

# A CLOSER LOOK

By Patrick T. Isakson



CRAIG BHRLE

*A willet (above) wades in a shallow wetland in search of food. Note (inset photo) the black and white on the underside of the willet's wing.*



CRAIG BHRLE

## Flash of Brilliance

Standing in a shallow wetland there isn't much that distinguishes the willet from other similar-sized shorebirds across the state. This large shorebird stands 15 inches tall, is gray-brown with a long straight bill and gray legs.

Its appearance, however, changes in the air with a flash of black and white and a distinct *pill-will-willet* call. The black-and-white pattern on its wing tips is visible only when outstretched, and is a striking contrast to the willet's gray-brown body. This pattern is displayed during courtship and territorial disputes.

The willet is found throughout the state, but is most common in the Prairie Pothole Region of North Dakota. They flock to the area this time of year from wintering grounds as far south as Costa Rica.

Shallow prairie wetlands provide important feeding areas for willets, which eat mainly calcium-rich insects and aquatic invertebrates needed in spring to help produce eggs.

As important as the wetlands are to this species, so too are the grasslands that surround them. Willets prefer native prairie for nesting, but can also be found in planted Conservation Reserve Program grasses. Once the willets have paired up, both male and female begin a process of shaping a nest bowl. Once the nest is finished, the female lays four eggs, which she incubates for about 25 days.

The willet is designated as a Level I Species of Conservation Priority in the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Wildlife Action Plan.

This means it has the highest priority when it comes to conservation of its habitat and needs. Its main threat is the loss of native grasslands and associated wetlands. The Department works to preserve areas important to not only the willet, but a host of other species.

May is a great time to view shorebirds in North Dakota as the migration ushers in birds of all shapes and sizes. Visit your local wetland, and with a little luck, you just might see that flash of black and white, or hear the call of the willet distinguishing itself from the crowd.

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