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August 1980

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Where Have All the Curlews Gone?*

One species seems to have gone extinct, although occasional sightings of the Eskimo curlew keep hopes alive

by Paul A. Johnsgard

The morning of September 16, 1932, dawned gray and dismal, with a northeaster in full progress along the coast of Long Island. The night before, Robert Cushman Murphy, the noted authority on coastal and sea birds, and his family had camped near the lighthouse at the tip of Montauk Point. Shortly after daylight four large shorebirds headed in from the direction of the sea and dropped into the vegetation of a hillock near Murphy's tent. Stalking the birds, Murphy could scarcely believe his eyes. They were almost certainly Eskimo curlews, a species believed by some to be extinct, and had probably come from the coast of Labrador, where a curlew had been shot two weeks previously near the Strait of Belle Isle. So far as is known, that was the last Eskimo curlew ever shot on the North American continent, and Murphy's observation was to be the last along the Atlantic coast for nearly thirty years.

Those four remnant birds were following one of the most remarkable migration patterns of all the North American shorebirds. They were representatives of a species once so abundant that flocks on the Labrador coast were reported to be a mile long and nearly as wide. The calls of a distant flock were said to sound like the wind whistling through a ship's rigging or the jingling of countless sleigh bells. When the birds arrived from central Canada in August, they gorged themselves on the abundant invertebrates and crowberries of the Labrador coast in preparation for the long overseas flight to their wintering areas. If the fall weather was favorable, the birds remained in New-

* Published in *Natural History* 89:8 (Aug 1980), pp. 30-33. Copyright © 1980 American Museum of Natural History. Used by permission.

foundland and Nova Scotia until early September, when they would leave for a nonstop flight to the Lesser Antilles, some 2,000 miles to the south. After a brief lay-over in the Lesser Antilles, the birds continued south over eastern Brazil and on to Argentina. The majority arrived at their winter quarters by mid-September, concentrating in the grassy pampas south of Buenos Aires.

However, fall storms on the Atlantic coast often affected this schedule and itinerary, forcing the birds to hug the North American shoreline. Large flocks would build up along the Atlantic coast, particularly in Massachusetts, on Long Island, and down through the Middle Atlantic and southern states. (Local hunters in New England called the curlews "dough-birds," apparently because they were so fat and tender.) Under adverse weather conditions, some flocks sought refuge on Bermuda. Westerly winds sometimes drove them far out over the Atlantic, and on rare occasions they would touch down in the British Isles.



US Fish & Wildlife Service, DLS photo B01A

Probable Migration Corridors of the Eskimo Curlew



Joe LeMonnier

Such large assemblages of birds did not go unnoticed by hunters, who ruthlessly slaughtered thousands in Labrador every fall. The Hudson's Bay Company's store at Cartwright was a convenient place to sell the tasty birds, which were marketed in all eastern cities, and it

was not unusual for twenty-five or thirty hunters to bring in as many as 2,000 curlews in a single day. Individual hunters often shot hundreds, usually by stationing themselves between feeding areas and simply waiting for the birds to pass by. The curlews' favored foraging areas were muddy tidal flats where small mollusks were abundant; these, together with crowberries, seem to have been the bulk of their autumnal foods. The birds were so intent on reaching the tidal flats that they continued to circle even when subjected to steady gunfire.

Such slaughter could not go on indefinitely. Between 1870 and 1880 the birds began to diminish rapidly, and by 1890 they had been practically exterminated on the Labrador coast. In that same year, however, a "cloud" of these curlews was observed on the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, the last sighting of a large flock anywhere. By 1900 the birds were nearly gone. An ornithologist who visited the Labrador coast in the fall of that year saw only five birds there and could find evidence for only about twelve for the entire area. Eight were seen in the fall of 1912 on the Labrador coast, of which all but one were shot.

Fall hunting was not the only hazard for the birds. Those that survived the long fall migration were also hunted without restriction in the South American wintering areas, although the intensity of hunting there was not nearly so great as in North America.

The Eskimo curlew's traditional spring migration route was quite different from the fall pattern. By late February or early March the birds left their wintering areas and probably undertook a nonstop flight to the Gulf Coast of the United States. They initially concentrated in the coastal prairies of Texas and Louisiana in early or mid-March and gradually moved northward through the southern Great Plains. They began arriving in Oklahoma in late March, and by early April they were abundant in Kansas, western Missouri, western Iowa, and Nebraska, as well as Oklahoma. These great spring flocks reminded the pioneers of passenger pigeons, and the birds were often called "prairie pigeons." They foraged and migrated in vast flocks; in flight these might reach a half mile in length and a hundred yards or more in width. When feeding in fields they frequently covered areas

of forty to fifty acres. The largest flocks assembled during the period of corn planting, when the birds settled on newly plowed fields or burned-off prairie searching for grasshopper eggs, young grasshoppers, and other insects.

