

RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF BREEDING POPULATIONS OF LONG-BILLED CURLEWS IN WASHINGTON

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EARLY travelers through the Columbia Plateau of eastern Washington mention seeing many curlews, and settlers knew them well by their calls which the birds made on their nesting grounds in the rolling grasslands, sagebrush plains, and channeled scablands. The name Curlew Lake in Ferry County suggests that these birds frequented that area; they were known to occur in the Okanogan and Yakima Valleys also.

Apparently man was responsible for the decline in the populations of curlews that occurred with settlement. The birds were shot for food and their nesting areas were destroyed when much of the range land eventually was plowed under and planted to grain. Within recent years, the populations have increased in some of the grassland ranges. Figure 1 shows typical breeding habitat for Long-billed Curlews (*Numenius americanus*) in eastern Washington.

Changes in land use.—Settlements at the end of the last century were located along streams or near lakes, and often they were adjacent to yellow pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) timber. Human populations grew, and later more of the range lands formerly under the control of cattlemen were invaded by farmers. The better grasslands were continually being plowed, and homesteaders even invaded the scablands. So, for a time, rural populations grew, only to diminish as the more successful operators bought out those who were less successful or who desired to move elsewhere. Small holdings were not economically sound for the owners; thus large economic units developed.

Evidence of the reduced rural populations is obvious in the deserted country schools and old homestead sites. Data for Whitman County (Yocom, 1943), showing that private land holdings increased from 495.5 acres per unit in 1930 to 532.9 acres by 1940, also indicate that this trend started during the homestead era (Yocom, 1952). Buss and Dziedzic (1955) show how increase in cultivation of the rich Palouse country effected a decline in Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Pedioecetes phasianellus*).

After homesteaders moved out of the poorer soils, cattlemen again obtained control of most of the channeled scablands, thus placing the range lands under large operating units and permitting revegetation. This trend, in addition to better range management, may have affected the increase of curlews. These assumptions concerning factors that have affected populations of the Long-billed Curlew are subject to question, but whatever the cause, this species has increased in eastern Washington in recent years.

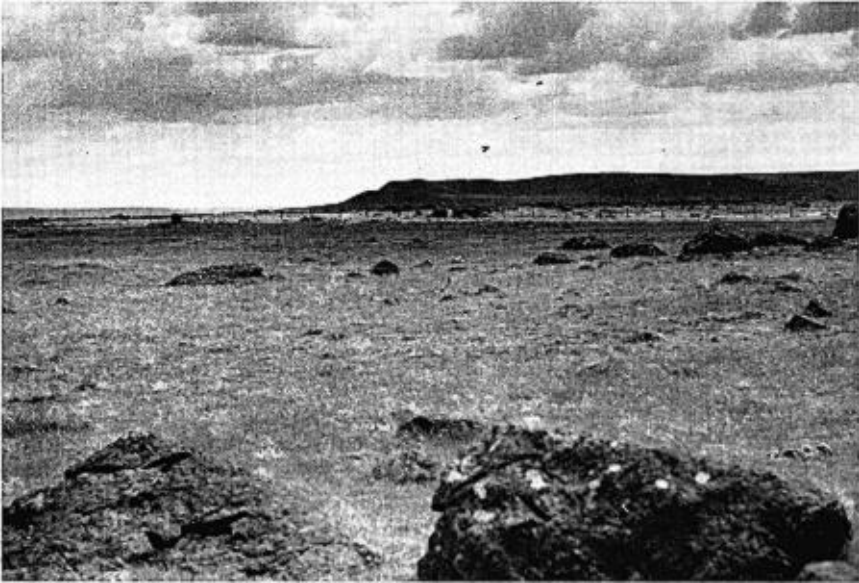


FIG. 1. Breeding habitat of the Long-billed Curlew in the channeled scablands of eastern Adams County, Washington. The loess hills in the background are cultivated for wheat production.

RECORDS BY COUNTIES

Okanogan County.—Curlews nested in pasture land directly east of Lake Osoyoos on the Eder Ranch, spring of 1953.

Grant County.—There are no breeding records for this county. Sight records include two curlews seen on July 7, 1950, and two on May 6, 1951, in Potholes south of Moses Lake; one at Lake Lenore April 7, 1952 (Harris and Yocom, 1952); two, June 8; and one, August 4, 1954 (Johnsgard, 1954).

Lincoln County.—There are no published breeding records for this county. H. A. Hansen reported the following observations from the shallow, temporary marshland at the east end of Sprague Lake: one, March 22, 1949; two, March 25, 1949; three, March 30, 1949; two, July 19, 1949; five, May 5, 1950.

Spokane County.—H. A. Hansen found curlews breeding in the dry range lands directly east of Sprague Lake and west of Downs Lake, Spokane County, in 1950.

