

The Status of the Whimbrel in the Middlewestern Prairie Region

by Dan Kassebaum

History

Aside from regular movements along Lake Michigan, the Whimbrel or "Hudsonian Curlew" (*Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus*) has long been considered a rare migrant throughout the entire Middlewestern Prairie Region of Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri and Iowa. This region as described by *North American Birds* and its predecessors, *Bird Lore*, *Audubon Field Notes*, and *American Birds* also includes most of Ohio. As this report is more concerned with the movements of Whimbrels through the Mississippi River Valley of Illinois and its border states, data from Ohio have been excluded.

The status of three historically common North American species of curlew, Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*), "Hudsonian Curlew" (*Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus*) and Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*) has changed dramatically in Illinois since pre-settlement days. Considered a common migrant by both Nelson (1876) and Cory (1909), the Eskimo Curlew was exterminated by the unregulated hunting practices of the late 1800s, wiping out virtually the entire population, possibly beyond the point of recovery. Bohlen (1989) lists an Illinois Eskimo Curlew specimen record taken 30 March 1894, Fayette County. The Long-billed Curlew was considered an abundant migrant and common breeder in Illinois by Nelson (1876) and Kennicott (1854), but by the turn of the century, both the Eskimo and Long-billed Curlew had been virtually eliminated from the state with only four modern

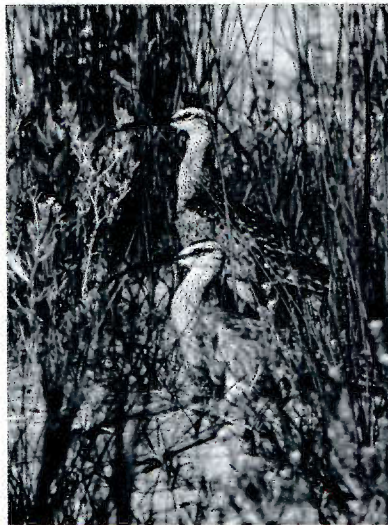


records for the latter species (Bohlen 1989). Cooke (1888) states the "Hudsonian Curlew" was "a common migrant in most parts of the Mississippi Valley." Elliot (1895) considered the "Hudsonian Curlew," "the least common of our curlews in the United States" but observed that many "pass through the valley of the Mississippi." The "Hudsonian Curlew" is now the

only curlew one can expect to find in Illinois, although Bohlen (1989) adds, commenting on its rarity, "downstate residents might never see it."

Recent status

The breeding range of the North American population of Whimbrel is split with the western population in "northwest Alaska and adjacent MacKensie" and the eastern population "on the west side of Hudson Bay" (Hall 1960). Taverner (1942) points out that the two breeding populations of Whimbrel in North America are of the same subspecies, the "Hudsonian Curlew." Hall



Above: A Whimbrel at Montrose Harbor, Chicago, Cook County. 25 July 2003. Photo by Kanae Hirabyashi.

Left: Two Whimbrels at Montrose Harbor, Chicago, Cook County, feeding in the grassy area around the larger dune, north of the fishing pier. 27 July 2003. Photo by Jerry Kumery.