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Birds of the Great Plains (Revised edition 2009) by
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Birds of the Great Plains: Family Scolopacidae (Woodcocks, Snipes, and Sandpipers)

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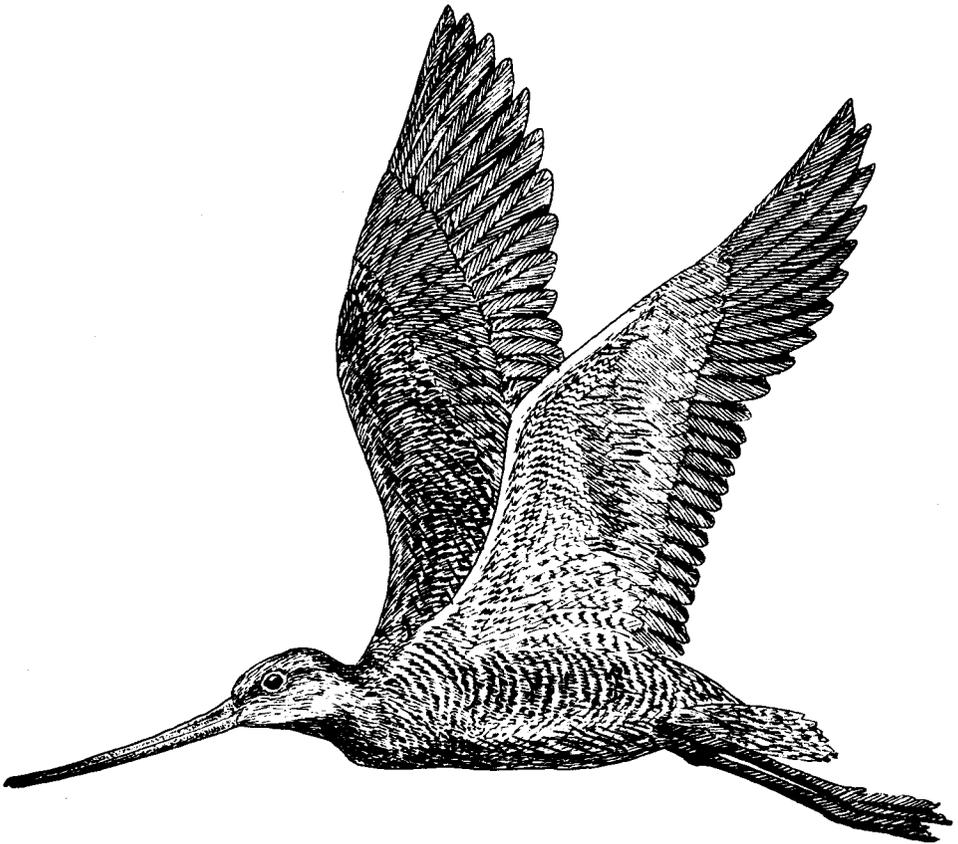
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FAMILY SCOLOPACIDAE
(WOODCOCKS, SNIPES,
AND SANDPIPERS)



Marbled Godwit

American Woodcock *Philohela minor*

Breeding Status: Summer resident in west-central and northwestern Minnesota, with nesting records for Pennington and Becker counties and a summer record from Pope County. Nesting in Iowa is fairly frequent (*Iowa Bird Life* 46:65) and has occurred in Brookings County, South Dakota (*South Dakota Bird Notes* 25:6). There is a 1972 nesting record for Sarpy County, Nebraska (*Nebraska Bird Review* 42:43). There are also three recent Kansas nesting records for Jefferson, Woodson, and Douglas counties (*Kansas Ornithological Society Bulletin* 26:22, 27:9, 28:22). There is a 1973 breeding record for Payne County, Oklahoma (*American Birds* 27:789), and since that time there have been a surprising number of Oklahoma nestings. Outside its Minnesota range, these scattered woodcock nestings must be considered as extra-limital records, although there is some evidence of a recent western extension of the breeding range (*American Birds* 32:1122).

