

# STATUS AND CONSERVATION OF THE ESKIMO CURLEW

by Craig A. Faanes and Stanley E. Senner



THE ESKIMO CURLEW (*Numenius borealis*) is now among the rarest bird species in North America. Reports from as late as the 1860s and 1870s indicated that the Eskimo Curlew occurred in tremendous numbers (e.g. Swenk, 1915). By the late 1880s, however, the species had noticeably declined throughout its range, and many ornithologists considered the Eskimo Curlew extinct or nearly so by the early 20th century (Swenk 1915, Gollop *et al.* 1986).

Clearly, market hunting and "sport" shooting figured prominently in the population reduction (e.g., Swenk 1915), but other factors also may have played a role. Banks (1977) agreed that hunting mortality contributed to population declines, but he also suggested that an increase in the number of storms in the North Atlantic during fall migration and lowered ambient temperatures on the breeding grounds in Arctic Canada in the 1880s may have caused increased mortality and reduced reproductive success.

The decline also may have been related to habitat loss, both on the wintering grounds of the Argentine Pampas (Wetmore 1927) and at migration stops on the North American prairies. In spring, Eskimo Curlews were found on "pieces of land which had not been

plowed and where the grasshopper eggs were laid" (Swenk 1915:43).

Woodward (1980) noted that although the Lesser Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*), a species with a range nearly identical to the Eskimo Curlew, began to increase in numbers following the cessation of market hunting, the curlew continued its decline. Grasshopper egg pods were a favored food for Eskimo Curlews. Woodward (1980) suggested that because grasshoppers avoided laying eggs on cultivated land, a decline in the availability of egg pods may have prevented the curlew's recovery. Declines in the huge flights of grasshoppers on the Great Plains occurred concurrently with the loss and fragmentation of Great Plains grasslands due to cultivation, a reduction in the extent and frequency of fire, and the demise of great herds of American Bison (*Bison bison*). Any or all of these changes could have affected curlew habitats and prey.

Although the reasons for the Eskimo Curlew's decline are unclear, it is evident that the population has never recovered. This is so in spite of the fact that it has been completely protected from hunting in the United States and Canada since passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918.

Here, we briefly summarize the current status of the Eskimo Curlew

in North America and the West Indies and discuss potential avenues for fostering its conservation and recovery.

## STATUS

### *Migration*

Gollop *et al.* (1986) described in detail the status and distribution of Eskimo Curlews during migration. We will not repeat those details here.

In spring, Eskimo Curlews apparently followed a relatively narrow migration corridor from the Texas coast north through the plains states in the Missouri-Mississippi rivers drainage to the prairie provinces in Canada and then northwest to the Arctic. Most United States records in spring are from late March through the end of April. Canadian sightings are during mid-May.

Gollop *et al.* (1986:Table 1) listed reports of Eskimo Curlews during the period 1945 through 1985. In that time, 35 Eskimo Curlews were reported in 11 separate sightings in the plains states and provinces. All but two of the records were from Texas, and, with the exception of the individual photographed by Bleitz (1962) on Galveston Island in 1962, none of these records is confirmed by a specimen or photograph.

In the fall, Eskimo Curlews followed the southbound leg of a classical elliptical shorebird migration. They left Arctic nesting grounds in Canada (and possibly Alaska) and migrated east and south to the north Atlantic coast (Gollop *et al.* 1986: Map 3). Large numbers of birds spent several weeks on the coast, especially in Labrador, where they fattened up and then departed in what was probably a nonstop flight to South America.

Since 1959, 15 Eskimo Curlews have been reported on 11 separate sightings during the fall migration in North America and the West Indies (Gollop *et al.* 1986). With

the exception of one Eskimo Curlew, which was collected on September 4, 1963 in Barbados, none of these records is confirmed by a photograph or specimen. As is typical for shorebirds generally, the fall migration extends over many weeks. Most autumn sightings have been in August and September.

### ***Nesting Grounds***

The only Eskimo Curlew nests ever found were from the Anderson River region in Canada's Northwest Territory (Gollop *et al.* 1986). Considerable debate exists regarding the current status of the Eskimo Curlew on its nesting grounds. Reports surfaced in 1987 of curlews on the traditional breeding grounds in northwest Arctic Canada (Gollop 1988). The official position expressed by the Canadian Wildlife Service is that there are no recent, confirmed nest records from Arctic Canada (R. Edwards, *in litt.*).

### ***Wintering Grounds***

There are not any recent sight records from the wintering grounds in Argentina or elsewhere in South America. The last sight record from Argentina was in 1939.

