



Purdue University  
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## Indiana Farmland Provides Rest and Forage for Arctic Travelers

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Indiana farm families don't have to travel far to see Arctic wildlife or winter residents of South America. In fact, many farm families have been playing bed and breakfast host to such world travelers for years.

Shorebirds, those little brown birds normally associated with ocean shorelines, make an appearance twice a year along seasonally flooded agricultural fields in Indiana. The birds are making their way in the spring to breeding grounds as far north as the high Arctic. They return each fall as they travel to wintering grounds as far south as the tip of South America. Shorebirds stop in Indiana to rest and forage before continuing their migration. Temporarily flooded farmland help provide these "stopover" sites.



### Which Shorebirds Stop in Indiana?

Shorebirds most commonly found in temporarily flooded agricultural fields in Indiana include Lesser Yellowlegs, Greater Yellowlegs, Least Sandpiper,

Pectoral Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Semipalmated Plover, American Golden-Plover, and Dunlin. Killdeer, a shorebird familiar to many residents, breeds and rears young in Indiana. The most recognized species is the Killdeer. Killdeer are easily identified by the two black bands across the breast. Killdeer are also known for their strange behavior of feigning a broken wing, which draws intruders away from nest sites, or young.

### What Do Shorebirds Eat?

Shorebirds eat a variety of insect-like organisms found in the soil. Moisture stimulates dormant stages of these organisms that then rapidly grow. Shorebirds are equipped with long bills to probe the soil for food, and many have long legs adapted to wade in water.

### Why Do Shorebirds Stop in Indiana?

Many areas in Indiana historically provided stopover sites. Marshes and shallow lakes in Indiana were along the traditional migration route that migratory birds have traveled for thousands of years. With so many possible stopover sites available, precipitation and temperature fluctuations somewhere were sure to create the mudflat/shallow water habitat conditions preferred by shorebirds.

Today, most wet areas in Indiana have been drained, but migrating shorebirds still travel the same routes. Agricultural practices help maintain the bare soil habitat that shorebirds prefer when flooding occurs.

Temporary flooding does not guarantee the presence of shorebirds, however. Studies have shown that

shorebirds prefer certain types of crop residue. For example, Shorebirds are found more often in soybean stubble fields than in corn stubble fields, possibly due to differences in the shorebird's ability to see predators from a distance.

Studies have shown that agricultural fields are important because they provide shallow water conditions that may not be found in the more traditional marsh. Wildlife as a whole depends on a wide variety of habitat conditions. For shorebirds, those conditions are shallow water areas with adjacent mudflats.



### When Are Shorebirds Here?

Peak for spring shorebird migration in Indiana generally occurs in mid-April; however, shorebirds may be found in late-March through early-June. Shorebirds use fields in spring before crops are planted. Early southbound shorebird migrants can be found in Indiana during the first weeks of July, although peak fall migration generally extends from August through September.

### Are Shorebirds Protected?

All migratory birds are protected by federal laws. However, two species of shorebirds, American Woodcock and Common Snipe, are legally hunted. Recent conservation concern for shorebirds regarding the loss of shallow water areas has brought attention to shorebird habitat and few species are considered threatened at this time. Visit: <http://www.state.in.us/dnr/fishwild/nongame/e-list.htm> or call the IDNR, Division of Fish and Wildlife at (317) 232-4080 for a current list of species.

### What Can We Do?

Farm families can enjoy the wildlife that visits their land. The presence of migrating shorebirds can mark the seasons as well as provide opportunities for map exploration and education. Merely watching and identifying the birds can be an interesting family project as world travelers come to the farm family's door.

## Knowledge to Go...

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