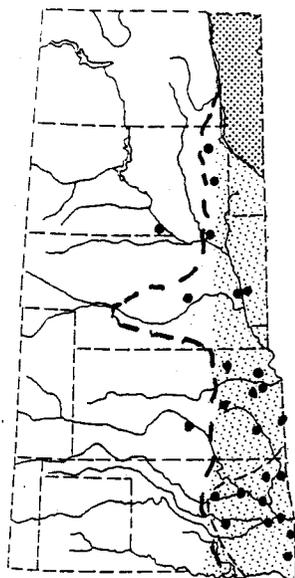
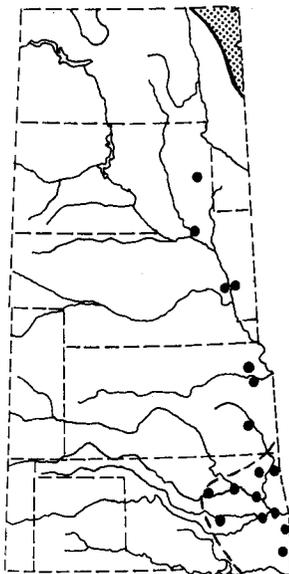
Breeding Habitat: Woodcocks are generally confined to young forests with scattered openings on rather poorly drained land, especially soils supporting a large population of earthworms that can be readily obtained by probing. Nesting cover is usually of hardwood or mixed hardwood and conifer trees but may also be dominated by brushy growth.

Nest Location: Nests are usually within 500 feet of a male's territory and are typically less than 50 yards from the edge of woody cover. Of more than 200 nests studied in Maine, nearly half were in mixed hardwoods and conifers, and most of the rest were in pure alder or other hardwood cover. The nest is usually at the base of a small tree or shrub and is simply a slight depression in the soil with little or no vegetation lining it.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: Nearly always 4 eggs, rarely 3. The eggs are pinkish buff to cinnamon with darker brown spotting. They are laid daily, incubation beginning with the last egg and lasting 20-21 days. Single-brooded.

Time of Breeding: Minnesota egg dates are from April 27 to June 23. In Kansas the few records suggest that eggs are probably laid from March to May, and young have been seen in April and May. In Oklahoma, young have been seen in early to mid-April.

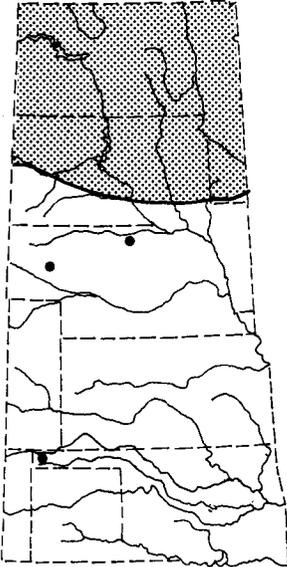
Breeding Biology: Shortly after returning to their breeding grounds, males begin their distinctive dawn and dusk display flights from territorial "singing grounds." These consist of a series of calls, a hovering flight with "twittering" wing noise, and a zigzag flight back to earth accompanied by a series of liquid trilling notes. The male attempts to copulate with any females that are attracted to such singing grounds, and it is probable that no pair bond is established. The female locates her nest in the



general vicinity of the singing ground but is not protected by the male, and she does all the incubation and brooding alone. Female woodcocks are noted for being extremely "tight" sitters and if finally forced off the nest will perform strong injury-feigning displays. The young are soon led from the nest and begin to feed on earthworms as early as 3 days after hatching. They can fly short distances by the time they are 3 weeks old, and most broods probably break up between 6 and 8 weeks after hatching.

Suggested Reading: Sheldon 1967; Godfrey 1975.

Common Snipe (Wilson Snipe) *Gallinago gallinago* (*Capella gallinago*)



Breeding Status: A summer breeding resident throughout Minnesota, North Dakota, and most probably South Dakota (no actual nesting records), becoming more local and uncommon southward. There are no recent breeding records for northwestern Iowa, and in Nebraska breeding is known only from Garden County and, recently, Rock County (*Nebraska Bird Review* 38: 17). There are no breeding records for Kansas and only a 1910 record for Cimarron County, Oklahoma. It is likewise not known to breed in eastern New Mexico or northern Texas.

Breeding Habitat: In North America this species is primarily associated with peatland habitats such as bogs, fens, and swamps, which in our region are generally confined to Minnesota. Farther south, snipes also breed in marshy habitats along ponds, rivers, and brooks, where mucky organic soil and rather scanty vegetation are to be found.

