

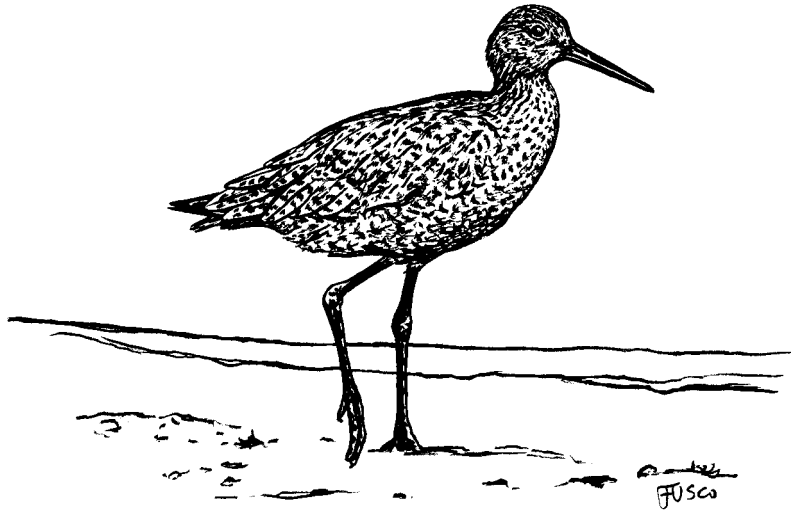
# WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

## ENDANGERED AND THREATENED SPECIES SERIES

### WILLET

*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*

**SPECIAL  
CONCERN**



**Habitat:** Coastal marshes, beaches and mudflats.

**Weight:** 7-12 ounces.

**Length:** 14-17 inches.

**Wingspan:** 24-31 inches.

**Life Expectancy:** 8-10 years.

**Food:** Aquatic insects, marine worms, small fishes, small crustaceans and mollusks; occasionally seeds and grasses.

**Status:** Special Concern

**Identification:** The willet is a relatively large member of the sandpiper family, with a uniformly gray appearance when at rest. Its bold white and black wing markings, which are visible in flight, help in the identification of this species. The sexes are similar, but the female is a bit larger. The blue legs and heavier bill help distinguish the willet from the similar-looking greater yellowlegs.

**Range:** In the East, the willet nests locally from Nova Scotia, along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. The species winters from the Carolinas to the northern coast of South America. Western populations breed in the prairies from southern Canada to the north-central United States and winter along the coast from northern California to South America.

**Reproduction:** The willet often nests in small, loose colonies. The nest site is chosen by the female and can be found in beach grass or on high, dry, grassy areas along a salt marsh. The 4 olive eggs, marked with olive brown, are usually laid in a depression lined with grasses but can be found on bare ground. The eggs are laid in late May and early June and incubated for 22 days. Both the male and female incubate the eggs. The male does a ceremonial low bow before changing places with the female. Nesting areas are noisily defended, especially if they are part of a large colony. The downy, precocial young are able to leave the nest after hatching, and they are cared for by both adults.

**Reason for Decline:** Extensive, unregulated market hunting and egg collecting in the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries caused a serious decline in the willet population, especially in the northeastern United States. There has been a slow comeback of the population, but habitat loss along the coastal islands and marshes jeopardizes further population recovery.

**History in Connecticut:** The willet was probably a common inhabitant of Connecticut's once abundant coastal marshes and beaches. However, by the early twentieth century, there was no reported nesting in the state. The willet was listed as a state threatened species when Connecticut first established its endangered and threatened species list in 1992. In recent years, there has been evidence of a population increase in New England. Surveys in the 1990's indicated willets breeding at several locations in Connecticut. In 1998, the willet was officially reclassified to a species of special concern.

**Interesting Facts:** Willets are one of the noisiest of birds on their breeding grounds. When disturbed, the birds will fly around or perch on trees as they loudly scold the intruder. Adults have been observed moving

their young from danger by clasping the chicks between their legs and flying to safety.

The willet's partially webbed feet (hence the species name *semipalmatus*) give them the ability to swim well, although they primarily walk or wade as they search for food. Feeding sites are on mud flats, sandbars and along the tidal creeks and pannes (shallow depressions that collect tidal and rain water) of salt marshes.

**Protective Legislation:** *Federal* - Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. *State* - Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 26-311.

**What You Can Do:** Loss of habitat, human disturbance and predation are the greatest threats facing Connecticut's willet populations. By encouraging the protection and conservation of the state's remaining coastal wetlands, willets and other wildlife will benefit. To reduce disturbance, avoid travel and recreation near nesting areas during the breeding season. Do not allow pets to roam freely in coastal or wetland habitats; always keep pets on a leash when visiting these areas.

## CONNECTICUT RANGE

