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A SIGNIFICANT MIDCONTINENTAL STOPOVER SITE FOR THE LONG-BILLED CURLEW

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The accumulation of observations of the Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*) by birders and biologists during the spring migration along the Arkansas River Valley in Finney and Kearny counties Kansas over the last decade, strongly suggested that the area is an important migratory stopover site for a significant part of the Great Plains population. In the last decades of the twentieth century considerable effort was spent understanding the importance of a few mid-continent wetland areas to shorebird species dependent upon those sites for migratory stopover sites. These sites were used for fat deposition and the continuation of the migration (Skagen and Knopf 1993, 1994a and 1994b, Davis and Smith 1998). Very little progress has been made over the past century in understanding the migration patterns of the Long-billed Curlew (Bent 1929, Johnsgard 1981, 2001, and Dugger and Dugger 2002). It has been suggested that the Long-billed Curlew migrants are more broadly distributed, using far more stopover sites than the smaller long-distance shorebird migrants (Dugger and Dugger 2002). My paper summarizes a number of observations that support the Kansas stopover site hypothesis.

Spring Flocks on the Great Plains

Menke (1891) reported on the status of the Long-billed Curlew in Finney County during the late nineteenth century as; "Occasionally met with in small flocks during migration." Large flocks of the Long-billed Curlew have often been observed in the Finney/Kearny counties region of western Kansas. They are often encountered in alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) circles as well as wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) and fallow fields most commonly in the sand dune regions south of the Arkansas River. Most of these observations occur between the last week of March and the first three weeks of April. Hundreds were observed south of Holcomb in the sandhills on 6 April 1998 (Bradstreet and Bradstreet 1998). During the period 1997-2002, biologists from Kansas State University studied the Lesser Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) in the sandhills south of Garden City and Holcomb, Kansas. The following are summaries of communications with a few of those biologists. G. C. Salter observed a maximum of 75 Long-billed Curlews in one field and a high of 250 on one day. C. A. Hagen observed nearly 150 in one alfalfa circle and approximately 800 birds total for a single day on 1 April 2001. T. J. Walker stated it was not uncommon to encounter flocks between 50 and 100 in flight or foraging in alfalfa and occasionally winter wheat. Foraging groups of 300 to 400 were occasionally observed in one field.

During previous spring migrations, flocks nearing 50 birds could occasionally be seen flying over Garden City. Those flocks would often be in an obtuse “V” formation flying northward at sunset. It was assumed that these northward flights at sunset were the beginning of long nocturnal flights toward their breeding grounds. Over several years, unexplained local southbound flights were also observed primarily during early morning hours (TGS). Early dates of arrival in Finney and Kearny counties include, 21 March 1999, and 26 March 2002 (G. C. Salter, pers. comm.), and first observed on 24 March 2005 (Robert Price, pers. comm.).

In Kansas, Imler (1937) reported the species as a rare migrant in Rooks County. Schreiber (1970) reported the curlew as uncommon in Ellis County with a high count of 12 birds. The largest flock encountered in Meade County during the late-twentieth century was 15, (Flowers 1995). On 6 April 1989 a group of 30 curlews was sighted north of Fowler; however, most sightings from 1983 to 2000 were in the range of one to 13 ($n=20$), (T. L. Flowers pers. comm.). The high count for an entire day in Morton County was between 25 and 30 curlews (Cable et al. 1996).

The recent Upper Arkansas River Valley curlew concentrations appear to be unprecedented when throughout most of the last half of the twentieth century one to 10 individuals are most often reported (Dugger and Dugger 2002). Historically large spring migrant flocks of 100 to 300 were reported in New Mexico (Bailey 1928). Groups of 700, 800 and 1500 were observed near Tipton, Oklahoma 31 March 1946 (Greenwalt 1947). Large groups have recently been observed in the Texas Panhandle during the summer/fall migration but rarely encountered in the spring (Seyffert 2001). The largest concentrations in Nebraska, outside the sandhills have been in the vicinity of the larger western reservoirs in groups of 13 to 26 (Sharpe et al. 2001). Groups of 130 and 117 have been observed at Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge and Palmer Lake in Nebraska (Skagen et al. 1999). Several groups of 30 plus were observed the first two weeks of April 2005 north of North Platte in the sandhills (T. J. Walker pers. comm.).