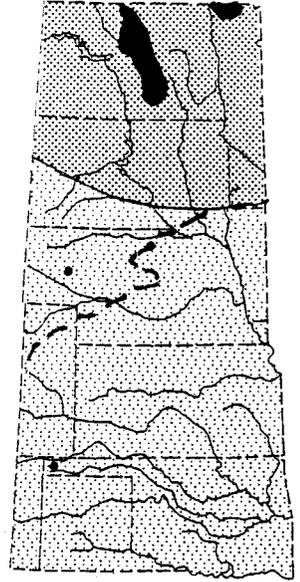
Nest Location: Nests are usually in rather wet locations, usually on a hummock in cover provided by mosses, grasses, or heather. When nests are built in grasses, the previous year's growth is interwoven to form a canopy. A lining of fine, dry grasses is also typical.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: Typically 4 eggs, rarely 5 or 3. The eggs are light to dark brown with heavy spotting or blotching of darker brown. Incubation begins with the last egg and lasts 17-20 days, usually about 18 days. Single-brooded, but renesting in some areas is probable.

Time of Breeding: In North Dakota the breeding season lasts from early May to mid-July, with eggs seen from May 20 to June 27 and young reported from June 9 to July 15. In Minnesota, eggs have been seen as early as May 10, and the single Oklahoma egg record is for June 3.

Breeding Biology: During migration the males fly in advance of the females and arrive on their breeding grounds up to 2 weeks before them. Males immediately establish territories and begin advertising them with several displays, especially “winnowing,” an aerial display in which the bird dives at a 45° angle with the tail fanned horizontally and the wings quivering. The vibration of the outer tail feathers produces the distinctive tremulous sound, with the wings used as “dampers” to prevent excessive vibration. After females arrive there is a good deal of chasing, and the female may mate with several males before forming an association with one, which happens when she selects the nest site and begins to lay. The pair bond lasts only until the chicks are hatched, and during incubation the male may also court other females. Only the female incubates, but the male returns to the nest at the time of hatching and collects the first active chicks, leaving the last two or three to be cared for by the female. The chicks grow rapidly and can flutter short distances at 2 weeks, but they cannot make protracted flights until they are about 3 weeks old. When about 6 weeks old they begin to gather with other young in “wisps” that may number in the hundreds and begin to migrate south before the adults.

Suggested Reading: Tuck 1972.

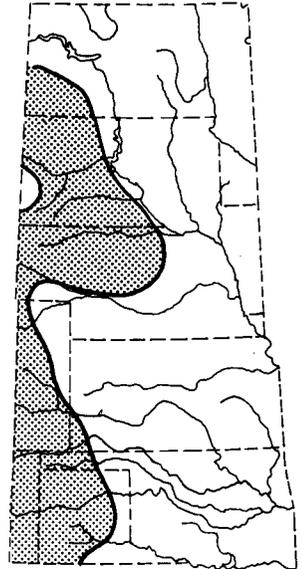


Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus*

Breeding Status: Breeds in southwestern North Dakota (primarily Bowman and Slope counties), western South Dakota, western Nebraska (the Sandhills area), eastern Colorado (particularly Baca County), southwestern Kansas (Stanton and Morton counties), extreme northwestern Oklahoma (Cimarron County), the western panhandle of Texas, and eastern New Mexico.

Breeding Habitat: This species is most often associated with short-grass plains, grazed mixed-grass prairies, or combinations of short-grasses, sage, and cactus, often on gently rolling terrain.

Nest Location: Favored nest sites are damp, grassy hollows in prairie vegetation or long slopes near lakes or streams. The nest is simply a slight hollow lined with a varying amount of grasses or weeds. At times the birds nest in loose colonies, and they frequently place their nests beside dried cow dung, presumably for better concealment. In the Nebraska Sandhills, the proximity of potential upland nesting areas to moist meadows for foraging was found to be the most important criterion for nest sites.

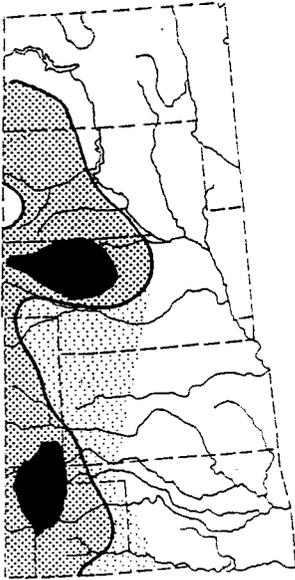


Clutch Size and Incubation Period: Usually 4 eggs, sometimes 5, and rarely more in multiple clutches. The eggs are mostly olive buff with variable spotting of darker browns. The incubation period is probably 27-28 days. Single-brooded.

Time of Breeding: The probable breeding season in North Dakota is from late April to early August, with a peak from early May to early July. Kansas egg records are for May and June, and Oklahoma egg records extend from May 10 to July 1, with young birds seen as early as June 8. Texas egg records are from May 15 to June 10, and newly fledged young have been reported from June 1 to June 16.

