

Shorebird Sister Schools Program – shorebird education in North America and beyond

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The Shorebird Sister Schools Program (SSSP) is an internet-based environmental education program that provides a forum for students, biologists, and shorebird enthusiasts to track shorebird migration and share observations across shorebird flyways (see <http://sssp.fws.gov>). The program project area includes the major shorebird flyways of the Western Hemisphere, and the Central Pacific and East Asian–Australasian flyways. The program involves teachers, youth (students, youth groups, home school students), park, refuge, and nature center educators along coasts and inland areas where shorebird habitat is found. Equally important is the involvement of shorebird biologists and shorebird enthusiasts who share their shorebird observations and research projects, and answer questions from participants. Their participation greatly enriches the experience and knowledge gained by students and educators.

The vision of SSSP is to engage public participation in the conservation of shorebird species and their wetland, grassland, and shoreline ecosystems. Public participation begins with increasing understanding and awareness of local species and habitats which participants gain through the primary components of the program: an educator's guide for grades 2–12 (ages 7–18), an e-mail network, and a World Wide Web site. Students can share their projects, their shorebird observations, what they have learned, and ask questions on the Web site. Educators can exchange tips and information through the e-mail network. A primary objective of SSSP is to actively involve students in conservation. Projects can include habitat clean-ups, learning about management of local habitats, sharing what they learn about shorebirds and habitats with their community and with other SSSP participants. Moreover, if students learn their community is a good steward of their local habitat they can nominate their town as a Shorebird Sister City. Though the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is responsible for maintaining primary program components, partner participation in each component is critical for the program to succeed.

SSSP began as a supplemental education program of the Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival, which is held annually in Homer, Alaska. Recognizing the brevity of the migration periods of arctic-breeding shorebirds in Kachemak Bay, festival planners began looking for a way to bring the spectacle of shorebird migration to more students over a wider span of time. The suggestion arose to use e-mail to build an information-sharing network among schools along the American Pacific flyway. Students from each stopover site would

monitor the progress of shorebird spring migration and report their observations by sending e-mail to the other schools participating in the project. SSSP was launched in 1994 when 17 schools from California to Alaska were connected using a basic Internet e-mail service.

After this initial start, the program grew to include an expanded teacher's guide, a World Wide Web site, and a faster and more convenient list serve. The program also expanded to include program coordinators for Mexico, South America (Argentina focus), and Japan and the curriculum was produced in Spanish, Russian, and Japanese. Educator workshops took place in Mexico, Argentina, Russia, and numerous sites in the United States. The program has since expanded into Paraguay, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, and China thanks entirely to partners in these countries. Currently, SSSP has a part-time national coordinator and receives support from a number of USFWS offices at the national and regional level. Several USFWS staff have accepted collateral duties as regional SSSP regional coordinators. These coordinators and partners in the United States and abroad work together to revise the World Wide Web site, expand the curriculum, design educator workshops, and promote community involvement.

The SSSP educator's guide is correlated to U.S. National Education Standards in science, geographic, social studies, visual arts, language arts, and mathematics. Tracking projects, field trips, and other participatory projects engage students in real-life science – the successes, challenges, and setbacks. These projects are also important for making the educational linkage to the larger goal of flyway conservation. Students learn that habitats in their own community are part of a chain of healthy habitats that are critical to shorebirds and other migratory species. In keeping with the program's primary vision of flyway conservation, SSSP connects with researchers and managers through the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan Council (see <http://shorebirdplan.fws.gov>). This linkage ensures that SSSP is integrated with shorebird conservation priorities, which in-turn strengthens the program's relevance. The success of this education program is due to agency support, partner commitment, and participant enthusiasm. We welcome you to "cruise the super shorebird highway with Shorebird Sister Schools" at: <http://sssp.fws.gov>.

For further information, send e-mails to the National Shorebird Sister Schools Program Coordinator at:

sssp@fws.gov

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