ABOUT THE COVER: UPLAND SANDPIPER

The Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*) was named after William Bartram, the famous American naturalist whose most important contribution to ornithology was his mentoring of Alexander Wilson, the "father of American ornithology." This sandpiper, which behaves in many respects more like a plover, is an inland species that sadly continues to decline in the east as grasslands and agricultural lands continue to be developed or returned to second-growth forest. Often heard before it is seen, this intricately buffy-brown patterned sandpiper is easily identified by its distinctive silhouette. Long-necked, small-headed, and having a short thin bill, Upland Sandpipers usually keep their wings raised in tell-tale fashion after landing. They often perch on a fence post, rock, or telephone pole, and they fly with shallow, stiff wing beats; they appear long-winged and long-tailed in flight. The sexes are similar in appearance, and juveniles resemble adults but may have a somewhat more scaly appearance at close range. The Upland Sandpiper is monotypic (not divided into subspecies) and is a true sandpiper despite behavioral similarities to plovers. Its upland affinities and behavior have resulted in a number of monikers including "upland plover," "field plover," "prairie dove," and "quailie."

Upland Sandpipers breed from Alaska across the Canadian Great Plains into the agricultural and prairie regions of the western and midwestern United States as far south as Texas. They extend east from the Great Lakes to southern Maine and south to New Jersey and Virginia wherever suitable habitat occurs. They winter on the pampas of Uruguay and Argentina.

In Massachusetts they are uncommon spring migrants that arrive in late April. In the fall they are most common in late August and early September, but rarely are more than a dozen birds reported on a given day.

Upland Sandpipers breed in grasslands, dry meadows, fields, and pastures. In Massachusetts the largest patches of suitable habitat are associated with airports and military facilities. The article by Andrea Jones and Peter Vickery in this issue of *Bird Observer* notes that Westover Air Reserve Base contains the majority of the breeding pairs in the state.

The song of the Upland Sandpiper has been described as "flute-like," and a "sweet, mellow, rolling trill." Its flight note and alarm calls have both been described as *quip-ip-ip-ip*, and its song as a *whooo* or *whee* followed by a protracted *leeeeee* or *looooooooo*. Courtship displays include a spectacular flight where the male ascends until it is a speck in the sky, then descends in wide circles, wings fixed, singing, and finally retracting its wings and plummeting toward the ground.

The nest is a scrape several inches deep, usually in a protective grass tussock or otherwise well hidden. The usual clutch is four cream-colored eggs, spotted with reddish-brown. The species is monogamous, and both parents

incubate. The young hatch in three to four weeks and are precocial—born with eyes open and capable of leaving the nest soon after drying. The young feed themselves but are accompanied by the adults until fledging occurs in four to five weeks.

Upland Sandpipers hunt by sight, and their foraging typically involves short runs followed by a pecking bout when a prey item is sighted. Their diet is more than ninety percent insectivorous, with a wide variety of terrestrial invertebrates consumed. They will, however, eat weeds, seeds, and waste grain following harvest.

Upland Sandpiper populations peaked in the mid-nineteenth century, when most of New England was farmland. They unfortunately became a favorite target of the market hunters in the 1880s about the time when Passenger Pigeons became rare. In the west populations declined as the prairie was converted to farmland, but recovered somewhat as they adapted to agricultural conditions. In New England populations have declined in the twentieth century as farmlands have reverted to woodlots. The Upland Sandpiper is but one of many grassland species that have been seriously declining in the east. With continuing loss of habitat in the United States, continued massive use of pesticides in agricultural areas, and problematic conditions on their wintering grounds in South America, their future is uncertain. One can only hope that these elegant birds will continue to raise their wings aloft on the fence posts of our roadways into the indefinite future.

W.E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Barry Van Dusen last provided cover art for the October 1994 issue. He was the illustrator for *A Birder's Guide to Eastern Massachusetts* and *Birds of Massachusetts*. He can be reached at 13 Radford Road, Princeton, MA 01541.

AT A GLANCE *February 1995* _____ *Wayne R. Petersen*

To assist in identifying February's puzzler, it is useful to have a fundamental understanding of general passerine plumage characteristics and plumage acquisition. In general, the majority of North American songbirds wear at least four to six more or less distinct plumages during the course of their lifetime. Variations of this rule are many, however, and often differentiating subtle characteristics between certain plumages can be difficult. Fortunately, the sequence of plumage acquisition is pretty much the same for most species.

When first out of the egg, many nestlings have a soft downy covering. This down covering is rapidly replaced by the first true coat of feathers—the juvenal