Breeding Biology: In the Nebraska Sandhills, long-billed curlews arrive by early April, usually in flocks of fewer than 12 birds. The rest of the month is spent in prenesting activities, including establishing core areas and foraging areas. Core areas typically consist of rolling sands and are advertised by extended flight displays and calling above the ultimate nest site. Meadows adjacent to nesting locations are used for foraging and are advertised by similar flight displays. The foraging area is a part of the defended territory, and other curlews are forcibly excluded. Both sexes incubate, and both sexes care for the brood. The fledging period is not precisely known, but in a Nebraska study the last fledging occurred about a month after the end of the hatching period in mid-June. By early August, all the adults and juveniles have departed from the area.

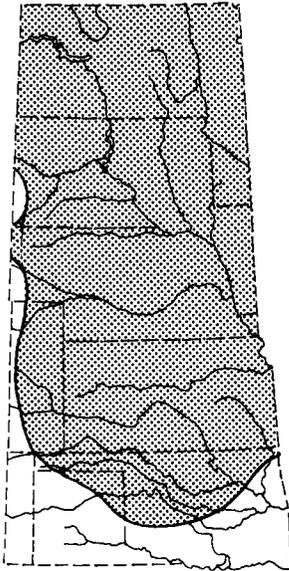
Suggested Reading: Bicak 1977; Fitzner, 1978.



Upland Sandpiper (Upland Plover) *Bartramia longicauda*

Breeding Status: Breeding occurs over nearly all of the region except for the southernmost portion, including eastern New Mexico (where it may have bred formerly), the Texas panhandle (where it is sometimes seen in summer but no breeding records exist), and southern Oklahoma. In Oklahoma it formerly bred south to Washita and Comanche counties and more recently (1963) to Oklahoma County.

Breeding Habitat: Breeding occurs on native prairies, especially mixed-grass and tall-grass, on wet meadows, on hayfields, on retired croplands, and to a small extent on fields planted in small grains. Throughout the area this species' abundance has declined as the extent of land in native prairies has decreased in recent decades.



Nest Location: In North Dakota, all of 183 nests in one study were in grassland, mostly native prairie. The nest is simply a slight depression in the ground, usually well hidden in thick grass, with grasses arched overhead to provide protection. It is lined with dried grasses to form a rather deep cup.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: Typically 4 eggs, rarely 3 or 5 (all of 189 North Dakota nests had 4 eggs). The eggs are creamy to pinkish buff with reddish brown spotting on the rounded end. The incubation period averages 24 days, starting with the last egg and ranging from 21 to 28 days. Single-brooded, but renesting is probable.

Time of Breeding: North Dakota egg dates are from May 15 to July 22, and dependent young have been seen from June 14 to August 2. Egg dates in Kansas are from April 21 to June 10, with a peak of egg-laying in early May. Oklahoma egg dates are from June 1 to June 24, and young have been reported from June 12 to July 5.

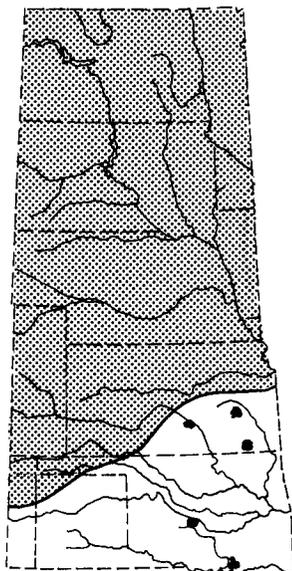
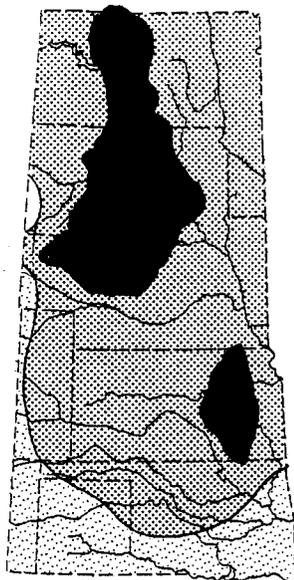
Breeding Biology: In North Dakota, the first spring arrivals appear about 2 weeks before the start of nesting and are usually paired birds. Territorial birds perform a flight display consisting of circling with quivering wingbeats while uttering a musical purring or chattering call and finally diving abruptly back to the earth. In North Dakota nesting begins almost simultaneously, and the eggs are laid at approximately daily intervals. Both sexes incubate, and adults typically feign injury when discovered on the nest. There is a fairly long interval between the first pipping and the hatching of the last egg, which may vary from less than 24 hours to about 3 days. The chicks are brooded by both parents, and by the time they are 30 days old they appear to be full grown and presumably are fledged.

