

BAYLANDS

Willetts

The Willet, a large member of the shorebird family, is one of the most commonly seen birds in the Palo Alto Baylands during the winter. They migrate from their breeding and nesting grounds in the northwestern sections of the United States and Canada, and winter along coastal tide flats, salt marshes, and beaches from Central California to Peru. A few non-breeding birds are found in the Palo Alto Baylands during the summer.

Willetts use their long bills to probe in the mud flats for worms, snails, clams, and other invertebrates. They are one of the most vocal birds in the Baylands. Like crows in woodland areas, they are the first birds to announce the presence of any danger. They sound off with a rapidly repeated *KIP-KIP* to announce an intruder in the area. When aroused the *KIP* is then changed to a repeatedly loud *KAY-E-E*. Except for the Killdeer the Willet is the most active of the shorebirds, constantly moving and jerking its head up and down.

When they are standing, the Willet's plumage is best described as nondescript. Their drab plumage helps Willetts to blend in with their surroundings. During the winter, Willetts are light gray above and whitish below. Those same birds seen during the summer are brownish gray, streaked with black and brown above and light buff colored below. The female is slightly larger in size, but otherwise has the same plumage as the male.

Only when flying are Willetts easy to distinguish from other shorebirds. In flight they display broad black and white wing markings normally hidden when the bird is on the ground. Ornithologists wondered why these gaudy wing patterns are normally hidden. But then William Vogt determined their purposes were for vigorous displays used during courtship and when establishing and protecting territories.

Nature Notes

Willetts can usually be seen on the mud flats at low tide. During high tides, they can often be seen walking in the surrounding marsh pickleweed from the observation platform of the Palo Alto Baylands Nature Interpretive Center.

Edited and Illustrated by Virginia Kolence

