

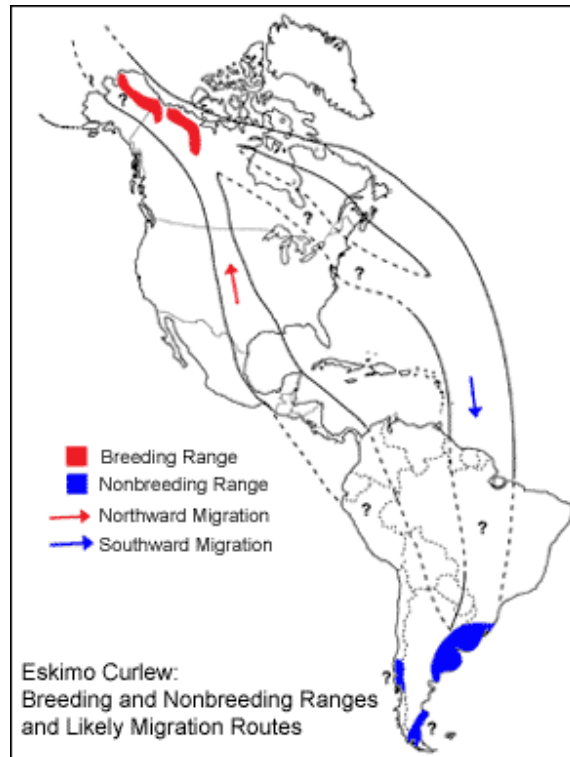
Story of the Eskimo Curlew



Eskimo Curlew by Archibald Thorburn from en.wikipedia.org

My muscles are tired and achy as I fly the last hour or two to my nesting spot on the tundra in the Arctic. My family has nested in the northernmost areas of Canada and Alaska for hundreds of years. We are migratory birds, meaning that our species travels from one place to another at specific times during a year and often over long distances. We fly from the southern parts of Patagonia in Argentina, where we spend the winter, to the top of the world in the Arctic where we make nests and raise our young.

I have been flying for the last two months from South America to get to my destination. I do not fly every day. I fly north as the weather gets warmer in the spring when the snows finally melt on the tundra. I stop along the way to rest and feed so that I am strong enough to fly the next part of my travels. My journey northward began in South America where I flew over the Andes Mountains to Central America, Texas and Louisiana and up the Great Plains of the United States and Canada to the Arctic tundra.



Let me tell you a little bit about my family’s history before I stop for the night. We are known as the Eskimo Curlews. Over 300 years ago, before people began to come to the Americas to settle, there were millions of us. We had plenty of food to eat, and no one who wanted to hurt us. We eat wild berries, insects, small worms and snails. We were never a threat to farmers or anyone else.

The people who came to America to settle did not know about my family. They thought that we were eating the seeds that they planted in their fields. They thought that we might be good to eat, so they hunted us as they did other kinds of wildlife to provide food for their survival. They also thought that we weren’t smart, because if one of the birds in our flock fell from the sky, the others would go back to check on it. This behavior made it easy for hunters to shoot hundreds of my family in just one day. Within 100 years, the numbers of Eskimo Curlews became fewer and fewer.

Today my family of Eskimo Curlews and other migrating birds are fully protected in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, the United States and other countries, because the hunting of certain

migratory birds has been outlawed since 1918 when the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was put into effect. However, even with that protection, too few of my family members survived to have enough baby birds to stop our numbers from dwindling. It was too late for us to return to the numbers of Eskimo Curlew family members that flew in the skies many years ago. This migration season I have flown thousands of miles to get to this place in the Arctic tundra where I can see my nesting grounds below. I dive down to the area that I will protect so that when a mate arrives for me, I will have a safe place for her to build a nest where we can raise our young.



Whimbrel

Photo by Ian Davis from Macauley Library and The Cornell Lab of Ornithology



Long-billed Curlew

Photo by Jeff Dyck from Macauley Library and The Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Now that I am on the ground, I will introduce myself. My name is Sky, and I am an **Eskimo Curlew**, a shorebird that is related to the **Whimbrel** and **Long-billed Curlew**. I am the smallest of the three birds. A strong flier, I leave other birds behind as I migrate each year. I can fly at 50 miles an hour and as high as two miles in the sky. My feathers are warm brown with white speckles. Cinnamon-colored feathers cover the undersides of my wings. I am about 12 inches tall with long dark green, brown, or grey-blue legs. I also have a long, thin beak with a small bend at the end. I am often seen along mudflats or the shore of a body of water.

My job right now is to prepare and protect my territory until the arrival of a mate. As I work, I notice that some golden plovers are arriving and making nests close to my territory. They do not bother me as they make their own nests and care for their eggs and young once the eggs hatch. But the days are passing, and I have not seen any other Eskimo Curlews. I have very little time left before my instincts will force me to leave this summer home and begin my next migration

journey back to South America. I have been so lonely and have not seen even one member of my family this summer.

