

Least Sandpiper

Article by Taylor Bennett

Beach nesting bird season is officially over. Gulf Coast Bird Observatory's avian research team is switching gears and is now 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 that we monitor for are Piping Plovers, Red Knots, Snowy Plovers, Wilson's Plovers, American Oystercatchers, and Black Skimmers. 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. Amongst these six species on the beach, there are other species that also spend the winter here. One such species is the Least Sandpiper.

Least Sandpipers are characterized as being the smallest shorebirds in the world. They are no bigger than a sparrow. They are observed along the Upper Texas Coast during the fall and winter. In the Spring, they migrate to the Arctic to nest.

Least Sandpipers are often seen migrating in large groups or flocks which can range from a few dozen to a few thousand. They prefer muddy and wet habitats such as lagoons, swamps, and saltmarshes. They can also be seen on the beach feeding in the washed-up debris. We have observed them in the mudflats and the lagoon at Matagorda Beach.

You can easily identify a Least Sandpiper just by size alone especially when they are amongst other shorebirds like Ruddy Turnstone and Sanderling. They are mainly brown with white bellies and have a brown breast band as part of their winter plumage. Their heads are small and they have a small, black, slightly curved bill which differs between male and female. The female has a slightly longer bill than the male which gives them the advantage of locating bigger prey. They are also one of the few shorebirds with yellowish-green legs.

These birds feed on whatever they can fit in their tiny mouths. This includes small invertebrates that are buried in the mud such as amphipods, isopods, snails, and terrestrial invertebrates that can be found on the surface such as flies, midges, beetles, and even dragonflies. They have two different methods of feeding: probing and pecking. They use the probing method for the mud and the pecking method for prey on the surface. On their bill, they have unique receptors called Herbst corpuscles which help detect different pressures to help locate prey deep in the mud. They also have a unique way of using the surface tension of water to transport their prey from their bill to their mouth.

Even though their conservation status is labeled as "least concern," Least Sandpipers are still protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. If you visit the beach, please remember to give them plenty of space and keep pets on a leash. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thanks for reading.