

Long-billed Curlew

Numenius americanus



TPWD PHOTO



Not surprisingly, the long-billed curlew has a long, downward curving bill. Look for it on the seashore where it spends its winters or in fields and prairies where it breeds. Habitat loss has forced it to exist almost exclusively in the western half of North America.

Coastal Wetlands

Long-billed Curlew

Numenius americanus



APPEARANCE

Height: 18 to 26 inches (45 to 66 cm)

Wingspan: 36 to 40 inches (91 to 101 cm)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Speckled brown and buff backs and upper wings, buff-colored bellies and breasts and cinnamon-colored underwings
- Legs and feet are bluish-gray.
- Long, thin, down-curved bill is dark and fades to a flesh tone at the base; it can be more than 8 inches (20 cm) long and has a droplet-shaped tip.
- Webbed front toes

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Southwestern Canada to the western half of the United States. They winter in the southern United States and south to Guatemala, but can be found along the Texas Gulf Coast during the summer as well.

Diet: When inland, mostly insects and worms. In coastal areas, they probe in the mud with their long bills for shellfish, crabs and fish. They will also eat other nesting birds.

Predators: Hawks, badgers, coyotes, weasels and snakes

Sexual maturity: At three to four years

Mating season: Mid-April through September

Nests: Built on the ground in flat, open areas with clumps of grass. The nests are simple depressions in the ground, usually lined with grass.

Eggs: Four greenish or buff-colored, pear-shaped eggs with brown spots

Incubation: 27 to 30 days

Young: The chicks can fly within 45 days of hatching.

Life span: Up to ten years

HABITAT

Long-billed curlews prefer prairies and pastures with short grass during breeding season. After breeding, they seek seashores, lakes, rivers, mudflats and salt marshes.

BEHAVIOR

Curlews frequently build nests near cow patties or bushes to help hide the nests from predators. The females incubate the eggs during the day and the males incubate at night. The females will abandon the nest and their mate two to three weeks after the eggs hatch. Predators destroy 10 to 16 percent of long-billed curlew nests. If a nest is only partially destroyed, the parents will still abandon the remaining eggs.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- Long-billed curlews are also called "sicklebills," "big curlews" or "hen curlews."
- The genus name, *Numenius*, is Greek and refers to its crescent-shaped bill.
- Long-billed curlews can swim if they need to—their front toes are webbed.
- They can fly as fast as 50 miles (80 km) per hour.

LONG-BILLED CURLEWS AND PEOPLE

The long-billed curlew was once common along the Great Plains and in the eastern United States. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, these and other shorebirds were hunted in large numbers as game; long-billed curlew was a menu item in many restaurants. By the time they were finally protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, much of their crucial breeding habitat had been destroyed for agriculture. Populations in the eastern United States never recovered, but curlews remain fairly common in the western United States. Although pesticides may have also contributed to declining populations of curlews, the main reason for the species' continued decline is habitat loss. The long-billed curlew is listed on the Audubon Society's Blue List of decreasing bird populations. It is also listed as endangered, threatened, or species of special concern in several states.