



**Natural Heritage
& Endangered Species
Program**

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

**Willet
*Tringa semipalmata***

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Willet is a large, brownish-grey sandpiper with long legs, a thick, straight bill, and a short, squared-off tail. During flight, they display a bold, broad, white wing-stripe bordered in black that runs across the primary and secondary feathers, and a white rump. On the ground they may be confused with other large shorebirds, such as the Whimbrel and Greater Yellowlegs.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: The Willet was extirpated from Massachusetts during the 1800s due to hunting pressure, but the population has shown a strong recovery since the enactment of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Over the last several decades, the Willet has undergone a strong population increase in Massachusetts and can be found nesting along much of the state's coastline. Willets have an extensive wintering range that includes coastal areas from the southern United States to South America.

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: The Eastern population of the Willet (there is a disjunct breeding population of Willet in the western part of the country) occupies open beaches, marshes, mudflats and rocky coastal zones along the Atlantic coast. They breed in salt marshes, barrier islands, and barrier beaches, laying an average of four eggs in a ground nest constructed out of grass. In winter, they migrate south along the coast using beaches, mudflats, and rocky coasts as foraging habitat.

The Willet utilizes its long, sensitive bill to feed on crabs, mollusks, worms, insects and other prey in sand and mudflats. They are often seen alone walking slowly and deliberately, and will react with a piercing call when startled.



THREATS: The Willet's population may be negatively affected by the loss of nesting and wintering habitats, contaminants and pollutants which accumulate in coastal sediments, and collisions with structures and objects.

REFERENCES:

- Lowther, P.E., H.D. Douglas, III, and C.L. Gratto-Trevor. 2001. Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online:
<http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/579doi:10.2173/bna.579>
- Petersen, W.R., and W.R. Meservy. 2003. *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas*. Massachusetts Audubon Society and University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Massachusetts.

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A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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