

Catoptrophorus semipalmatus (Willet)

Family: Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Snipe)

Order: Charadriiformes (Shorebirds and Waders)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Willet, *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*.

[http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Catoptrophorus_semipalmatus/pictures/collections/contributors/jp_myers/2006-1014Willet_landing2/, downloaded 9 March 2017]

TRAITS. *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*, commonly known as the willet, is usually brown and sometimes grey in colour and is quite large for a shore bird (Lowther and Douglas, 2001). A distinctive white band flanked by black feathers can be seen when they are in flight or when their wings are outstretched (Fig. 1). They are 30-40cm tall and weigh 195-330g; the females tend to be larger than males. They have long thin legs and a dark, long, thin, straight beak. They make a characteristic “willet willet” call (Lowther and Douglas, 2001).

DISTRIBUTION. They breed inland in North America and migrate for the winter to the coasts of northern South America (Fig. 2).

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. Willets live near to bodies of water. They are usually found on the coastline especially in winter, and can also be found living near to lakeshores, wetlands and

grasslands. They are usually active during the day but can be nocturnal. Their activity changes based on the availability of moonlight and the tide cycle (Fig. 3). They take advantage of their long legs to chase and catch their prey with their long beaks. They are social birds and are often found in small flocks except during the breeding seasons. They are territorial and defend their territory during the breeding season (Lowther and Douglas, 2001). Some territories in North Dakota have been measured to be around 44 hectares.

FOOD AND FEEDING. Willets can be found feeding during the night and day. They are carnivorous and feed mainly on invertebrates (Lowther and Douglas, 2001; Christian and Luczkovich, 1999), using touch and sight to catch prey. Their main prey are worms, insects, molluscs and some shellfish and small fish. They probe through the mud to find food and can be seen pecking at the dirt. In water they have been known to immerse their beak in water while moving their heads laterally, waiting for small fish to pass through. They can also visually identify their prey in the water and quickly strike, catching the prey (Del Hoyo 1996).

REPRODUCTION. Willets are believed to have a monogamous mating system. Female willets advertise their presence and males will perform mating rituals to get the attention of the female. The males fly into the air while their wings are above their heads and they also flutter to gain the attention of the female. If the female accepts the male she flies to him and they sing to each other in a mating ritual. Their mating season runs from May to early July. They build their nests near to a food and water source. Their nests are made from debris such as leaves, twigs and grass. The females produce 3-4 eggs and incubate them for an average of 25 days. The mother leaves the nest after hatching and the father takes care of the chicks. The eggs are olive in colour. The chicks can fly and leave the nest at around 4 weeks old. They reach sexual maturity at around 2 years, and the maximum recorded age for a willet is 10 years (Lowther and Douglas, 2001).

BEHAVIOUR. Willets are low flyers reaching a maximum height of 150m, and are occasional swimmers. Populations that live further north migrate short distances to the south during winter. Willets make a distinctive "pill-will-willet" sound. This call is used mainly to signal danger or when the bird is startled. Willets communicate with each other using calls and visual means. Willets will mobilize into a gang to ward off predators while making the danger call to attract more willets and disturb the predator. They usually only adopt the mob behaviour when they are brooding young. They prefer to hide rather than fly away from airborne predators. Some of their known predators are the hawk *Circus cyaneus* and the snake *Pantherophis obsoletus* (Lowther and Douglas, 2001).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. Willets have high population numbers and live across a wide geographic range they are classified as least concern by IUCN. However, their habitats are under increased threat due to human activity which destroys grassland, and pollution and pesticides. Coastal marshes have also been degraded over time.

REFERENCES

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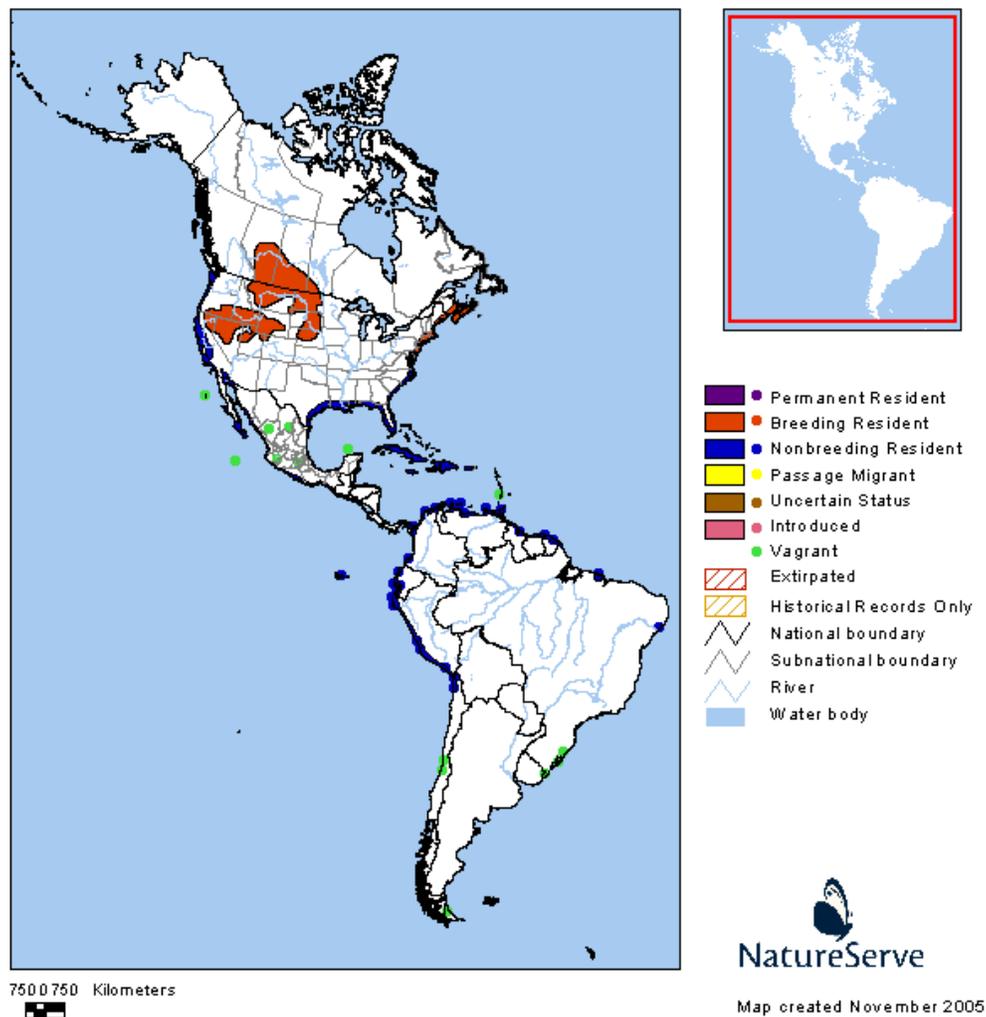


Fig. 2. Willet geographic distribution.

[<http://explorer.natureserve.org/servlet/NatureServe?searchName=Tringa+semipalmata>, downloaded 8 March 2017]



Fig. 3. Willet feeding in water.

[http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Catoptrophorus_semipalmatus/pictures/collections/contributors/barbara_lundrigan/bird2_035/, downloaded 8 February 2017]

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