Adams County.—The eastern edge of Adams County, which lies in the Cheney-Palouse River Channel and is drained by Cow and Rock creeks (Yocom, 1951:53), supports many Long-billed Curlews. A sizable population nests at the west end of Sprague Lake in rolling range land. In 1947, John Harder stated that curlews were becoming more abundant on their 80,000-acre ranch along Cow Creek, which drains Sprague Lake. When he was a boy only scattered pairs were seen on the ranch; now they are common and breed at lower Sprague Lake and along Cow Creek east of Ritzville. LaFave (1954) found two young birds about three weeks old and saw eight pairs near Sprague Lake on May 29, 1954.

Another concentration center is near Twelve-mile Slough which is located northeast

of Benge. East of this marsh on the Hodge's ranch, a pair was seen in 1947. By April 13, 1951, this population had increased to the point where the writer was able to count 18 adult birds in driving one mile through this rangeland. Elsewhere in Adams County this species has been reported during the breeding season by Hansen at Palm Lake, on rangeland north of Benge, at the Harry Harder Ranch near Lamont, and at Emden. Yocom noted a concentration of 150 at Twelve-mile Slough, July 13, 1949, and has seen curlews at Cow Lake, and at a small pond west of Macall.

Whitman County.—Whitman County encompasses the greater part of the land drained by the Palouse River (Yocom, 1943:169) and is actually the heart of the "Palouse Country" or the "Palouse Hills." Curlews nested in this county before the grasslands were converted to wheat fields, but it is not known how extensive the nesting populations were.

Evidence to support the above statement came from interviews with qualified observers. In 1949 Mr. William Hegler, former County Game Commissioner, stated that curlews were seen in the St. John area several years ago, but it was not known if they nested in this portion of the county.

Mr. Christenson, who lived near Cherry Lake south of Ewan for many years, related that there were many curlews which nested in this channeled area of western Whitman County in the early days. None is nesting in that area at the present time as far as the writer knows.

Other reports indicated that curlews nested along Alkali Creek west to the LaCrosse area at the time that the greatest extent of the range land was plowed under.

Recent information shows that curlews are again nesting in some areas of Whitman County where they formerly nested. Fay Lloyd was raised along the lower Palouse River and he observed these birds nesting in the range lands in the vicinity of Twin Buttes, which are about five miles south of Hooper, from 1909 to 1914. No curlews were seen again in this area by him until the spring of 1947 or 1948. Since then he has observed curlews every spring in this area. Three birds were seen at Twin Buttes on March 31, 1951, by the writer.

Suitable breeding areas still remain along the Palouse River from Winona to Hooper. The following recent records suggest that Long-billed Curlews breed in that area: one bird seen flying east over the Palouse River two miles south of the mouth of Union Flat Creek, April 2, 1948, (Hansen and Yocom); three curlews seen along the Palouse River northwest of Pampa, April 20, 1951.

Walla Walla County.—Records for this county are those of Carl V. Swanson, Game Biologist, State of Washington Department of Game: one near Burbank, April 1, 1947; two, two miles north of Touchet, April 25, 1947, and one seen in same locality on April 21, 1948; one adult and three young about the size of a Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) between Burbank and Wallula, May 17, 1947. Swanson (personal communication, 1955) saw seven Long-billed Curlews in typical grassland habitat seven miles east of Burbank, June 6, 1955.

E. S. Booth (Hudson and Yocom, 1954) indicated that curlews were locally common near the Columbia River between Touchet, Wallula and Pasco.

Franklin County.—Mr. Oscar Rogers homesteaded the first wheat farm east of Pasco, Washington, in 1897 and at that time curlews were abundant. Farming practices and increased human populations reduced these populations (Swanson, 1955, personal communication).

The following records for this county are those furnished by Carl V. Swanson: Curlews seen approximately 15 miles northwest of Pasco near Byers Landing (now known as

the Pasco Pumping Plant) in 1947; several birds seen east of Pasco along the Snake River in the 1930's during a Mormon cricket outbreak; four seen five miles east of Pasco about one-half mile from the Snake River, June 7, 1955; 30 or more curlews seen by Charles Swanson flying about near a grass fire east of Pasco on June 12, 1955. Possibly young birds that could not fly were in these grasslands.

Curlews arrive on the breeding grounds as early as March 22 (Hansen) and depart during the month of July. The latest date that this species has been seen in eastern Washington is July 21 (Hudson and Yocom, 1954). The writer hopes that interested people in Washington continue to follow population changes in Long-billed Curlews in the future.

SUMMARY

Early records show that Long-billed Curlews were found at a number of localities in the Palouse prairie region of eastern Washington. These birds disappeared as the grasslands were plowed under, but they have reappeared with changes in land use. Distributional data tracing these population trends are listed by counties.

At the present time breeding populations are scattered over the lower portion of the Cheney-Palouse River Channel south of the yellow pine zone; this area includes parts of Whitman, Adams, Spokane and Lincoln counties (Yocom 1951:52-56). Other population centers are located along the lower Snake River and the Columbia River in Franklin and Walla Walla counties.

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