



## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

### *Threatened and Endangered Species*

# Eskimo Curlew

*(Numenius borealis)*

#### **Status**

Endangered worldwide. Probably extinct. Listed as endangered in 1967 (Federal Register, March 11, 1967)

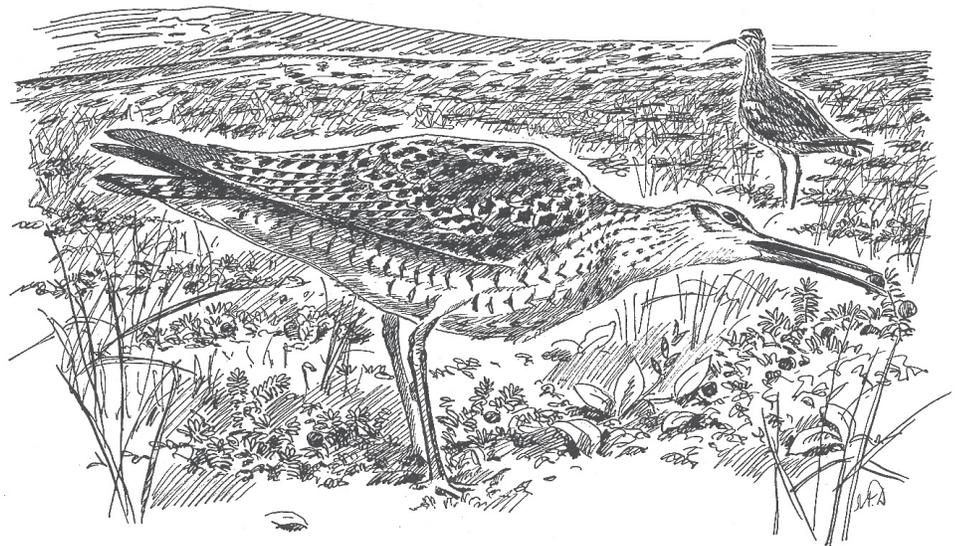
#### **Description**

Eskimo curlews are the smallest and most gregarious of the four Western Hemisphere curlew species. They closely resemble the Whimbrel; but at 14 inches (36 cm) in length, are smaller and have darker upper parts, a thinner, less curved bill, less distinct eye-stripes and markings on the crown, and pale cinnamon wing linings.

#### **Range and Population Size**

Historical population levels of Eskimo curlews are thought to have been in the hundreds of thousands. However, accurate estimates remain unknown, having been decimated before 1900. This species has not been observed in Alaska in decades and is probably extinct world wide. Breeding was documented at only two locations in the Northwest Territories, Canada. Its range during historic times is believed to have extended from the Arctic Coastal Plain of Alaska, possibly including portions of far eastern Siberia, east to the northern Northwest Territories.

Prior to a non-stop migratory flight to their winter range in South America, Eskimo curlews staged along the coast of Labrador and Newfoundland to feed on crowberries and blueberries in heath shrub habitats, and insects and crustaceans in adjacent littoral areas. They wintered in the Pampas of Argentina, southern Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile, where scattered permanent and ephemeral wetlands occurred. Some evidence suggests that birds left the Pampas and moved to extreme southern Patagonia and northern Tierra del Fuego in mid-winter.



*Eskimo curlew were the smallest and most gregarious of the four Western Hemisphere curlew species. Drawing by Maksim Dementyev.*

In spring, they traveled north through Central America, arriving in Texas by March, stopping in tall- and mixed-grass prairie prior to their arrival on their breeding grounds in late May. They may have specialized in foraging on high concentrations of the now-extinct Rocky Mountain grasshopper, where they extracted egg cases and emerging nymphs from subsurface soil.

