

Upland Sandpiper, *Bartramia longicauda*

Status: *State:* Endangered

Federal: Migratory Nongame Species of Management Concern

Identification

Formerly known as the upland plover, the upland sandpiper is a slender brown shorebird of dry, inland fields with a thin neck, long tail, and cryptic coloration. Adults are buff above and heavily marked with dark brown barring. The throat is buff with dark brown, chevron-shaped streaking that extends onto the white breast and flanks. The slender neck supports a small head with large, dark eyes. The bill is short and straight; with a slight decurve at the tip. The legs are long and yellow. When perched, the tail extends beyond the wing tips. Juveniles appear similar to adults, but have buff tips to the back feathers and less streaking on the flanks. The sexes are alike in plumage. The call of the upland sandpiper is a whistling, quip-ip-ip-ip, pulip-pulip, or whip-whee-ee-you. In flight, the upland sandpiper appears dark above with a lighter brown innerwing that contrasts with the darker brown outerwing and rump. The underwing coverts are white with heavy dark brown barring. The feet do not extend beyond the tail in flight. Upon landing, the wings are stretched upwards.



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Habitat

A bird of open countryside, the upland sandpiper inhabits grasslands, fallow fields, and meadows that are often associated with pastures, farms, or airports. Upland meadows and short grass grasslands, containing vegetation 3 to 16 in. (8-40 cm) tall, provide habitat for nesting upland sandpipers. Such grasslands may include the following species: timothy (Phleum spp.), bluegrass (Poa spp.), needlegrass (Stipa spp.), bluestem (Andropogon spp.), quackgrass (Argopyron spp.), Junegrass (Koeleria spp.), and bromegrass (Bromus spp.). Habitats that contain a mix of tall and short grasses and forbs provide both foraging and nesting habitat. Upland sandpipers are sensitive to vegetation height and may not use sites with vegetation exceeding 28 in. (70 cm).

Pastures that receive light to moderate levels of grazing offer quality habitat for upland sandpipers. In addition, hayfields provide habitat, so long as the hay is not cut during the breeding period. Large monocultures of row crops are of limited habitat value to this species due to the lack of cover and threat of farming operations. Smaller farms,

containing crops of wheat, rye, soybean, strawberries, or corn, may offer habitat for upland sandpipers, especially if they are interspersed with fallow fields.

Airports often provide habitat for grassland birds such as the upland sandpiper, particularly if the habitat is managed to benefit these birds. Larger airports, such as the Atlantic City International Airport, support breeding colonies. Smaller airports, such as county airports, may support nesting pairs if they are surrounded by other areas of suitable habitat. Strips of short grasses located along runways and taxiways as well as adjacent areas of taller grasses are used by these birds. The characteristically low flight of upland sandpipers poses little threat to passing airplanes.

Regardless of the specific habitat type, upland sandpipers require several basic structural components. Habitats must be maintained at an early successional stage. Territories often contain telephone poles, fence posts, wires, or a few, scattered small trees or shrubs, which are used as perches. Traditional nesting sites are often used in successive years provided that suitable habitat remains.

Upland sandpipers require large home ranges. Of several New Jersey sites, nesting pairs occupied an average area of 87.5 hectares (216 acres) (Plage 1983). Breeding areas ranged in size from 44 hectares (109 acres) at Burlington County Airpark to 203 hectares (502 acres) at Featherbed Lane in Pilesgrove Township, Salem County (Plage 1983).

Upland sandpipers use similar habitats throughout the year. Migrants can be found in hayfields, pastures, airports, grasslands, sod farms, fallow fields, and vegetated landfills. Wintering sandpipers occur in mixed short and tall grasses on the pampas of South America.

Status and Conservation

The boom of agriculture in the northeastern United States during the 1800s provided habitat for upland sandpipers, enabling their populations to greatly increase in this region. Following the demise of the passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*), gunners aimed their sights at the upland sandpiper, whose value began to increase in city markets. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, the upland sandpiper was on the verge of extinction, nearly wiped out by market hunters. In addition, severe hunting and habitat loss on the species' wintering grounds exacerbated population declines. Stone (1965) noted that hundreds were shot in New Jersey and nearly all of the migrants were gone from Cape May by 1903. Following the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1916, which afforded protection to upland sandpipers, populations began to gradually recover, although they probably never reached pre-market hunting levels. The decline of agriculture in the later half of the century prevented the upland sandpiper from full recovery.

Since the 1950s, upland sandpiper populations in the eastern United States have declined due to habitat loss. Small farms and pastures have been replaced by suburban development and large monocultures that offer limited habitat value. In addition, early and more frequent crop harvests threaten sandpiper eggs and young.

From 1970 to 1987, the number of known active breeding sites in New Jersey fell from 26 to four. In 1982, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated the upland sandpiper as a Migratory Nongame Species of Management Concern, as populations in the East had declined due to habitat loss. The National Audubon Society included the

upland sandpiper on its Blue List of Imperiled Species from 1975 to 1986, the final year of the list. In 1979, the upland sandpiper was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey. Due to further population declines and the increasing threat of habitat loss, the status of the upland sandpiper in New Jersey was changed to endangered in 1984. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers this species to be “demonstrably secure globally,” yet “critically imperiled in New Jersey because of extreme rarity” (Office of Natural Lands Management 1992). Breeding Bird Surveys have shown a reduction in the number of upland sandpipers in the Northeast from 1966 to 1999 (Sauer et al. 2000). Imperiled throughout this region, the upland sandpiper is listed as endangered in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maryland, threatened in Vermont, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, and of special concern in New York.