Dugger and Dugger 2002 report that during spring the species is noticeably absent from playa wetlands, with seasonal difference in abundance possibly caused by a seasonal shift from terrestrial habitats to wetlands. Davis (1964) counted shorebirds on several large playas in Finney County, KS and found curlews rare in the spring ($n=23$) and common to abundant in the fall ($n=448$). Davis and Smith (1998) found almost no use of playas during the spring migration in the Texas Panhandle where they accounted for 10 to 22% of the shorebirds using playas during the fall migration. Flowers (1996) classified the curlew in regard to playa use as an opportunistic mud flat feeder, and was also regularly found in other habitats.

At twilight on the morning of 8 April 2001, I left Dr. Paul Johnsgard and Linda Brown at their Lesser Prairie-Chicken blinds 7.5 miles (12 km) SSE of Deerfield, Kearny County, Kansas and proceeded to a spot several hundred yards away to a west-facing sand dune. While listening to the dawn chatter of several Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) pairs, I made note of passing Long-billed Curlews. The first curlew movement occurred at 0708 hr CDT with a group of four flying south. The last observation was of two curlews flying SSE at 0910 hr. During that time period 32 curlews were observed and all but three were flying S or SSE. Two were flying east together and one was flying NE. After several discussions on the curlew during the remainder of the day with Paul Johnsgard and Linda Brown, I concluded that the local region held a special importance to the species and I decided to gather more information.

Recent Observations From the 2005 Spring Migration

At dawn on the morning of 2 April 2005 south of Holcomb and Deerfield (Finney and Kearny counties), Mike Ramsey encountered a flock of Long-billed Curlews foraging in a fallow field. The field was very rolling, and from his vantage point he could only count part

of the flock, which totaled 346 individuals. In addition to the foraging individuals, he observed many pairs, triplets and lone Long-billed curlews soaring overhead and fluttering from field to field. While driving the sandhill roads almost all the curlews observed were flying in a southerly direction (M. Ramsey, pers. comm.).

Late on the afternoon, 3 April 2005, Doug and Mary Floto, along with Sara and Tom Shane went out to visit the Long-billed Curlew field located by Ramsey. They found 120 curlews feeding in the sandy soil on a very large dune at the west end of an irrigation circle. As Ramsey had indicated, a very small portion of this circle could be seen from the road. If the curlews were evenly spaced across the field there could have easily been several thousand birds. It was the most active field that we found with dozens of curlews flying in from the west while we were there. It looked like the field had been lightly disked. We probably found an additional 40 curlews in other fields, most often in similar fallow fields that were probably disked grain sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) fields. I had the opportunity to see three different curlews probe the earth up to 1/3 and almost 1/2 of their bill lengths and bring up earthworms and consume them rapidly.

A flock foraging in a single irrigated alfalfa circle south of Garden City was counted on several occasions during the 2005 spring migration. The first 30 curlews were observed on 25 March, 36 on 26 March, 49 on 31 March, 51 plus on 1 and 5 April, peaking with 108 on 6 April, 20 on 10 April, 30 on 11 April, 10 plus on 12 April, 18 on 13 April and 2 on 14 April. Prior to departure near sunset there was some calling. Most often the majority of the curlews departed together heading north. Occasionally they would depart in two or three staggered groups (M. Osterbuhr, pers. comm.).

On the evening of 25 March 2005, around 1800 hr, I observed a flock of 70 Long-billed Curlews flying north at about 200 ft (60 m) high just west of our house in Garden City. A minute later a smaller flock of 20 curlews followed. I did not hear any vocalizations, which is often common for migrant flocks (Bent 1929). In prior years, I had observed two other migrant flocks over Garden City near these temporal periods. Just before sunset on 9 April 2005 I observed two smaller curlew flocks of four and eight flying NNW over our home. They also were about 60 m high.

On the morning of 5 April 2005, at 0730 hr, two flocks of nine and 15 curlews were observed flying south over Garden City, KS (Sara Shane, pers. comm.). Likewise, on the morning of 15 April 2005, 0645 hr, two curlews were observed flying south over Garden City (Doug Floto, pers. comm.).