### **CONSERVATION**

The Eskimo Curlew was placed on the United States endangered species list in 1967 (U.S.F. & W.S. 1986), and it was declared endangered in Canada in 1980 (Fraser 1980). Subsequently there have been no active management or conservation efforts for the specific benefit of this species or its habitats. During 1981-1984, Tom Barry and others used helicopters to revisit some of the same areas along the Anderson River where McFarland found nesting Eskimo Curlews in the 1860s (Gollop *et al.* 1986). Those efforts did not result in any fresh evidence on the status of the Eskimo Curlew's nesting grounds.

Nonetheless, continued reports

—albeit unconfirmed sightings—of Eskimo Curlews in recent years give rise to the hope that a remnant population exists and that it can be protected in a way that will increase prospects for survival and even growth. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was prompted in 1990 to establish an Eskimo Curlew Advisory Group, comprised of representatives of the U.S.F. & W.S., Canadian Wildlife Service, International Council for Bird Preservation—United States Section, Asociacion Ornitologica de la Plata (Argentina), and the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network. In its initial meeting, the advisory group began to develop an informal 3-5 year strategy focused on:

- reviewing historical information that provides clues about the current status and needs of the Eskimo Curlew.
- educating the public about the Eskimo Curlew and enlisting the help of birders to document its current status and distribution.
- assessing the availability of and degree of protection for habitats on which Eskimo Curlews have been historically dependent.

Clearly, before one can even contemplate active steps to protect or enhance the Eskimo Curlew population and habitats, much basic information is required. Every reader of *American Birds* probably dreams about seeing an Eskimo Curlew, and the help of the birthing public throughout the Western Hemisphere is the crucial ingredient in any curlew recovery program. Specifically, we encourage all field birders to:

- be ready with a *camera* whenever you go shorebirding or birding in appropriate habitat.
- be informed about when and where the presence of Eskimo Curlews might be a possibility.

- *know how to distinguish* Eskimo Curlews from similar species (*e.g.*, Whimbrel [*Numenius phaeopus*] and Little Curlew [*Numenius minutus*]).
- routinely search Eskimo Curlew habitats (*e.g.*, wet meadows and open, grassy areas) in the proper season.
- make every appropriate effort to *document observations* of Eskimo Curlew-like birds with *multiple photographs* and copious notes.
- *immediately* inform others about any possible sightings.

To encourage the active assistance of birders, the U.S.F. & W.S. has printed a brochure, "Have You Seen An Eskimo Curlew?" which is available by writing to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 203 West Second Street, Grand Island, Nebraska 68803. The U.S.F. & W.S. printed a Spanish language version of the same brochure and also a "wanted" poster about the Eskimo Curlew for distribution in Barbados and other islands in the Caribbean and in Latin America. During the 1990-1991 winter season, these publicity efforts resulted in four new unconfirmed and unphotographed Eskimo Curlew reports from South America and the Caribbean.

Anyone who thinks they've seen Eskimo Curlews should call (308) 381-5571 in the United States (U.S.F. & W.S.), (306) 975-4087 in Canada (Canadian Wildlife Service), and (809) 426-9635 in the Lesser Antilles (Caribbean Conservation Association).

The goal of documenting sightings of Eskimo Curlews is not only to confirm their existence, but also to begin to establish some predictability in occurrence and some sense of numbers. This will enable supporting research and, ultimately, habitat protection measures to benefit the curlew. Although some habitats once frequented by this species may already be protected,

many such areas will not be. For example, 97 % of the original areal extent of wet meadows adjacent to the Platte River, Nebraska have been lost (Currier *et al.* 1985). Protecting crucial habitats for Eskimo Curlews will require hard evidence, and none too soon.

Priority areas for documenting the presence of migrant or wintering Eskimo Curlews—and for protecting potential habitats—include wetlands and grasslands in coastal Texas, the prairie states and provinces (especially eastern Oklahoma north through South Dakota), Hudson Bay, coastal Labrador, Barbados, Surinam, and Argentina.

Confirmation of nesting Eskimo Curlews would be exciting news, but it could also encourage potentially harmful traffic by people wanting to see the nests and birds. This problem can be addressed by delaying announcements until after the breeding season and by not revealing specific locations. If the presence of a sufficient number of migrants or wintering birds can be established, intensive systematic searches for nests, conducted by or in close cooperation with the responsible government agencies, may then be appropriate.

All things considered, confirmation of the presence of Eskimo Curlews—particularly of nests or multiple individuals—is just the information needed to renew and galvanize efforts to protect this species and its critical habitats in North and South America. The return and recovery of the “last of the curlews” would indeed be an extraordinary event. ■

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