



Lesser Yellowlegs

Photo: © Gary Donaldson



Scientific Name

Tringa flavipes

Taxon

Birds

COSEWIC Status

Threatened

Canadian Range

British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut

Reason for designation

This medium-sized shorebird has 80% of its breeding range in Canada's boreal region, migrates through the United States and Caribbean, and winters mostly in South America. It has experienced substantial long- and short-term declines, most recently estimated at 25% over three generations (12 years) based on the Breeding Bird Survey, and greater than 50% over 10 years based on International Shorebird Surveys. Declines are expected to continue. Key concerns include the loss of wetland and intertidal habitat used on migration and in winter, and hunting for sport and subsistence, which has been reduced in some areas but likely remains the most significant threat. Additionally, emerging threats from climate change include increased risk of drought in breeding areas, coastal

flooding, and greater severity of hurricanes during fall migration..

Wildlife Species Description and Significance

Lesser Yellowlegs is a small, slender shorebird with greyish plumage, a long neck, a straight black bill that is roughly the same length as its head, and long, bright-yellow legs. This migrant travels up to 30,000 km in a round trip between its breeding and wintering grounds. Approximately 80% of Lesser Yellowlegs breed in Canada.

Distribution

Lesser Yellowlegs breeds primarily in the boreal forest of Canada and Alaska, including all provinces and territories except the Maritimes. It winters in coastal areas from the southern United States through South America, with concentrations on the northern coast of South America and in the Pampas region of northern Argentina, Uruguay, and southern Brazil.



Canadian breeding range and estimate of extent of occurrence of Lesser Yellowlegs.

Source : COSEWIC. 2020. COSEWIC assessment and status report on the Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. x + 64 pp.

Habitat

Lesser Yellowlegs nests on dry ground near peatlands, marshes, ponds, and other wetlands in the boreal forest and taiga. In winter and during migration, the species frequents coastal salt marshes, estuaries and ponds, as well as lakes, other freshwater wetlands, and anthropogenic wetlands such as flooded rice fields and sewage lagoons.

Biology

Lesser Yellowlegs can begin breeding at one year old, and is estimated to have a generation length of 4 years. Females typically lay a single clutch of four eggs in mid-May, and may lay a second clutch if the first is lost to predation. Incubation lasts approximately 22 days; the young leave the nest shortly after hatching. Lesser Yellowlegs is monogamous and only defends a small area around the nest or brood. Adults may travel many kilometres from the nest to the wetlands where they forage, so home range may be as large as several dozen square kilometres.

Population Sizes and Trends

The North American population of Lesser Yellowlegs as of 2020 is estimated to be at least 527,000 mature individuals, with 80% (422,000) breeding in Canada. Data from the North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) estimate an average annual trend of -2.40% in Canada over the most recent three generations (2007 to 2019), corresponding to a cumulative loss of 25%. From 1970 to 2019, the average annual BBS trend is -2.36%, amounting to a total decline of 69%. This is comparable to the significant 2.75% annual (69% cumulative) decline shown by shorebird migration monitoring data in North America between 1974 and 2016; over the most recent decade (2006 to 2016; slightly less than three generations) the decline based on these surveys accelerated to 7.28% annually, amounting to 53%. This estimate includes the

Alaskan population, which BBS results indicate is declining more rapidly than the Canadian population. Periodic surveys at migratory stopovers in the Caribbean and at key wintering regions in South America also indicate steep rates of decline within the past three generations.

Threats and Limiting Factors

Hunting of Lesser Yellowlegs during migration and on wintering grounds in the Caribbean and South America appears to be the greatest threat to the species. Ongoing habitat loss is also a concern, especially with respect to agricultural expansion and shoreline development in South America. Various impacts related to climate change remain poorly understood but may be increasing in importance. Other threats which may contribute to ongoing declines are energy production and mining, increasing abundance of predators, and various forms of pollution.

Protection, Status and Ranks

In Canada, Lesser Yellowlegs and its nests and eggs are protected under the *Migratory Birds Convention Act, 1994*. The species was assessed as Threatened by COSEWIC in November 2020. NatureServe considers Lesser Yellowlegs to be Secure or Apparently Secure in Canada, although it is ranked Vulnerable in five provinces and territories, and Imperilled to Apparently Secure in the Northwest Territories. The Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) aims to designate and protect migratory stopover sites of significance at regional to hemispheric scales, but offers no legal protection. Quill Lakes in Saskatchewan is the only Canadian WHSRN site with globally significant numbers of Lesser Yellowlegs, but habitat there has been severely degraded as a consequence of unregulated and unlicensed drainage of wetlands.

Source : COSEWIC. 2020. COSEWIC assessment and status report on the Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. x + 64 pp.

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