Sara Shane and I traveled to Lowe Lake, three miles (4.8 km) north of Holcomb, Kansas, the evening of 28 March 2005 to observe waterbirds. Just before sunset I heard and observed five curlew flocks coming in from a southerly direction at 200 to 300 feet (60 to 90 m). They then started dropping in over the lake at about 30 m. The first flock of 37 Long-billed Curlews, a few of which were calling, drifted in on a steady south wind at 1822 hr. They were slightly descending; however they continued on north over Lowe Lake. The second flock of 17 curlews came in from the southwest at 1846 hr. This group was not vocal. At 1852 I heard curlews again to the southeast, finding a flock of 49. At 1853 hr, I heard calls again and found another 32 coming in. These two groups continued on northwest over Lowe Lake and then headed west about 1.2 km to land in a wheat field. At 1854 hr, another flock of 20 curlews came in from the south. Checking the field of wheat to the west of Lowe Lake at dusk, I found a large group of curlews in the wheat that had grown to a height of about 10 inches.

Characteristics of the Stopover Site

The upper Arkansas River Valley Long-billed Curlew stopover site in central western Kansas will certainly not rival Sandhill Cranes stopping along the Platte River in Nebraska (Johnsgard 2002), or the great masses of shorebirds using the Copper River Delta in Alaska

(Senner 1999). However, with a reported world population of 15-20,000 Long-billed Curlews (Morrison et al. 2000), 5 to 20% of that population could be using the Finney/Kearny county sandhills area as a migratory stopover site. Finney County is directly inline for a flight from the lower gulf coast of Texas to the Sandhills of Nebraska and other breeding locations on the northern Great Plains.

The local movements of curlews from good foraging areas to safer roosting areas north of the river could have been a behavior in place prior to settlement of the region by humans. Long-billed Curlew roost to feeding area flights have been recorded since the days of Audubon (Bent 1929), and are still the norm on the wintering areas along the Gulf Coast Plain of Texas (F. Collins, pers. comm.)

The sandy dune areas to the south of the Arkansas River Valley were historically dominated by sandsage prairie. This habitat is rich in invertebrate prey items such as earthworms, crickets, grasshoppers and beetles compared to the shortgrass region north of the river. However the sandsage area contains a high density of predators such as the Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), and several species of the Canidae. The area north of the river was shortgrass prairie dominated by buffalo grass (*Buchloe dactyloides*) and grama grasses (*Bouteloua spp.*) and areas of alkali sacaton prairie. It probably held fewer predators and allowed for increased visibility with the lack of shrubs on a moonlit night. The wheat fields of today provide a similar roosting habitat (TGS).

The density of spring migrant Long-billed Curlews in Finney and Kearny counties of Kansas far exceeds any other location reported during the last 55 years. The birds arrive in late March and early April and forage in the farmed areas of the sandhills south of the Arkansas River. They depart the sandhills at sunset in flocks and fly north across the river to roost in fields. They return south across the river the next morning at sunrise to forage in the sandier soil. Future research is needed to determine the length of time the curlews spend at the stopover site, the number of birds using the site and the actual size of the site. Studies should also be made to determine if any farming practices are potentially dangerous or beneficial to the curlews.

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IN MEMORIAM: KATHARINE B. KELLEY

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Katharine Benson Kelley was born on 2 June 1909 at Bittersweet Farm near Vinland, Douglas County, Kansas and passed away at Lawrence Memorial Hospital on 27 September 2005 at the age of 96 years. Miss Kelley was a Charter Member of the Kansas Ornithological Society and was the very first Life Member in 1968. She served as a Director for the Society during 1958-1959. She received the Dr. Ivan L. Boyd Award for Outstanding Service from KOS in Fall 2004 at the annual meeting on the Baker University campus.

Katharine grew up in the Vinland area and attended grade school at Coal Creek Elementary School and graduated from Vinland High School in 1928. In 1932 she graduated from Baker University with a Bachelor of Science degree. She also took additional classes at the University of Kansas.



KATHARINE B. KELLEY
1909–2005

Katharine devoted her life to teaching others. She taught elementary school for 42 years from 1932 until her retirement in 1974. During that time she kept track of many of her 1,002 students as they grew up and became productive citizens in Baldwin and communities around the United States. Most of her teaching was in the fifth grade. This is an age when many children are very receptive to learning more about nature, and Miss Kelley did her best to make sure her students had the opportunities to have that exposure to nature. Miss Kelley organized and operated a Junior Audubon group in her classroom after school. Many students took advantage of that chance to learn and came back to her for decades after leaving her class with various questions about nature, but mostly about the birds that came to their yards or that they saw elsewhere.

Katharine was also very active in the Baldwin Bird Club. She joined the club during its second year in 1945. During her life she served as president, vice president, and secretary multiple times. She participated in the Christmas Bird Count from then up to 2005. She gave several programs on birds to the club as well as local civic groups.

