



WAYNE LYNCH

status

Alberta: Recommended by the Endangered Species Conservation Committee (ESCC) as a Species of Special Concern

Saskatchewan: May Be At Risk (Recommended as a Species of Special Concern)

Manitoba: Extirpated

British Columbia: Sensitive

Canada (COSEWIC): Special Concern

USA: Secure (N5); extirpated from several states and considered rare in most northern Great Plains states



Alberta's Long-billed Curlew

(*Numenius americanus*)

special concern

Description

The long-billed curlew is the largest shorebird in North America. Its long, downward-curved bill is used to capture insects such as grasshoppers and beetles. Both sexes have a distinctively small, beige head with a long neck faintly streaked with darker brown, a white eye ring, a buff brown chest, a brown rump, a striped tail, and a dark back with pale edges.

Habitat and Distribution

The long-billed curlew inhabits large areas of native grassland and sandhill habitats. It breeds on grasslands and prairies from the interior of British Columbia through southern Manitoba from late March through late July. It also breeds in many parts of the United States. After the breeding season, the long-billed curlew flocks and migrates to coastal habitats and inland wetlands.

This species is found mostly in the grasslands of southeastern Alberta, although there are a few breeding records from the aspen parkland region. The long-billed curlew will sometimes inhabit agricultural areas, but generally prefers native grasslands to cultivated fields and tame pastures.

Once common across prairie regions of the U.S. and Canada, numbers of the long-billed curlew appear to have declined and its breeding range has been reduced. The eastern border of the long-billed curlew's range has contracted since the late 1800s and early 1900s. Its Alberta range appears to

be somewhat stable, although limited evidence suggests this species is declining.

Population

The long-billed curlew population in the grassland region of our province was estimated to be between 19,122 and 28,646 individuals in 2001. This may seem like a healthy population size; however, dramatic declines in its Saskatchewan population suggest that this species should be carefully monitored. In addition, this estimate is only a snapshot of the current population size, and does not provide an indication of trends.

Threats

Long-term declines are thought to be a result of conversion of native grasslands to cropland, as well as overhunting. Although the long-billed curlew is no longer hunted, loss of breeding habitat likely continues to be a threat. The long-billed curlew may be susceptible to the reduced habitat quality caused by drought, and slow population growth may limit its recovery rate following these drought-related declines. Additional concerns include the impacts of human disturbance, and possibly the effects of pesticides on grasshoppers (their main food supply), and predation.

Management

Protective legislation since 1917 has been credited with preventing the

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extinction of the long-billed curlew in North America. This legislation prohibits hunting, collecting eggs, nests or birds, keeping captured birds, or selling, exchanging, importing, or exporting protected migratory bird species.

Conservation and management of the long-billed curlew in our province rely on the maintenance of the remaining breeding habitat in native grasslands and sandhills. Several management plans exist that aim to protect the native grassland habitat that the long-billed curlew requires for survival. Operation Grassland Community, The Prairie Conservation Action Plan, and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) are examples of initiatives within Alberta that have identified the need to protect native grassland and its species. Furthermore, federal and provincial agricultural agencies are implementing soil conservation programs that aim to convert cultivated areas back to grasslands.

Despite historical declines in the long-billed curlew population, there has been very little research conducted on this species, especially in Canada. In 2001, an Alberta population inventory of long-billed curlews was conducted to estimate the provincial population size, and collect information to help better understand curlew habitat preferences. In the future, regular monitoring of long-billed curlew population trends will be accomplished through a program based upon a subsample of the 2001 provincial inventory.

It has been recommended that programs to collect information on the population size, distribution, and trend of the long-billed curlew in Alberta be enhanced, and the status of this species be reassessed within the next five years. A long-term banding study has been recommended to provide information on territory and mate fidelity, sex ratios, juvenile dispersal patterns and

population structure. Without knowledge of age classes and sex ratios, it is difficult to interpret population data and predict the future of the curlew population in our province. Research is also needed to determine the impacts of future periodic droughts, various grazing practices, pesticide use and habitat fragmentation on the long-billed curlew population and its breeding success in Alberta.

What You Can Do To Help

As a member of the public, a land manager or an industrial developer:

- Report observations of the long-billed curlew to the nearest office of the Fish and Wildlife Division, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development.
- Contact wildlife management staff at the nearest Fish and Wildlife Division office for information on ways that you can minimize impacts on the long-billed curlew, and ways you can assist in monitoring the status of the long-billed curlew.