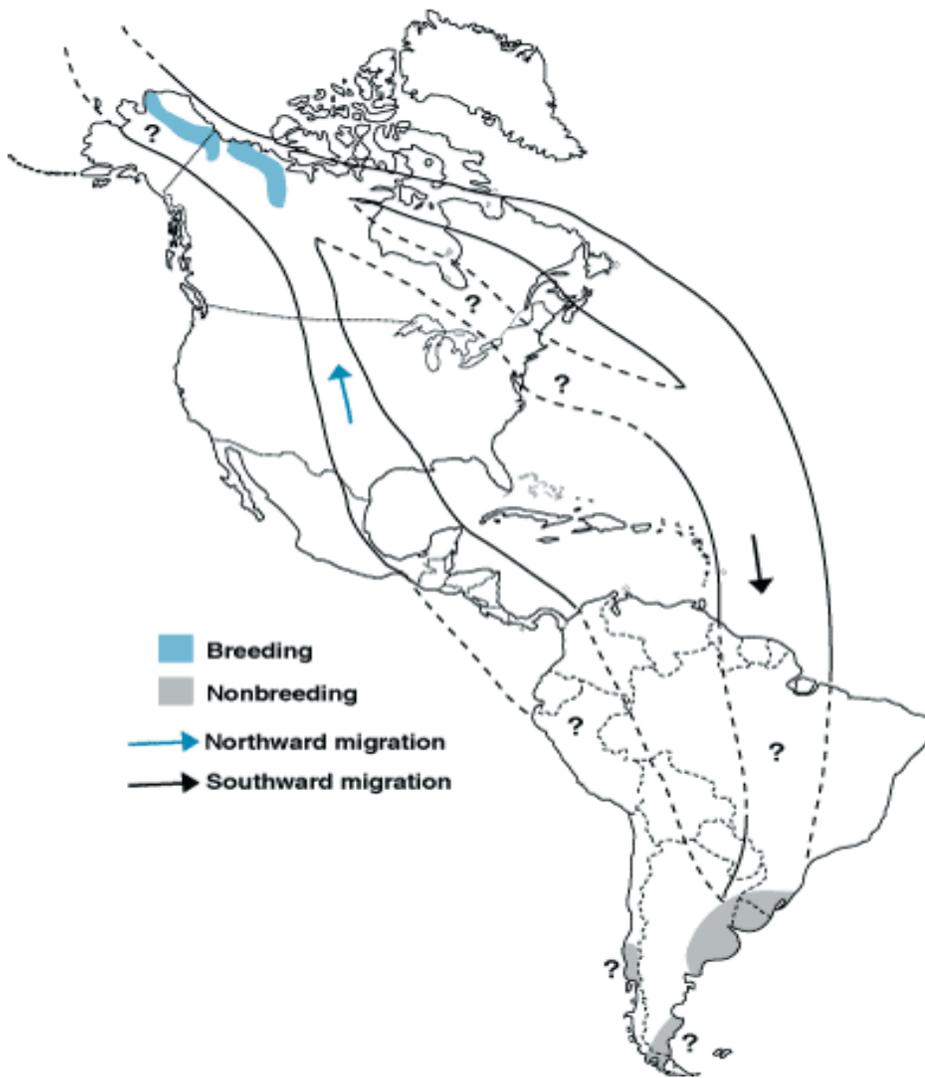
#### **Habitat and Habits**

The few historical breeding records for Eskimo curlew are from the arctic and sub-arctic where they nested in drier tundra areas. Nests were simple depressions on bare ground with four eggs, one clutch per season. Hatching occurred during late June and early July. Details of incubation and fledging remain unknown. Both sexes likely incubated and reared young. Chicks were precocial.

#### **Reasons for Current Status**

Eskimo curlews were decimated during a relatively short period of time between 1850 and 1890. The species decline has been attributed to three primary causes: (1) fire suppression and conversion of grassland habitats to agriculture, (2) concurrent extinction of Rocky Mountain grasshoppers and drastic declines in other insect species, and (3) market hunting.

By 1850, the tall-grass prairie of the mid-western states was depleted by 88-99%. Habitat modification in conjunction with pesticide application led to the eventual extinction of the Rocky Mountain grasshopper. And from 1850 to 1900, Eskimo curlews were hunted 11 months of the year with tens of thousands killed annually and brought to sale at markets in metropolitan centers. Some scientists believe that the ultimate cause of the bird's demise lay with its social structure and life history



areas and along their migratory corridors. Efforts by both government and non-government organizations in the U.S. and Canada to conserve, enhance and protect habitats used by curlews and other grassland species have become high priority in recent years. Nevertheless, the amount of land that is currently protected remains small.

To aid in preservation of curlews and other grassland species in decline, the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) recommends the following:

- Continue to implement systematic searches in migratory corridors, and in breeding and wintering areas.
- Conduct future mineral exploration and extraction in historic breeding areas in consultation with the Service.
- Incorporate grassland habitat protections, including prescribed burns, in public land management plans.
- Provide private landowners with incentives to manage lands to benefit indigenous grassland species in historic migration and wintering areas.
- Purchase land or conservation easements on private lands that still support healthy blocks of tall-grass prairie; discourage incentives that convert grasslands into commercial forestry plantations in Argentina and Brazil.

- For projects within the breeding range of Eskimo curlews, assess whether they are likely to use the project area for nesting or brood-rearing. Contact the Service's Fairbanks Ecological Field Office in for assistance.

*For more information on this and other threatened and endangered species, contact the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Ecological Services Field Office near you. Contact information is on page 5 of this publication.*

*Breeding and nonbreeding ranges plus probable migration routes of Eskimo curlew. (Used with permission by Birds of North America on-line (bna.birds.cornell.edu); after Gollop et al. 1986).*

characteristics. Adult survivorship and a low reproductive rate, characteristic of a K-selected species, made them more vulnerable to overharvest and predation. Reliance on a few important stop-over sites during its long migration left the species vulnerable to disturbance of these few food-rich sites.

By 1900, sightings of Eskimo curlews were rare. The last confirmed observation took place in Nebraska in 1987. The last photograph was taken in Texas in 1962; and the last individual harvested came from Barbados in 1963. An unusual sighting of a flock 23 birds was reported from Texas in May 1981; and an adult with one young was reported in May 1983 in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Occasional reports of sightings continue, but photographic documentation is lacking.

Historic Eskimo curlew breeding range remains relatively untrammled. Native grassland habitat throughout its migration corridor is far from pristine, however; most is gone from conversion to cropland, overgrazing, housing development, resource extraction, and fire suppression. Much of the native grassland habitat in its South America wintering range has been converted to tree plantations as well.

#### **Management and Protection**

Any remaining Eskimo curlews are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Endangered Species Act. In addition, they have protection on wintering grounds as per the 1940 Convention on Nature Protection and Wildlife Preservation in the Western Hemisphere. The search for Eskimo curlews continues in former breeding and wintering

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