

Audubon California's Working Lands Series

You can help make a home for the Long-billed Curlew

Standing more than a foot tall, the Long-billed Curlew is North America's largest shorebird, and is easily recognized by its long and decurved bill. Curlews breed in grassland habitats of the prairies and the intermountain West, and winter along the Pacific coast and at interior sites in California and Mexico. In California, Long-billed Curlews breed only in the northeastern counties of Siskiyou, Modoc, Lassen, and Plumas but winter all along the California coast, Central Valley, and the Imperial Valley. The Central Valley alone supports more than 20,000 wintering curlews.

Long-billed Curlews and agriculture

Long-billed Curlew populations have declined substantially over the past 150 years. Although a number of factors have contributed to this decline, habitat loss and degradation has been, and continues to be, a major factor. Curlews no longer occur in the eastern prairies, where the conversion of native grasslands to row crop agriculture led to huge losses in grassland breeding habitat.

Yet, in much of California, Long-billed Curlews now rely on working agricultural lands for breeding and foraging habitat. In northeastern California, curlews breed in wet meadows, pastureland, hayfields, and alfalfa, and during the winter curlews inhabit a wide variety of agricultural lands in the Central and Imperial Valleys, including alfalfa, pastureland, rice and other row crops.

Why You Should Help Long-billed Curlews

California hosts the majority of Long-billed Curlews wintering in the United States. On the coast and in the Central Valley, these charismatic birds are a significant component of California's rich and unique biological heritage. Moreover, due to its extensive use of agricultural crops for foraging and even nesting, the curlew is an excellent example of how working lands can be an important component of wildlife conservation and management.



Long-billed Curlews increasingly depend on agricultural fields to survive.
(photo by Dan Dzurisin)

Help Long-billed Curlews on your land

In northeastern California

Provide nesting habitat

Long-billed Curlews breed in northeastern California between April and July. They require open, short-grass habitat for nesting. To improve nesting conditions for curlews on your pastureland and hay fields:

- Maintain grazing through March to create the short-grass vegetation structure curlews like to nest in.
- Remove livestock and complete tillage by April on at least some of your fields to limit nest disturbance, trampling and destruction.
- Irrigate grassland habitats but maintain stable water levels to avoid flooding of nests. Wet hay and pastureland attracts breeding curlews.

Provide brood habitat near nesting sites

Long-billed Curlew chicks are precocial (they can walk and forage for themselves soon after hatch). Tall, dense vegetation in wet areas (including many agricultural crops) make excellent nurseries by providing food and cover for the young. To improve brood habitat on your land:

- Irrigate crops such as pasture, hay, and alfalfa through July.
- Delay harvest until after chicks are able to fly at the end of July.

Central and Imperial Valleys

Enhance Winter Foraging Habitat

Long-billed Curlews inhabit wetlands, grasslands and agricultural crops of the Central Valley and Imperial Valley during the fall and winter (July-March). Here are a few things you can do to improve winter foraging habitat:

Native Pasture

- Protect large tracts of native pasture through conservation easements.
- Develop a prescribed burning or grazing plan that keeps grasslands healthy.

Alfalfa/Irrigated Pasture/Hay

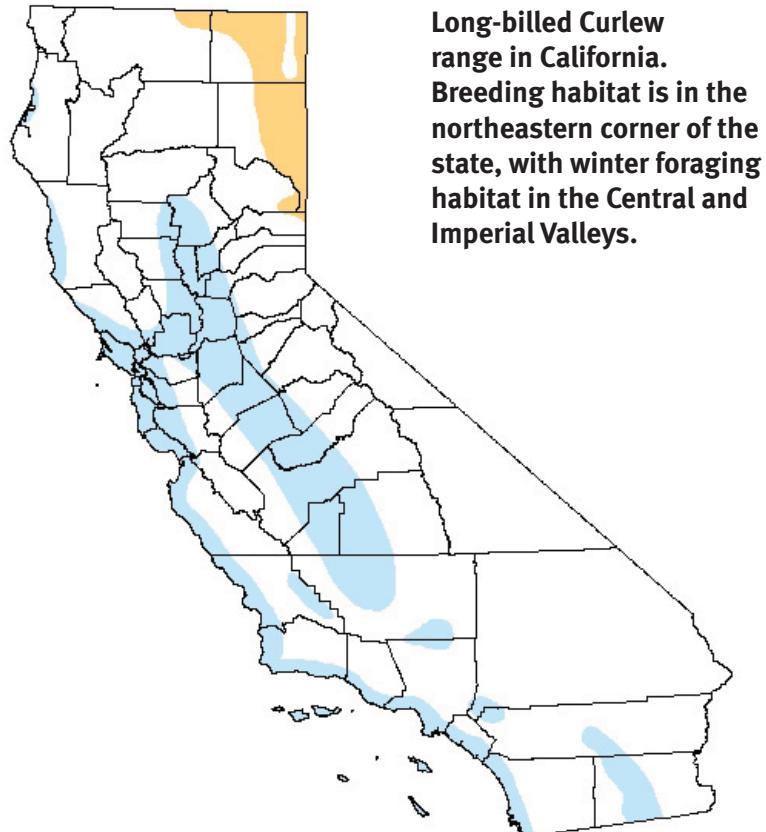
- These are among the most used habitats by curlews in the Central Valley. Maintain irrigated alfalfa, hay and pasture acreage on your land.
- Use a flood rather than subsurface irrigation system. Flood irrigation fronts often create excellent foraging opportunities for curlews and other birds.

Rice

- Flood rice fields as soon after harvest as possible for fall migrants; maintain flooding through February.
- Maintain some shallow-water habitat (less than 5 inches deep) over winter; curlews cannot forage in deep water.

We want to work with you

Audubon California wants to work with you to create and enhance Long-billed Curlew habitat. If you would like more information about helping Long-billed Curlew on your land please contact Audubon California at (916) 649-7600.



Long-billed Curlew range in California. Breeding habitat is in the northeastern corner of the state, with winter foraging habitat in the Central and Imperial Valleys.

Source: California Department of Fish and Game