Katharine was also an avid bird bander beginning in 1962. She banded over 20,000 birds in her backyard. The largest number banded in a single year was close to 5,000 Pine Siskins (*Carduelis pinus*) during the winter of 1977-1978. She was active in the Inland Bird Banding Association and gave numerous presentations at their annual meetings, as well as at KOS meetings about her banding experiences. Several papers were published in the *Inland Bird Banding News* and *North American Bird Bander*. One report was printed in the *KOS Bulletin* and described a number of foreign recaptures of the Purple Finch (*Carpodacus purpureus*) from various locations around the United States and Canada.

Katharine was very interested in local history, especially but not limited to the Santa Fe Trail. After her retirement, she went to work as a volunteer at the public library and started putting together files on everyone in or around the city of Baldwin that ever ended up in the newspaper. She filled a file cabinet on all of the information she could find. She was a charter member of the Santa Fe Trail Association which honored her with “*Official Ambassador of the Trail*” in 1989 for her work on re-establishing markers along the trail. In January 2005 she was the first recipient of the “*Outstanding Achievement Award*” from the Missouri River Outfitters of the Santa Fe Trails. In May 2005 she received two exceptional awards. She was named “*Teacher of the Century*” at the Baldwin High School Alumni Banquet and she received an Honorary Doctorate degree from Baker University at the Spring Commencement.

My sister and I lived with Katharine and Amelia Betts for nearly two months the summer that my grandfather passed away. Katharine was especially good at coming up with activities that kept our minds off our displacement. It was a sad time in our lives but Katharine was able to make it much more tolerable. Many of us remember Katharine and her long-time friend Amelia Betts at nearly every KOS meeting. We will miss her at KOS, in her home town of Baldwin City and the surrounding area, but her memory will live on in our minds and hearts forever.

AERIAL PURSUIT OF A RED-TAILED HAWK BY A WILD TURKEY IN KANSAS

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The primary predators of Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) poults in North America include coyotes (*Canis latrans*), bobcats (*Felis rufus*), raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), mountain lions (*Felis concolor*), Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), and Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*) (Eaton 1992). Buteo and Accipiter hawks are at times significant predators of turkey poults (Schorger 1966).

On 9 August 1997 (1912 hr. CDT), while traveling west on Kansas highway 156, I observed a very large bird fly straight up out of the north ditch about two miles (3.3 km) west of the town of Burdett, Pawnee, County. On closer approach, I identified the bird as a Wild Turkey. It flew straight up to an altitude of about 30 feet (9 m) to chase an adult Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) that had been slowly soaring over the ditch. The turkey almost made contact with the hawk on its vertical ascent. The hawk flew south across the highway, with the turkey making a short horizontal pursuit and landing in the ditch on the south side of the highway. Unfortunately, the traffic was heavy, preventing me from turning around and looking for the poults the turkey was likely protecting. A brood at that time of year was probable since broods are found into September at the same general latitude in Missouri (Sadler 1954).

Bent (1932) did not report this behavior; however, Schorger (1966) did report two records of the behavior of turkeys making aerial pursuits of hawks. Those two observations reported from Arizona include a Zone-tailed Hawk (*Buteo albonotatus*), which was actually knocked to the ground by a turkey hen that had poults, and the second observation was of a Red-tailed Hawk chased by a turkey hen that also had poults (Johnson 1961). Eaton (1992) reported no additional observations of this behavior.

The 1966 through 1995 Breeding Bird Survey trends show an 8.0% increase in population per year for the Wild Turkey, and the Red-tailed Hawk with a 3.2% increase in population per year in North America (Peterjohn et al. 1996). It is estimated nationwide that Wild Turkeys numbered 4.2 million in 1994 (Kennamer and Kennamer 1996), and the Kansas Wild Turkey populations increased about 46% between 1983 and 1994 (Kennamer and Kennamer 1996, Donohoe 1985). With population increases of these magnitudes, these predator defense behaviors should be more commonly observed across Kansas and throughout their shared geographic range.

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Errata. The Kansas Bird Records Committee Report for 2004, published in the *KOS Bulletin*, Volume 56, No. 2, June 2005, page 21, for the Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii*) #2004-42; last sentence should have read "**Second non-specimen state record.**" On page 22, in the report for the Broad-tailed Hummingbird (*Cyananthus latirostris*) #2004-38, an observation date of 10 October 2004 was omitted from the manuscript.