Suggested Reading: Higgins and Kirsch 1975; Stout 1967.

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularia*

Breeding Status: A breeding summer resident that is locally common throughout the region north of Kansas but also breeds in low densities in Kansas, has bred twice (1910, 1911) in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, breeds locally in Union County, New Mexico, and has bred once in Deaf Smith County, Texas.

Breeding Habitat: This species uses water areas with exposed or sparsely vegetated shorelines or islands, ranging from moving-water habitats such as streams to stillwater ponds and lakes. The



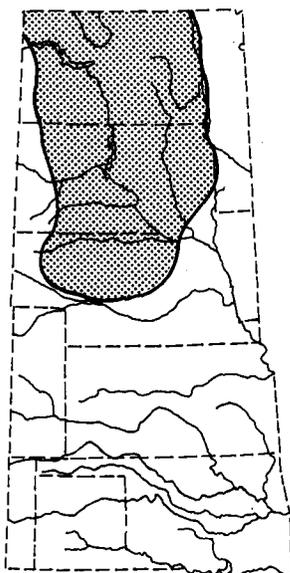
physical and chemical characteristics of the water are evidently secondary to the shoreline features.

Nest Location: Nests are on the ground in rather open terrain, often some distance from water. Cover above the nest varies from grasses 6-30 inches tall to weeds or bushes, and the nest itself is a slight depression lined with dried grasses.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: Usually 4 eggs, sometimes 3 or 5 (15 North Dakota nests averaged 3.9). The eggs are buffy with heavy spotting of dark brown. The incubation period is 20-22 days, usually 21, and starts with the last egg laid. Some females are sequentially polyandrous and may lay several clutches.

Breeding Biology: Male and female spotted sandpipers arrive on their breeding grounds at about the same time, and pair bonds are formed extremely rapidly during a period of intense aggression, especially among females, which are larger and more aggressive than males. Females establish territories, and pairs are formed by males entering such territories and being either accepted or expelled by unmated females. When a male leaves the shoreline area and enters nesting cover with a female, a bond has been formed, and the female may lay her first egg within 5 days of the male's arrival. Eggs are laid at approximately daily intervals, and by the time she lays the third egg the female begins to show a resurgence of sexual activity, with increased singing and territoriality. Although some females remain monogamous and assist with incubation, others allow their first mates to undertake incubation duties and accept a second mate. Successive mating with as many as four mates in a single season has been found, and typically the female helps incubate the final clutch. The young birds leave the nest as soon as their feathers dry and reportedly are able to fly as early as 13-16 days after hatching.

Suggested Reading: Hays 1973; Oring and Knudson 1973.



Willet *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*

Breeding Status: Breeds locally in prairies and wetlands in the northern part of the region, including most of North Dakota but especially east of the Missouri River, glaciated portions of South Dakota, and the Nebraska Sandhills. There are no breeding records for the region south of Nebraska. It is possibly a casual summer resident in extreme western Minnesota, but there are no recent nesting records.

Breeding Habitat: In North Dakota, willets are found in a variety of habitats, including fresh to highly saline water areas, streams, and seasonal to semipermanent ponds and lakes, but with highest densities on brackish or subsaline lakes and semipermanent ponds.

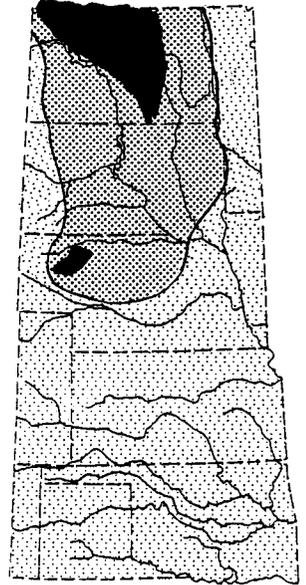
Nest Location: Nests are in prairie vegetation, often 100 to 200 yards from the nearest water. Of 12 North Dakota nests, 8 were in native prairie, 3 were in cropland fields, and 1 was in tame hayland. The nests are usually in thick grass, with the grass blades bent down to help provide a nest base and other grass added for lining. Some nests have also been found in almost wholly exposed locations.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: Typically 4 eggs, rarely 5 (15 North Dakota nests all had 4). The eggs are grayish to olive colored with darker brown spots and blotches. The incubation period is 22-29 days, occasionally starting before the clutch is complete, which results in staggered hatching. Single-brooded, but renesting has been reported.

