

American Avocet

Recurvirostra americana By Lex Hames

During a previous incarnation as a video producer of TV segments on waterfowl and wetlands, I spent countless days walking and even crawling around prairie marshes. Although my job was to film ducks and geese, I grew increasingly fond of those other fascinating denizens of shallow water: shorebirds, especially the American avocet.

To my mind, the avocet is the most elegant and stylish of wading birds. Dressed in a finely tailored suit of white, black, and soft cinnamon, this stately, statuesque bird strides along the shorelines of shallow lakes and marshes like a member of England's royal family out for a stroll. Except that sometimes, when resting, it stands on one leg, which nobility rarely do.

APPEARANCE

With their black-and-white striped wings, cinnamon head carried high, and long legs as trim as walking sticks, male and female avocets cut an elegant appearance. Standing about 18 inches tall, they are one of Montana's larger wading birds.

Avocets change their outfit twice each year. In winter plumage, they lose the rusty shade on the head and breast, and sport strictly black-and-white attire. A flock of winter avocets resembles a herd of tiny flying zebras. The black-and-white stripes, moving with rapid wingbeats, create a dizzying zigzag pattern of dark and light sweeping

Lex Hames is a writer and video producer in Helena.

through the sky. In spring, the cinnamon head coloring returns.

The slender, sharply pointed bill of both sexes curves slightly upward, the female's a bit more than the male's.

SOUND

An avocet produces a series of notes that have a Doppler-like effect. They rise in pitch as they come closer, creating the same impression as when a train rushes toward you with its whistle blowing, the whistle's blast rising in pitch as it draws nearer. As the avocet approaches a ground predator, it raises the pitch of its call, creating the impression that it is approaching faster than it is—a neat trick for a bird defending its nest.

FOOD

For all their delicacy and beauty, avocets make their living in the muck. They're "mudders," working shallow marshes and thin sheets of open water, waving their long, thin bill back and forth like a rapier to nab minnows, crustaceans, and aquatic insects. Like all wading birds, they have long stilt-like legs that hold their body above the water. When walking, the avocet's legs move swiftly up and down, carrying the bird forward in a determined, high-stepping manner.

REPRODUCTION

Avocets nest on flat ground near water in



SCIENTIFIC NAME *Recurvirostra* comes from the Latin *recurvus*, "curved backwards," and *rostrum*, "bill." The avocet's common name derives from the Italian name for a similar bird found in Europe and Eurasia: *avosetta*.

simple structures. Either the female or male creates a scrape in the ground with its breast and feet, then lines the shallow depression with grass, feathers, pebbles, or other small objects. A mating pair engages in elaborate "cross-bill" displays before and after mating—think of crossed swords held high. Both parents incubate the eggs. If the eggs get too warm, one parent dips its belly feathers in the water and returns to cool the nest.

HABITAT

Avocets require shallow marshes and mud flats submerged a few inches where they can stroll and forage for aquatic invertebrates and small fish.

CONSERVATION STATUS

Though avocet numbers have diminished across parts of North America, due mainly to wetland loss, they're still abundant in Montana and other northern Great Plains states. This prairie bird has been here for a long time, making it an important part of our state's natural heritage.

WHERE TO WATCH

Avocets usually arrive at their breeding grounds from late April to late May. Look for them in eastern and central Montana marshes, ponds, and alkaline lakes throughout spring and summer. Avocet-watching hot spots include Freezeout Lake, Benton Lake, and Lake Bowdoin. 🦆

