

Buff-breasted Sandpiper

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Gulf Coast Bird Observatory's avian research team is monitoring for non-breeding shorebirds along the Upper Texas Coast until the end of March. Our main focus are those species that are classified as endangered, threatened, or of high concern due to habitat loss and climate change. The six target species we monitor for are Piping Plover, Red Knot, Snowy Plover, Wilson's Plover, American Oystercatcher, and Black Skimmer. Gulf Coast Bird Observatory will be monitoring the same five sites as last year: Matagorda Beach, Bryan Beach, Quintana Beach, Surfside Beach, and Follet's Island. During monitoring, we tend to see other migrants as well. One unusual bird that we spotted on beach this season is the Buff-breasted Sandpiper.

Buff-breasted Sandpipers are medium-sized shorebirds that migrate from their breeding grounds in the High Arctic of Canada and Alaska to their wintering grounds in South America. This makes them the longest distant migrant in North America travelling over 30,000 km yearly. They mainly use the Texas coast as a stopover site.

We managed to spot a few along the shore of Matagorda and Quintana Beach last month, which is quite unusual because they mainly prefer dry flat habitats such as agricultural fields, prairies, and short grassy lawns such as cemeteries, industrial parks, and airports. They will also use shallow wetland sites and rice fields as places to bathe and drink.

Buff-breasted Sandpipers are identified by their buffy or light brownish-yellow coloring. They have brown upperparts, long orange-yellow legs, and a small dovelike head with a short black bill. They are mainly named for their buffy breast, which has very little markings and spots on the side. Like most shorebirds, there are subtle differences between the male and female, with the males being slightly larger.

Unlike other shorebirds, Buff-breasted Sandpipers do not probe for their prey; instead they pick up whatever is exposed on the surface using their bill. Their prey consists of insects, spiders, pill bugs, snails, and earthworms. They can also feed on small quantities of seeds and plants. Their hunting behavior is similar to plovers, as they will walk and pause a lot when searching for their prey.

The Buff-breasted Sandpiper's mating strategy is also very unique. It is one of the few shorebird species that have a lek mating system, similar to grouse species. Multiple males defend small territories to attract females. They have what is called an exploded lek where the males are spread out, but are close enough they can see each other.

The males can have up to 17 different courtship behaviors. One behavior is the double wing display where the male lifts both his wings up and down showing the white underside as if they were flashing to grab the attention of a female. While most shorebird species form pair bonds and both the male and female take care of the nest and chicks, the Buff-breasted Sandpiper female acts as the sole parent. The females are the ones who build the nest and take care of the chicks.

The Buff-breasted Sandpiper's conservation status is classified as near threatened. Their population is in decline due to hunting, loss of habitat, and exposure to chemicals from agricultural fields. Like our other shorebirds, if you happen to see one, please give it plenty of space and keep pets away. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thank you for reading.