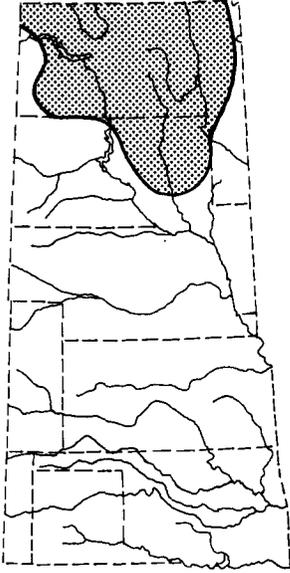
Time of Breeding: North Dakota egg dates are from May 10 to June 21, and young have been seen from June 11 to July 30.

Breeding Biology: Willets arrive on their breeding grounds several weeks before egg-laying and the group includes paired birds as well as unpaired ones. Courtship is relatively social, and this flocking tendency conflicts with the territorial behavior of males, which tends to space the population. Aerial displays are common, consisting of calling the distinctive *pill-willet* call while moving the wings through a narrow arc. Sparring fights on the ground between males are also common. Precopulatory display consists of standing behind the female and similarly vibrating the open wings, thus displaying the white areas on them. After pair bonds are formed the male follows the female about, often spreading his tail and exhibiting the white feathers, while the female apparently chooses the actual nest site. The nests are usually well spaced, 200 feet or more apart, and the eggs are laid at intervals of 1 to 4 days. Presumably incubation begins before the clutch is completed, since estimates of it range from 22 to 29 days, but the eggs all hatch about the same time and the young are highly precocial. Little is known of posthatching biology, but apparently the parents abandon their offspring before fledging and leave the region.

Suggested Reading: Tomkins 1965; Stout 1967.



Marbled Godwit *Limosa fedoa*



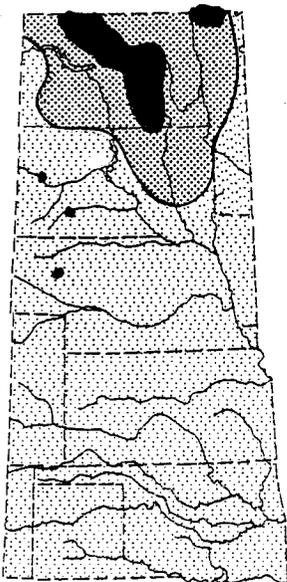
Breeding Status: A summer resident and breeder over most of North Dakota, primarily east of the Missouri, and adjacent prairie region of western and northwestern Minnesota, extending southward into the glaciated portions of South Dakota. Formerly more widespread and previously believed to breed in Nebraska, but no actual records exist.

Breeding Habitat: Godwits use a variety of wetland habitats for breeding in North Dakota, including intermittent streams, ponds, and lakes ranging from fresh to strongly saline. Semipermanent ponds and lakes appear to be the preferred habitat, followed by seasonal ponds and lakes, then miscellaneous wetlands.

Nest Location: Nests are usually in native grassland vegetation, sometimes considerable distances from water. Often the nests are in grassy cover only a few inches high and consist of a simple depression in the ground, lined with dead grasses. In higher grass cover the nest may be concealed by grasses interwoven to form a canopy overhead.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: Typically 4 eggs, rarely 3 or 5. The eggs are buffy to olive with dull brown spotting and blotching. The incubation period has not been reported, but in related species it is slightly more than 3 weeks.

Time of Breeding: North Dakota egg dates range from April 17 to June 22, and dependent young have been seen from June 7 to July 18. Minnesota egg dates are from May 24 to June 21, and dependent young have been seen from June 8 to June 26.



Breeding Biology: Remarkably little is known of the breeding biology of this species. Females are appreciably larger than males and have considerably larger bills. In a nest found by A. C. Bent, the female was incubating, but more recent observations in North Dakota by T. Nowicki indicate that the male incubates during the day and the female at night. Incubating birds are surprisingly tolerant and have been known to allow themselves to be picked up from the nest. However, humans in the nesting area are sometimes attacked from the air by all the godwits in the vicinity, as many as 50 birds. The young are led to water after hatching and soon begin feeding with groups of adults. The fledging period has not been established, but in the related Hudsonian godwit it is about 30 days.

Suggested Reading: Bent 1907; Roberts 1932; Nowicki 1973.