invertebrates, especially crabs, but also feeds on berries and insects, abundant on its breeding ground. Berries are pulled from a branch with the tips of the bill. The bird then flips its head back and swallows. Insects are eaten in the same way.

Early in the last century, Bernard Hantzsch, a man whose parents could not afford many vowels, described the male Whimbrel's nuptial flight: "Perched on a hillock, he utters a rolling *di-di-di* with wide-opened bill. Now he is off with long legs trailing and head and neck outstretched. With short, rapid wing strokes, he rises into the sky until almost out of sight, uttering his soft, fluty *du-du-du*, sometimes for minutes together. Then follows a higher, faster series of notes ending with a beautiful, soft trill, which is louder and faster than that of any Golden Plover. He descends, spiraling to the nest."

Breeding occurs May through July. Females usually lay four eggs in a depression they scraped out of the ground and lined with leaves. After 22-28 days of incubation, the eggs hatch. Young take about another month to fly. My mind boggles at a young bird, weighing about fourteen ounces, flying from Alaska to the Galapagos. How is that possible?

The species begins migrating south from its breeding grounds in July, when individuals may be seen in coastal areas of North America. Whimbrels winter along the coast from California south through Central and South America. Some birds even make it to the Galapagos and Falkland Islands. The U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan places this species in the category of shorebirds in significant decline. The Hudson Bay population has declined from an estimated 42,500 in 1973 to only 17,000 today.

Whimbrels probe the shorelines of many countries, but their decline reminds us of their precarious position in this world that man continues to modify in harmful ways. Imagine yourself as fourteen ounces of life flying from Juneau to the Galapagos Islands or Vladivostok to Sydney. Your chances of success are slim, especially without help from the Transportation Security Administration

Whimbrel (left) and Long-billed Curlew**Photos Ron LeValley, www.LeValleyphoto.com**