



It's Laughing With You, Not At You: The Marbled Godwit
Article by Taylor Bennett

Once again, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory is monitoring for non-breeding shorebirds on Texas beaches. Coastal Biologist, Taylor Bennett, and GCBO intern, Sarah Belles, will be monitoring Bryan Beach, Quintana Beach, Follet's Island, and Matagorda Beach this season. Target species include the Piping Plover, Snowy Plover, Black Skimmer, Red Knot, and American Oystercatcher. Along with these target species, we often encounter other migratory species including the Marbled Godwit.

Marbled Godwits can be seen in marshes and on beaches along the Texas Coast. We typically observe them at Follet's Island and Matagorda Beach during this time of year. The Marbled Godwit is somewhat easy to identify amongst other shorebirds. It is very tall due to its long grayish-blue legs. It has cinnamon-colored mottled or marbled plumage similar to another large shorebird, the Long-billed Curlew. It has a long, pointed, bill which is often pink or orange and black towards the tip.

The Marbled Godwit is named after the sound it makes, *god-wit* or *ger-whit*. They actually have a wide variety of calls which vary according to season. Only during the mating season in the summer, can you hear them making the *god-wit* call. They have a courtship song when they start to pair up and distress calls when a predator is near their chicks. During the fall and winter season, you will hear a different sound which is *ah-ha* or *ah-ahk* which makes them sound like they are laughing at their own jokes. Just think of them laughing with you and not at you.

Their diets also vary by season. During the breeding season, Marbled Godwits nest in short-grass native prairies near water in Northern U.S. and Canada. During this season, they feed mainly on insects such as grasshoppers, roots and seeds of aquatic plants, leeches, and small fish. During the wintering season, they feed in coastal mudflats and sandflats, estuaries, and sandy beaches. Their diet switches from insects and plants to marine invertebrates such as clams, crabs, and marine worms.

Marbled Godwits feed by touch using their long-pointed bill. Their bill is perfect for probing in sand and mud where their prey lives. With their long bill and legs, they can hunt in deeper water unlike other shorebirds such as Sanderlings and Plovers which have to stick to the shallow shore.

Marbled Godwits are not listed as threatened or endangered, but their population is declining due to habitat loss. Their wintering habitats are just as important as their breeding habitat. So, if you are planning to visit the beach this fall and winter please give the birds their space, admire them from afar, and also please keep your dogs on a leash.

If you want to learn more about native Texas birds and how to protect them, tune in to our Xtreme Hummingbird Xtravaganza on September 19th and 26th from 8:00 to noon. You can watch the virtual event on Gulf Coast Bird Observatory's Facebook page. It will be a live video so you can ask questions of our experts and get your answers live! On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thank for reading and we hope that you and your friends and family are staying safe and well.

Photo caption: **IMG_2712:** Marbled Godwit observed feeding along the shore of Follet's Island near Surfside, TX on September 10, 2020. Photo by Taylor Bennett.

Marbled-Godwit14: Marbled Godwit foraging. Photo by Mike Williams