

AZFO Shorebird ID Workshop
Lake Cochise and Twin Lakes Golf Course, Cochise County - 26 August 2023
By Paul Heveran, Doug Jenness, and Keith Kamper

One of the most consistent locations for observing migrating shorebirds in southeastern Arizona is Lake Cochise and the adjacent Twin Lakes Golf Course in Willcox. This site is also easily accessible and was a good choice for the Arizona Field Ornithologists to hold a workshop to learn more about shorebirds and how to identify them. Thirteen participants joined us from towns throughout southeastern Arizona as well as Coolidge and Phoenix to spend the morning studying more than 1,900 shorebirds of 19 species.



Photo by Doug Jenness

The shorebirds included BLACK-NECKED STILT, AMERICAN AVOCET, KILLDEER, LONG-BILLED CURLEW, MARBLED GODWIT, STILT SANDPIPER, BAIRD'S SANDPIPER, LEAST SANDPIPER, PECTORAL SANDPIPER, WESTERN SANDPIPER, SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER, LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER, SPOTTED SANDPIPER, SOLITARY SANDPIPER, LESSER YELLOWLEGS, WILLET, GREATER YELLOWLEGS, WILSONS PHALAROPE, and RED-NECKED PHALAROPE. Most numerous was an estimated 1,250 Wilson's Phalaropes, followed by 280 American Avocets. Many other species were enjoyed during the morning, including a Peregrine Falcon, that kept agitating the shorebirds, offering an opportunity to see hundreds in flight. Later a Prairie Falcon joined in the disruptive action. The 40 Scaled Quail, mostly on the golf course, was an unusually high number even for this location where they are regular. They were a "lifer" for a couple of participants. Unfortunately, a tern spotted as we were assembling early in the morning never appeared again and was never identified. The last bird of the day was a surprise Dickcissel that flew into the parking lot and landed on a shrub for good looks. The complete eBird checklist with all 67

species is at [eBird Checklist - 26 Aug 2023 - Willcox--Lake Cochise and Twin Lakes Golf Course - 67 species \(+4 other taxa\)](#)



Peregrine Falcon set hundreds of shorebirds to flight

Photo by Vernie Aikens

Late August is the peak period when shorebirds migrate in good numbers and variety in Arizona, and both adults and juveniles of many species are going through molt at this time. This can make identification challenging. Before we began looking for shorebirds, participants were given a flyer with the silhouettes of shorebirds, each with an identifying label. It was taken from *The Shorebird Guide* (M. O'Brien, R. Crossley, and L. Karlson, 2006). We encouraged participants to get a feel for the shape, structure, and size of the birds and to choose a familiar bird that could be used as a reference to compare sizes with other nearby birds. We also suggested looking at feeding behaviors. Getting a general impression of relative size, shape, and behavior is more reliable as a starting point than trying to sort out the wide variation of plumages found even in the same species at the same date of migration. Participants spent a lot of time working through the identification of the Baird's, Western, and Least Sandpipers. This was made easier by the presence of all three species in good numbers, often side by side. The rarest bird observed was the Short-billed Dowitcher, next to several more common Long-billed Dowitchers. These two species are very similar in appearance in the field and often hard to distinguish from each other. This bird was a juvenile and more buffy overall than the Long-billed Dowitchers. More important its tertials had black stripes edged with rufous, a characteristic of young Short-billed Dowitchers. Many participants appreciated seeing Stilt Sandpipers next to Lesser Yellowlegs and comparing the difference in bill size and shape. Even one of the most experienced birders present said she learned something new, particularly in identifying Pectoral Sandpipers.



Long-billed Curlews and American Avocets Photo by Diane Drobka

Overall, conditions at Lake Cochise were good with many mudflats and spits, as well as a large area of shallow water. However, the relatively low water level meant that on the west side of the lake birds were farther from the shore and harder to get good views. Viewing on the east side was better, where birds were closer. Typically, the turnover of birds at the lake during migration is very high with birds changing every day. What we saw was a one-day or less snapshot of what can be found there during fall migration. Assembling at the end of the morning to go over the list of birds we had seen, we gave participants a flyer with information on the AZFO's annual state meeting in Payson, 15-17 September. We want to thank all the participants who were truly an attentive group: Vernie Aikens, Chuck Border, Lisa Coons, Diane Drobka, Colleen Dugan, Anna Heveran, Christine Jenkins, Ashley Lauria, John Martin, Jeanne McCabe, Gayle Perrine, Bob Speckels, and Brenda Zaun.