

Whimbrel

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Numenius phaeopus

Class: Aves
Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Scolopacidae
Genus: Numenius

Distribution

This is one of the most wide-ranging shorebirds in the world. It breeds in the Arctic in the eastern and western hemispheres, and migrates to South America, Africa, south Asia, and Australia. They undertake one of the longest, coastal migrations of any shore bird. With the approach of winter they depart their nesting sites and head southward in small flocks.

Habitat

In summer they nest on open tundra and rocky, gravel beaches. They winter on stone-strewn, sandy beaches, low marshy wetlands, marine estuaries, coastal waterways and brackish, mangrove lagoons.

Food

Primarily invertebrates.

Reproduction

Upon arriving in the Arctic from early March to May, males search for a mate. He swings and darts over unattached females on the nest site below, all the time singing a single trilling note.



Most sightings occur in the fall.

On the west coast, they follow the Pacific edge of North and South America and as far seaward as the Galapagos Islands. They continue along the Pacific coast to Central America, with great numbers wintering in Costa Rica. Many birds winter on sites along the South American coast. Others, amazingly, fly on to the tip of the continent. In the east, they leave the coast of Nunavut and western Hudson Bay some flying well out into the North Atlantic; others pausing on coastal south Labrador and Newfoundland, and in the Canadian Maritime provinces, where they can rest and recuperate on the Bay of Fundy. There high tides bring a highly nutritious feast to the near shore. They continue southward, island hopping over the outer Caribbean. Some winter there. Others are bound for the coasts of northern Brazil and Venezuela.

Whimbrels rarely land more than once during their long migration. When they do, they select places with mud flats and exposed reefs, intertidal pools, marsh land, marine estuaries where food is available and isolation offers safety. Shallows must be available nearby for foraging as well as furnishing edible vegetation during the late summer. The Bay of Fundy is an ideal rest stop. On the west coast they eat and rest on California's southern Baja Peninsula before continuing the remainder of their 4,000 km. journey.

They eat a wide variety of crustaceans, aquatic invertebrates, insects, worms and molluscs. Burrowing crabs are a particular favourite followed by small fish. They also snack on seeds, berries and leaves, particularly in late summer as insect populations begin to dwindle.

If impressed with his performance she responds. Together they scrape a depression nest and line it with moss and lichen. Areas near nests are fiercely protected, the only time these birds are hostile to each other. She lays three to five eggs, pale yellow in colour with irregular brown splotches. Both parents share in the incubation. Chicks hatch in 27-28 days.



Development

They are nest bound for a very short time. They begin quickly to forage independently.

Characteristics

It is a mid-sized wading bird 37-47 cm. long. Females are slightly larger. It has a very distinctive bill. This pointed bill curving downward near the tip is 7.5 cm long, larger in the female. It is uniformly dark in winter, while in the summer, the base of the lower mandible is pink.

Adaptations

The long, curved bill is well designed for excavating, probing, picking up, dismembering and swallowing food. As a ground feeder and nester, its long neck and large eyes give it excellent vision. Long legs are useful when foraging shallows, tidal pools, mudflats and lagoons. Widely separated toes prevent sinking into soft surfaces.

Status/Threats

They have few natural predators. Foxes and large raptors take isolated adults and chicks. They are particularly susceptible to avian influenza.

Sightings in Nova Scotia

Whimbrels spend time in Nova Scotia resting and feeding before continuing their migratory journey.

Parental care continues only until fledging is complete, 34-42 days after hatching. The Arctic summer is short and young birds must be ready to fly quickly. Some birds begin departing as early as late July. All have left by early September.

Throughout the year and in both sexes the upper surface of the body is densely mottled with dark and pale brown spots; the underside is white; the long neck and chest are also white, faintly streaked with tan. The crown of the head displays a distinctive, bold, white stripe, flanked by two wider bands of dark brown. A horizontal, black line runs through the eye. The tail feathers are short, pointed and reveal stripes of dark brown when fanned out in flight; its broad wings are pale beneath but narrow towards their black tips which curve sharply backward. The legs are long and light grey, with knee joints clearly visible, ending in three widely splayed toes with small, sharp nails.

They have a very diverse diet which varies seasonally. Food is grasped by the point of the bill, torn into small chunks and tossed into the throat. They may also pick off food found on the surface. They can take large prey, tearing it to pieces before eating it. Switching their carnivorous diet to plants and berries when insects diminish, allows energy levels to remain high for their long journey. Strong wings and their aerodynamic shape are necessary for long migration. They usually rest only once. These are shy, mostly solitary birds, nesting in isolated pairs or on loosely spaced groups in remote locations. When selecting a nest site isolated pairs choose a slightly elevated site where the view is unobstructed; others gather in loosely organized groups when the view is limited. Its variable brown, dappled upper surfaces and buff white under parts are excellent counter shading camouflage. The chicks are ready for flight in a short time, lessening the opportunity for predation.

Human activity has impact by befouling beaches and polluting waterways. Intrusion into resting and feeding sites disturbs the birds, keeping them in a state of nervous agitation and prevents them from building up the adequate reserves necessary for their arduous migration.

They utilize the Bay of Fundy and Minas Basin as well as other coastal areas in Nova Scotia. Some populations linger during the winter months.

