LONG-BILLED CURLEW Donald Shephard

Long-billed Curlew photo Ron LeValley, www.LeValleyphoto.com

In the bad old days of that four-letter word, work, a grape grower came into the Lodi office of the Agricultural Commissioner and asked me about a brown bird with a long curved bill. He thought it must be exotic because he had not seen one before. As it happens, I had passed his vineyard earlier that day and seen six Long-billed Curlews feeding in the cover crop between his vines. They usually migrated through the grassland on the east side of the San Joaquin Valley where dairy pastures predominate.

Now we live in the good new days of retirement, and Long-billed Curlews, North America's largest shorebirds, delight us still as they travel up and down the shore. You will easily recognize this species by its two-foot body length and long, downward curving beak, much longer in the female (see the second bird from the left on page 3). Look for the cinnamon-colored underwings. Curiously, these waders sometimes swim thanks to webbed front toes. You may see a head pattern which is less pronounced than that of the Whimbrel. Size, shape, and color resembled the Marbled Godwit, but the curlew's decurved bill distinguishes it.

During the summer, this species breeds in open grasslands, including some agricultural fields (especially in the Great Basin) from central Oregon and northeastern California east to the mid-western states as well as in the grassland regions of southern British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan. They often nest in loose colonies.

Long-billed Curlews court with an elaborate dance followed by looping display flights while calling noisily. They line a small hollow with weeds and grasses; she then lays four

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greenish or buff-colored, pear-shaped eggs with brown spots. Curlews frequently build nests near cow patties or bushes to help hide them from predators.

Its deceptive coloration helps it to blend in with its surroundings and thus avoid enemies. When predatory birds are in the area, the incubating curlew crouches low on its nest. Other predators include badgers, coyotes, weasels, and snakes.

The female incubates the eggs during the day and the male at night. Shortly after birth, parents will lead their chicks to the feeding ground to hunt for invertebrates like grasshoppers. Both parents care for the chicks, but the female will leave after two to three weeks, delegating further chick care to the male. Despite this abandonment of her young, the male will reunite with her the next year.

Although the Long-billed Curlew's diet includes many species of invertebrates and some vertebrates, its bill is best adapted for capturing shrimp and crabs living in deep burrows on tidal mudflats (its wintering grounds) or burrowing earthworms in pastures. It forages by walking quickly with its long bill extended forward and probing. On their breeding grounds, curlews feed on grasshoppers and beetles. This species sometimes eats bird eggs and chicks. Opportunistic feeders, they also consume seeds and berries. They fly in formation and feed in flocks.

Relative to other curlews and godwits, these are short distance migrants, occasionally making it from breeding grounds to wintering areas in less than two days. They tend to migrate in flocks of less than 50 birds and family units may travel together. Some birds stage in certain agricultural areas like the Central Valley and Imperial Valley of California, before continuing on to final winter destinations.

People call the Long-billed Curlew by several names. Ornithologists use Numenius americanus; old-timers referred to it as "sicklebird" and "candlestick bird". Locals called Candlestick Point in San Francisco after the thousands of this once locally common bird they hunted there, and subsequently Candlestick Park stadium inherited the name. Ironically, the species had already dramatically declined in the San Francisco area by the early 20th century, being "practically extinct" in San Mateo county in 1916. By the time Horace Stoneham oversaw construction of the Giant's stadium in the 1950s, the last remnants of the flocks of "candlestick birds" had disappeared.

Now protected from hunting, Long-billed Curlews and other species have recovered from nineteenth century lows. You can watch these easily identifiable birds foraging in the Central Valley or, closer to hand, walking our beaches or roosting on rocks in mixed flocks with Marbled Godwits.

Long-billed Curlew photo taken by Becky Bowen on a recent SOS survey