

Sandpiper banded in spring in Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge in Missouri was recaptured a few weeks later in northeastern Siberia. More than almost any other family of birds, the Charadriidae erase the human political boundaries between countries and continents with their long-distance migrations and habitat requirements that may encompass pampas, tundra, and prairie for a single species.

Sanderling is another species for which Illinois harbors an important population of western Great Lakes migrants. Although Sanderlings are most numerous along ocean coasts, interior populations numbering several thousand birds, move through both the Great Lakes and Great Plains. Since the highest Great Lakes counts are from Lake Michigan and western Lake Superior, Illinois is well-positioned to provide important habitat for this species. Both the Chicago area shoreline and inland stopover sites along the major rivers and reservoirs are important for this species. Beach set-asides which prohibit human and human pet incursions such as the area at Chicago's Montrose Harbor can greatly benefit this and other Lake Michigan migrants.

An important migrant shorebird in Illinois is the American Golden-Plover. Half of the world's population of this species may use Illinois during migration. The proposed estimates in Table 1 are likely low for both world and Illinois population. The conservation significance for this species in Illinois may be extremely high, perhaps one of the highest of all the shorebirds observed in the state. Shorebird concentrations may not occur every year nor even every other year in a prairie state such as Illinois.

At least 5 percent of the world's population of Pectoral Sandpipers migrate through Illinois annually.



This photo of a Pectoral Sandpiper was taken at Montrose, Chicago, Cook County. 23 July 2003. Photo by Kanae Hirabayashi.

Populations of shorebirds greatly fluctuate east and west in the interior United States, dependent upon precipitation occurrence, forage availability, the presence and location of dominating weather patterns like high pressure and cold fronts on the continent, the previous year's breeding population, wintering ground conditions, and a host of other factors. If one sums the total of the breeding and migrant shorebird estimates from the table, one tallies approximately 400,000 birds. This may not be unreasonable and may even underestimate numbers considering that U.S. Geological Society researchers recently estimated between 16 and 21 million shorebirds moving northward on the Great Plains during spring migration. This estimate did not even include Illinois or Ohio, major states for shorebirds, at least during some years.

More intense surveying is being conducted this year across the Great Plains and those estimates should give us a better handle on how many shorebirds exist in North America. Intensive shorebird surveys are now underway on Arctic breeding grounds in Canada and Alaska, on wintering grounds in South and Central America and Mexico, and in the mid-continent to more accurately census migrant populations. Species-specific breeding surveys are underway for many of the small plovers, Long-billed Curlew, Mountain Plover, and Marbled Godwit. Shorebirds are finally getting some long-needed recognition by researchers, government agencies, and land managers. Readers who wish to make a case for higher or lower population estimates are welcome to forward me their reasoning. Future articles will focus on what Midwesterners can do to benefit shorebird conservation and highlight locations of major shorebird sites around the state.

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