Market hunters from such cities as Saint Louis, Kansas City, and Omaha ravaged these flocks without mercy. Wagons brought from Omaha were literally filled with curlews. When they were shot for sport, the birds were simply dumped wholesale on the prairie, their bodies forming heaps as large as several tons of coal. Here, too, the birds circled in masses so dense that one "could scarcely throw a brick or other missile into it without striking a bird," according to Myron Swenk, summarizing the species' decline in the Smithsonian Institution's Annual Report for 1915.

By mid-May, the birds were moving out of Nebraska and into eastern South Dakota and adjacent southwestern Minnesota. Nebraska seems to have been their last major spring staging area, for sighting records diminish progressively from South Dakota northward. There is no evidence of the birds stopping in North Dakota or in the Prairie Provinces of Canada. Instead, they apparently left eastern South Dakota in mid-May, made an almost nonstop flight to the Northwest Territories, and reached the vicinity of Great Slave Lake in the latter part of May.

Almost certainly the birds began to spread out widely once they reached the arctic tundra. There is no firm evidence that they nested in Alaska, but small curlews were seen in the late 1800s at Saint Michael and Cape Lisbourne in middle to late May, and very probably bred near Point Barrow since they were reported there between May 20 and July 6 of 1882, a period encompassing the nesting season.

The few actual records of nests include a clutch of three eggs hatching at Point Lake, Mackenzie, found in mid-June of 1822, and about thirty clutches located near Fort Anderson in northern Mackenzie by R. MacFarlane in mid-June of 1863 and 1864. The nests were well hidden in open tundra, and the clutch, like that of most shorebirds, consisted of four eggs. The incubation period was probably about four weeks, like that of other curlews, and hatching was

reported as early as July 12. Another four weeks was probably needed for the young birds to fledge. By the middle of August the birds were ready to begin their fall migration. The majority of the birds, presumably the adults, evidently flew eastward across the northern part of Hudson Bay, thus making a direct line for the Labrador coast. A few early-arriving birds that reached Labrador by the middle of August were probably unsuccessful breeders. There was apparently a second migration route down the west coast of Hudson Bay that reached the Atlantic coast via Ontario and the Great Lakes. A few birds also moved southward through the Great Plains, essentially retracing the spring migration route. As in the golden plover, which has a similar migration route, these may have been young birds. The few fall records for Nebraska suggest that Eskimo curlews passed through the state in October. One bird shot in Nebraska at that time had a total of thirty-one grasshoppers in its stomach, as well as numerous small berries.

By 1900, sightings of Eskimo curlews had become so rare that they can almost be individually noted. In Nebraska the last large flock (seventy to seventy-five birds) was observed in Merrick County in April 1900, while other, smaller numbers were seen in York County in 1904 or 1905, and in Madison County in 1909 or 1910. Among the last birds shot were seven (out of a flock of eight) killed in April 1911 in Merrick County, Nebraska. In September 1913 a single bird was shot in Massachusetts. Finally, a lone bird was killed on April 17, 1915, near Norfolk, Nebraska, just a year prior to the signing of the Migratory Bird Treaty, designed to protect and control the hunting of migrating birds. So far as anyone knows, it was the last curlew to be killed in Nebraska, although a group of eight was reported seen near Hastings on April 8, 1926. In 1924 a small flock was seen near Buenos Aires, Argentina, and one was collected; the next year a single bird was shot in the same location. In 1929 one was killed in Maine. A collector for museums shot one bird in Labrador in 1926, four in 1927, and one in 1932—the year Murphy saw the four on Long Island. In 1945 two were reportedly seen in late April on Galveston Island, Texas, and another was reported in mid-July 1956 on Folly Island off

the South Carolina coast, a rather unlikely time and location. In June 1946, however, there was another sighting on the South Carolina coastline, and in April 1950 a reliable observer near Rockport, Texas, reported seeing a single bird. In September 1964 a specimen was killed on Barbados. Each new record raised hopes for the species, together with fears that the very last bird had just been seen or killed.

