

Black-bellied Plover
Article written by Taylor Bennett

The Gulf Coast Bird Observatory has one more month of surveying for non-breeding shorebirds along the Upper Texas Coast. We monitor Matagorda Beach, Bryan Beach, Quintana Beach, Follet's Island, and Surfside Beach. Our target species are Piping Plover, Snowy Plover, Red Knot, Black Skimmer, and American Oystercatcher. Along with these species, we often come across other bird species as well like the Black-bellied Plover.

The Black-bellied Plover is another migratory shorebird that spends its winter here along the Upper Texas Coast. We often observe it on the beaches we survey as well as in the bays from August to April. It seems to prefer beaches, mudflats, and sandflats to feed and roost.

This is a very large plover with a chunky body, large head, thick neck, short thick bill, and short legs. Like most shorebird species, during the winter it has a rather dull appearance. Its forehead is pale, breast is white, and upper parts are a drab brownish gray. It can be identified from other plover species by size alone. This is the only American plover with a very small hind toe called a "hallux," which seems to serve no function.

The Black-bellied Plover is named for its breeding plumage which contrasts greatly from its non-breeding plumage. During breeding season, both the male and female plumage drastically change. In the males, a white stripe on either side of their neck develops that runs all the way down to the shoulder of the wings. Their back becomes more checkered with gray, brown, and black. The most distinctive change is when the chin, throat, fore neck, breast, and upper belly turn solid black. The female's change is similar to the males but, their plumage is slightly duller and their chin, throat, fore neck, breast, and upper belly are patchier instead of solid black.

The habitats of Black-bellied Plovers vary. During the non-breeding season, they are often observed feeding and roosting along beaches of all three coasts of North America as well as the Great Plains. They tend to roost in small flocks and spread out when feeding. During the breeding season, they migrate north to Canada and Alaska and breed within the arctic tundra. These long-distance migrants and are some of the fastest and most powerful fliers among shorebirds due to their large size. They can also tolerate both temperate and tropical climates.

This Plover's diet varies seasonally. During the non-breeding season, they mainly prey on marine invertebrates, especially marine worms, bivalves, and crustaceans. Then, during the breeding season, they mainly feed on large insects such as grasshoppers. They use similar feeding methods to other plover species and hunt mainly using eyesight. Their large eyes make it easier to feed at night as well.

Unlike our other target species, Black-bellied Plovers are considered a species of least concern, but are still protected via the Migratory Bird Act. As always please remember to fish, swim, and play from 50 yards away. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thanks for reading.



Black-bellied Plover in breeding plumage vs non-breeding plumage. Photos by Taylor Bennett.