Finally, the last of the nesting birds who migrate South for the winter are leaving the tundra. I must leave as well. I join a group of golden plovers who will also fly to South America. Since I am the strongest flyer, I will take the lead of the group. We have stored fat over the summer to fuel our wings and bodies for the long flight that is ahead of us. We fly east and south over northern Canada. We fly during the night and land in the mornings to rest and feed. We set out at sunset each evening to fly through another night. This is just the beginning of a very long trip.

Once again, I take the lead. The wind currents from my wings help the birds behind me to fly and not use so much energy. I realize that since I am the strongest and biggest bird in the group, I will need to remain the leader. After several days we arrive in Labrador in eastern Canada. We will rest here for several days eating crowberries. These are ripe and provide us with valuable food to help restore our fat supplies which we will need during our flight over the Atlantic Ocean. Since other curlews would also stop here to eat before their flight south, I look for another Eskimo Curlew, perhaps a mate for next year. Alas, there is not one curlew that stops to feed.

After several days we set off at night to fly to South America. We are traveling over water, making this the hardest part of the journey since we are not able to land along the way. It is a long and dangerous flight. If we are caught in a storm, we may fall into the ocean and drown. We work hard hour after hour to keep flying and moving to the south. We will fly day and night for two to three days until we cross the shores of Venezuela where the Orinoco River basin is located. After 2 ½ days, I can feel the warm air that is rising from the land. As a new day dawns, we see the river below, and we go down to land along the shore. We will rest here for days, maybe weeks, as we eat to store energy again and let our feathers be replaced by new ones that are not as worn and ruffled. This is where I part ways with my golden plover companions. They will not follow me over the summer as I fly farther and farther south, finally arriving in Argentina to an area called Patagonia. I will spend the rest of the summer here, resting, gaining strength, and looking for a mate.

Today the most wonderful thing happens. As I am looking for grasshoppers and other insects to eat, I notice a bird that I have not seen while I have been here. I watch her from behind the tufts of grass and realize that she is an Eskimo Curlew, just like me! I am so overjoyed that I fly up into the air, spin around and swoop back down to the ground. I land right in front of her. I leave to go and find a grasshopper to give to her. She accepts it, and we are now friends. I am so happy that I am not alone anymore. I have a mate, Annie, who will travel with me and keep me company. We rejoice at our good luck and spend the summer together, gaining strength for our migration north.

As fall arrives in Patagonia, we begin our flight to the north. We travel along the western coast of South America. We fly over the Andes Mountains and escape snowstorms that might keep us from going any farther. We continue northward until we pass over what is Central America. Shortly after the beginning of the new year, we will land in Texas to rest again before we begin the journey over the Great Plains and north into Canada.

In the southernmost part of Texas, we land to take a break. It is early spring here, and there are plenty of insects to eat. A farmer is in his field nearby. We do not watch him, because we are too busy eating bugs and grubs from his freshly plowed rows. Suddenly, a loud exploding sound startles us and I take flight. I look back for Annie, but she is not behind me. I circle high in the air, searching for her. I spot her, still resting on the ground. She does not follow. I return to check on her, but she will not fly to follow me. With a heavy heart, I must leave her behind and take off to fly further north. My instincts will not allow me to wait.

The next day I land on a lush island called Galveston. I join the other shorebirds and feed in the grasslands. I notice a man who is watching us. He seems to be very excited. He comes back again the next day with another man to watch our group of birds feeding. I will see him again several times before I leave the island to go north to nest. Each time he has other people with him. I leave the beautiful island in the middle of April to continue my migration. He will be the last man that I will ever see.



The only available photos of the Eskimo Curlew are black and white. This one was taken by Don Bleitz.

Note: The last confirmed sighting of the Eskimo Curlew on Galveston Island was in the early 1960s. Other sightings have been reported, but they have not been confirmed. Although the Eskimo Curlew has not been officially declared extinct, one has not been seen for over 50 years. Because Galveston was the last place that it was seen, a statue of the Eskimo Curlew will be placed in Galveston Island State Park in the spring of 2020. The statue was sculpted by Todd McGrain and will be over six feet tall. It will be a lasting memorial to a bird that we have lost for all of time.

Second Note: Although hunting played a major role in the decline of the Eskimo Curlew it was not the only factor that caused their near extinction. As with many animals, habitat for both breeding and foraging play critical roles in the survival of a species. Loss of habitat drastically effected the now extinct Rocky Mountain Grasshopper which was a major food source for the Eskimo Curlew. The loss of their food source, in addition to other contributing factors, was felt throughout the population and resulted in a species unable to recover.

This adaptation of the book Last of the Curlews by Fred Bosworth was written for younger audiences by Susette Mahaffey.