The 1945 Galveston Island sighting had been virtually forgotten by 1959, when on March 22 two bird watchers there saw a small, strange-looking curlew feeding among a group of long-billed curlews. After tentatively identifying it as an Eskimo curlew, they returned with a professional ornithologist, G. H. Williams, who confirmed their identification.

The bird was seen by numerous other observers until April 12, and during the following year a bird was again observed in the same field. In 1961 perhaps the same bird was observed and successfully photographed, and in 1962 the exciting discovery was made that at least three and possibly four curlews were present on Galveston Island.

These Texas sightings added considerably to the hopes that a breeding population might still exist. Countering this optimism was the possibility that at least some of the birds seen may have been the Asian little curlew, a very closely related form (some ornithologists suggest it is a different race of the same species) that breeds in eastern Siberia and normally winters in Australia. But since many of the recent sightings were from the Atlantic rather than the Pacific coast, and were mostly within the traditional migratory corridors of the Eskimo curlew, these suspicions do not appear to have great merit. Nevertheless, the early sightings of possible breeding birds in western Alaska may indeed have been of the Asian species rather than of the Eskimo curlew.

There were few sightings in the period between 1965 and the present. In late August 1970, a single bird was reported by two observers at Plymouth Beach, Massachusetts. In early August 1972, two birds were observed closely on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. In mid-August 1976, a pair of probable Eskimo curlews were seen flying over

an area of coastal tundra along the west coast of James Bay by two experienced ornithologists, one of whom had earlier observed the species at Galveston Island. Thus, as recently as four years ago there was some evidence that this species, believed by some to be extinct by 1920, probably still existed. All told, between 1932 and 1976 there have been at least six sightings of the Eskimo curlew on the coast of Texas, seven from the Atlantic coast, and one from James Bay.

Now, after a period of limited optimism, ornithologists are again in a state of uncertainty and doubt as to the existence of this elusive bird. In spite of the ever increasing activities of bird watchers, no sightings have been reported from the Texas coast in the last decade, and the present status of this ill-fated bird is impossible to judge. Most of the persons who have summarized its sad story have come to the conclusion that uncontrolled hunting, particularly spring hunting in the Great Plains, was the single most important factor in its demise. Richard C. Banks of the U.S. National Museum has recently reviewed the history of the species' decline, and although he agrees that hunter overkill was doubtless an important factor, he suggests it may not have been the only one. Several climatic factors, including an increase in fall storms along the North Atlantic coast and possibly lowered reproductive success on arctic nesting grounds in the late 1880s during a period of unusually cool summers, could also have contributed to increased mortality and lowered reproductive rates. These speculations are interesting but inconclusive, and we are left in doubt about what, if anything, can be done to protect and preserve a species that at best seems nearly mythical and at worst may already be extinct.

There must have been a majesty to the swirling flocks of Eskimo curlews as they swept across the Great Plains or down the Labrador coast. In perpetuating their memory, one can do no better than to quote an early observer, Lucien M. Turner, who saw a flock of several hundred birds flying south along the Ungava coast of northern Labrador in September 1884.

They flew in that peculiar manner which distinguishes the curlews from all other birds in flight, a sort of wedge

shape, the sides of which were constantly swaying back and forth like a cloud of smoke wafted by the lightest zephyr. The aerial evolutions of the curlews when migrating are, perhaps, one of the most wonderful in the flight of birds. Long, dangling lines either perpendicular or horizontal, the lower parts of which whirl, rise, or twist spirally, while the apex of the flock is seemingly at rest. At other times the leader plunges downward successively followed by the remainder in most graceful undulation, becoming a dense mass then separating into a thin sheet spread wide; again re-forming into such a variety of positions that no description would suffice.

The sight of these great shifting clouds, combined with the distant sound of avian sleigh bells tinkling or wind whistling through a ship's riggings, was a phenomenon that has vanished from the American scene.



"I am something of a compulsive writer, artist, and photographer," explains Paul A. Johnsgard, "lurching from one to another like a drunken barfly, and usually working on at least three books simultaneously." True to his word, Johnsgard, a professor of zoology at the University of Nebraska, reports that he is at work on a book on the shorebirds of the world, another on the grouse and ptarmigans of the world, and a third on the hummingbirds of North America. Fieldwork associated with the production of these ambitious tomes will cover a goodly chunk of time over the next several years. Somehow, he also finds the opportunity to contribute regularly to *Natural History*. [p. 4]