

Marbled Godwit

Limosa Fedoa



Photo credit: Faucon

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The marbled godwit is one of the four species of godwits found worldwide. In the 1800s the population declined because of hunting, but since has remained stable. With few natural threats to this bird, the marbled godwit is nevertheless a species of high concern because its main threat is the disappearance of breeding grounds through human activities, especially the expansion of agricultural land.

Characteristics

This bird is a very large, long-legged, and long-necked shorebird. Its long bill has a slight upward curve that is pinkish in colour with a black tip. Male and female are similar, but the male is a bit smaller with a brighter bill base. The juvenile is similar to the adult.

The marbled godwit measures about 42-48 cm (17-19 in.) long and weighs about 285 to 454 g (10 to 16 oz.).

The marbled godwit is distinguishable from other species of godwits by its cinnamon-colored wings, tail, and underparts, with dark barring above. It also has a slightly upturned bill, mainly pink with a black tip. Similar species are the long-billed curlew (similar colouring but a downturned bill), the bar-tailed godwit (smaller, shorter bill, no cinnamon underwings), Hudsonian godwit (dark underwings), and the rare black-tailed godwit (white underwings, black tail).

Life Cycle

The marbled godwit breeds on grassy plains, wet meadows, or prairie marshes near rivers or streams. The nest is a grass-lined depression in the ground. The female lays about four eggs in the nest that hatch in 21 to 23 days. Once the eggs hatch, both the male and female care for and protect the young. The birds breed in the interior summer range, and migrate in the winter to the coastal range.

Habitat

During the breeding season, the marbled godwit is found in the northern great plains region of North America: in Canada, from central Alberta through central Manitoba and

along James Bay; and in the United States, through Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Minnesota.

The marbled godwit nests along coastal beaches, mudflats, salt marshes, and tidal creeks. These areas are rich in food for the bird. As part of the diet, the marbled godwit feeds on a variety of insects, including grasshoppers, aquatic invertebrates, mollusks, snails, small crustaceans, larvae, worms, and leeches.

During winter the marbled godwit can be found along the coasts from southern British Columbia and North Carolina to Central America.

Behaviour

In the spring, noisy flocks of marbled godwits fly over the great plains. The males perform elaborate displays, including performing figure eights.

In grassy areas, they can catch grasshoppers and other insects. In their winter migration at the coast, they probe their long bills into shallow water and mud along the beaches to find their food.

The call of the marbled godwit is a nasally crowing or laughing sound, “ah, ha” or “ahk.” You can play an audio clip of the sound by linking from the Cornell (www.birds.cornell.edu) listed under Web Resources.

Threats

Although the numbers for the marbled godwit have remained stable over the past few years, the major threat to this species of bird is development of grassland into agricultural land.

What We Can Do To Help

Although the marbled godwit is not yet an endangered species, there are steps that people can take to help ensure that this bird never reaches the stage of endangerment. Becoming involved with bird programs and learning more about the habitat and characteristics of the marbled godwit are examples of actions that can help prevent any further threat to the species.

We need to ensure that they are preserved and remain in plentiful numbers. The marbled godwit’s main threat is from humans. To reverse or stop any negative effects that we have already placed on the bird, we need to assess how we can avoid taking away their breeding and living grounds. We need to find safe ways to protect their habitat.

Humans need to understand all animals so that we can learn how to live with them. A good website to start you thinking about bird conservation practices is at <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/programs/AllAboutBirds/Conservation/>. From there you can link to other interesting information on habitat management, projects to get involved in, conservation planning and specific examples of success stories and failures in conserving precious bird species.

Web Resources

Each of the following websites has good photos and clear summaries of characteristics, of the Marbled Godwit:

<http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/id/frames/i2490id.html>

http://www.birds.cornell.edu/programs/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Marbled_Godwit_dtl.html

<http://www.bird-friends.com/BirdPage.php?name=Marbled%20Godwit>

<http://www.nhptv.org/natureworks/marbledgodwit.htm>

<http://audubon2.org/webapp/watchlist/viewSpecies.jsp?id=129>