

YELLOWLEGS**Donald Shephard**

Greater Yellowlegs photo Ron LeValley
www.LeValleyphoto.com

When one of the Save Our Shorebirds (SOS) volunteers sighted his first Yellowlegs, he said, "The people who name birds have finally got something right." Of the two *Tringa* species that grace our shores, both have distinctly yellow legs, hence the names Lesser Yellowlegs and Greater Yellowlegs. They both sport rather long necks and bills, and white rumps and tails. Do not expect to see either of them frequently or widely distributed. Becky Bowen tells me the greatest number of

Greater Yellowlegs was seventeen, recorded in July and August on the Virgin Creek estuary in 2008. SOS volunteers recorded a lesser number (eight) of the Lesser Yellowlegs on the same estuary in summer 2009, again in July and August.

Visual birders will immediately spot long yellow legs and wonder which species to record. Size is not always easy to assess, but the Greater Yellowlegs are fourteen inches long with a 28 inch wingspan, while the Lesser Yellowlegs are ten and a half inches long, wingspan 24 inches. Bill length helps. In Greater Yellowlegs, the bill, slightly upturned and blunt, is noticeably longer than the head, while the Lesser yellowlegs' bill, straight and sharp, is about as long as its head. In breeding plumage further distinctions appear. Also the bill of the Lesser Yellowlegs does not become paler at the base during the winter: it is solid black year round. The Greater's chest is more heavily streaked than the Lesser and there are extensive dark bars on the Greater's flanks, while the Lesser's flanks are mostly unmarked.

In flight, the Lesser has a dark back, a white rump, and a dark tip on its tail. Relative to its size, the Lesser's legs are longer than those of the Greater Yellowlegs, a difference that can be seen in flight (entire toes and tip of tarsus visible behind the tail). Lesser Yellowlegs typically occur in tighter and larger flocks than do Greaters, both in flight and while feeding. Juvenile Lesser Yellowlegs have finer streaking on their breasts than do juvenile Greater Yellowlegs.

YELLOWLEGS

continued

My wife and I often saw these birds in vernal pools in the Sierra foothills. Our surest identification came not through binoculars, but through our ears. The Greater's flight call is a loud ringing *deew deew deew*, higher and more strident than the Lesser's call of usually two notes.

Take a walk along the Virgin Creek beach and you may notice another difference in these two species. The Greater wades in water and picks up prey it sees, or sweeps its bill side-to-side at or near the surface to catch prey by feel. It dashes after prey on land. The Lesser, on the other hand, often runs through water to chase prey.

Greater Yellowlegs breed on tundra and marshy ground from south-central Alaska to Newfoundland and spend winters mainly along coasts from Washington State and Virginia southward, and along the Gulf Coast, where they frequent pools, lakeshores, and tidal mudflats.

Yellowlegs are among the least studied of shorebirds, so estimates of population size over time are not reliable. Christmas Bird Counts indicate that the wintering population of Lesser Yellowlegs in the United States is on the increase. The consensus today is that the population is stable, and the Canadian government estimates it at half a million birds.

Christmas Bird Counts suggest that Greater Yellowlegs are becoming more common in winter. The Canadian Wildlife Service estimates the population to number 100,000 birds in North America.

Their relative scarcity makes yellowlegs a delight to find. Accompany an SOS volunteer to the Virgin Creek estuary in July or August and you may be fortunate enough to see one of these sprightly birds. With more luck, you might discover a small flock. Then you could tell all your friends you have seen a group, an "incontinence" of Yellowlegs.

Lesser Yellowlegs photo Ron LeValley

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A MESSAGE FROM THE MENDOCINO COAST AUDUBON SOCIETY BOARD

The nominating committee consists of Becky Bowen, Charlene McAllister, and Sarah Grimes. Please contact one of them if you are interested in serving on the MCAS board of directors.