Upland Sandpiper

Bartramia longicauda
Order CHARADRIIFORMES– Family SCOLOPACIDAE

Issue No. 580
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Introduction

On cool August nights you can hear their whistled signals as they set wing for the pampas, to prove again the age-old unity of the Americas. Hemisphere solidarity is new among statesmen, but not among the feathered navies of the sky.

Aldo Leopold 1966, A Sand County Almanac

Adult Upland Sandpiper, breeding plumage; Montana, June

This unusual shorebird, an obligate grassland species, spends most of its life away from water. It exhibits distinctive grassland adaptations: cryptic coloration, ground-nesting, well-defined diversionary displays, flight song, and relatively short incubation and nestling periods. It spends as little as 4 months on its main breeding grounds in the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas, where it typically requires 3 different but nearby habitats: during courting, it needs perches and low vegetation for visibility; during

nesting, higher vegetation to hide its nest; and during supervision of young, lower vegetation. It spends up to 8 months on its “wintering” grounds (during austral summer) in South America. It is capable of long flights, in stages, while migrating to South America, while individuals are known to wander to Guam, Australia, Tristan da Cunha, and Deception Island off Antarctica, and from inland North America to Europe.

In contrast to its relative abundance in the Dakotas, the Upland Sandpiper is distributed sparingly west of the Rocky Mountains; high-altitude meadows in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Alaska, and Yukon and the southwest corner of the Northwest Territories in Canada contain small populations. Evidence of breeding success is limited. Similarly, airports now supply half or more of this species’ nesting sites in several northeastern states, where adequate grasslands are otherwise in short supply.

Figure 1. Breeding distribution of the Upland Sandpiper.

Abundant when settlers first arrived on the western plains, the Upland Sandpiper experienced severe pressures, spring, summer, and fall, from settlers hunting adults and their eggs, and later from market hunters. Nevertheless, in most places on the northern Great Plains the chronology of its decline suggests that an even more detrimental factor was the loss of most of its breeding habitat as grassland was broken by the plow and crops were planted. Breeding Bird Surveys (2000) suggest that declining trends have continued, except in North Dakota.

Although the Mountain Plover (*Charadrius montanus*) and the Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*) are the other North American shorebirds specialized to breed in dry grasslands, the range of the Upland Sandpiper overlaps remarkably little with that of these other species. The main Upland Sandpiper range is in tall-grass and mixed-grass prairie. It is rare or absent in shrub-steppe terri-tory, which is instead the range of the Long-billed Curlew, and in short-grass prairie in southern Wyoming and southeastern Colorado, frequented by the Mountain Plover (Price et al. 1995)—although the Upland Sandpiper does thinly occupy some short-grass prairie in southern Alberta, Montana, and eastern Wyoming.

Alexander Wilson named this species *Tringa bartramia* in 1813, unaware that Bechstein had named it *T. longicauda* the year before. In 1831, however, Lesson “established a new genus name for it, *Bartramia*, thus perpetuating Wilson’s wish to honor [William] Bartram” (Terres 1980: 782). It was named Bartramian Tattler in the initial Coues checklist (1882), Bartramian Sandpiper in the first 2 American Ornithologists’ Union checklists (1886 and 1895), then Upland Plover in the third checklist (1910). Its name was changed to Upland Sand-piper in the thirty-second supplement to the checklist (Eisenmann 1973).

Vignettes of its early abundance, north and south, are available from Elliott Coues (1874, 1878), surgeon and naturalist on the United States-Canada boundary survey in 1873 and 1874, and from author-naturalist W. H. Hudson (1922, 1923), who lived on the Argentine pampas until 1874. The first life-history study, succinct and packed with information, was by Buss and Hawkins (1939) in Wisconsin in the late 1930s. Additional information was gathered in subsequent thesis studies by Ailes (1976, 1980) in Wisconsin, Dorio (1977) and Dorio and Grewe (1979) in Minnesota, and by Goering (1964) and Bowen (1976), both in northeastern Kansas. Waterfowl biologists based at the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center in Jamestown, North Dakota, beginning with Higgins and Kirsch (1975), and Kantrud and coauthors (1981–1983, 1992), and more recently including Johnson (1997) and Dechant et al. (1999), have studied aspects of the ecology and management of this and other grassland species.

Recommended Citation

Houston, C. Stuart and Daniel E. Bowen, Jr. 2001. Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/580

doi:10.2173/bna.580

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