

Long-billed Curlew
Article by Taylor Bennett

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory surveys for non-breeding shorebirds along the Upper Texas Coast as part of our research. GCBO intern, Alex Percy, and I monitor Matagorda Beach, Bryan Beach, Quintana Beach, Surfside Beach, and Follet's Island from the beginning of August to the end of March. Our target species are Piping Plover, Snowy Plover, Red Knot, Black Skimmer, and American Oystercatcher. We often come across other bird species as well. For instance, the Long-billed Curlew.

Long-billed Curlews are classified as being the largest shorebird in North America. They migrate from their breeding grounds in the Western United States and Southwest Canada to their wintering grounds in California, Texas, and Louisiana.

Their habitat differs depending on the season. During the winter, they are often observed along the shore and within mudflats. During the Spring and Summer, they nest in short or mixed grass habitat. During the winter, we often observe them feeding along the shore of Matagorda Beach. They have similar habitat as Marbled Godwit.

Along with being the largest shorebird, the Long-billed Curlew has several features that help it stand out from other shorebird species. First, it's very long and curved bill. Second, it's plumage. Long-billed Curlews have speckled and cinnamon colored upper parts, streaked buff colored bellies, and long pale blue legs. In flight, you can see that their underwings are also cinnamon in color. Unlike most shorebird species, the plumage of a Long-billed Curlew does not change between seasons.

There are very subtle differences between the male and female. The females tend to be larger than the males and their bill is also slightly longer. The "curlew" part of the name comes from their *Curluoo* call. They are very similar looking to Whimbrel. Whimbrel are smaller in size with shorter bills, lack the cinnamon color, and have a distinct pale crown stripe which makes it look like it has white eyebrows.

Long-billed Curlews are carnivores and prey on a variety of organisms depending on the habitat they're in. Their prey mainly consists of burrow-dwelling organisms, which they are able to capture with ease thanks to their long and slightly curved bill. They feed on different things depending on the season. During the breeding season, they prey on insects of grassy habitats including grasshoppers, beetles, and earthworms. During the winter season, they prey on marine crustaceans and benthic invertebrates including crabs, shrimp, bivalves, and marine worms.

Unlike our target species, Long-billed Curlew are considered a species of least concern, meaning that they are plentiful in the wild, but they're still protected via the Migratory Bird Act. When visiting the beach, please remember to give birds space, drive carefully, keep dogs on a leash, and keep the beaches clean by picking up trash. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thanks for reading.

IMG_5500: Long-billed Curlew observed feeding along the shore of Matagorda Peninsula.
Picture taken by Taylor Bennett on Oct. 5, 2022 in Matagorda, TX.