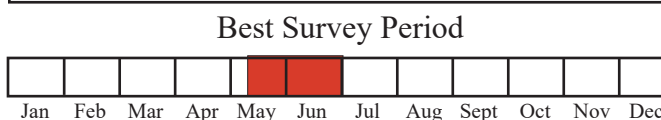
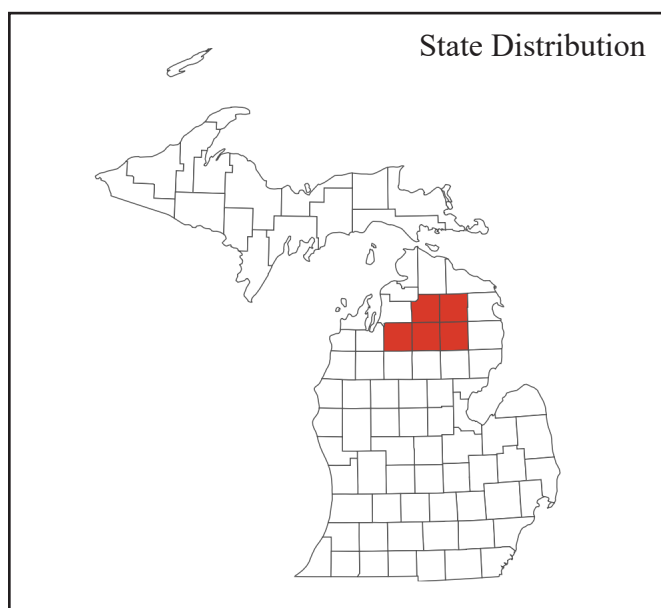


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**Status:** State threatened

**Global and state rank:** G5/S3

**Other common name(s):** Bartram's sandpiper; upland plover

**Family:** Scolopacidae – Sandpipers and Snipes

**Total Range:** The upland sandpiper breeds in the central United States through southern Canada. Though upland sandpipers are concentrated in the northern Great Plains region, breeding individuals can be found throughout Michigan and southern Ontario, and as far east as southeastern Quebec and northern Maine. A smaller portion of upland sandpipers breed in northcentral Alaska and northern Yukon (Houston et al. 2023). Upland sandpipers spend the winter in South America, ranging from northeastern Argentina through Uruguay, Paraguay, and southern Brazil (DeGraaf and Rappole 1995).

**State Distribution:** Upland sandpipers are not confined to the Great Lakes coasts and can be found throughout the state. The Michigan Breeding Bird Atlas has confirmed breeding individuals across at

least 45 counties, with possible breeding behavior observed in 26 more counties where nests are not yet confirmed (Corace 2013). Upland sandpipers are most frequently encountered in the northern Lower Peninsula, where large fields have fewer row crops and more herbaceous openlands (Corace et al. 2016).

**Recognition:** The upland sandpiper is a medium-sized terrestrial shorebird approximately 12" (30 cm) in length, with a wingspan of 20" (51 cm). It has a **small dove-like head**, on a **thin neck**, with a distinctive **large, dark eye**. In flight, its dark primaries contrast with the lighter and mottled brown of the rest of its wings and back. Its **tail is long**, proportionally the longest of all North American sandpipers, and its yellowish legs do not protrude beyond the tail in flight. Other field marks include a **white eye ring**, and **short yellow bill with a black tip**. The upland sandpiper bears some resemblance to the buff-breasted sandpiper (*Calidris subruficollis*) and the pectoral sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*), but the former is easily distinguished by its buff underparts, and the latter by its shorter neck and legs. Song is an ascending whistled chatter, followed by a **wolf-whistle**. (Johnsgard 1981, Nation-



al Geographic Society 1999, Houston et al. 2023).

**Best survey time/phenology:** Upland sandpipers start to arrive in Michigan at the end of April, and begin to depart near the end of July, though individuals have been seen as early as the first week of April and as late as the last week of September (eBird 2025). The best time to find breeding birds is from mid-May to the end of June. Their calls and flight displays make them easier to find in May, prior to incubation (Brewer et al. 1991).

**Habitat:** Uplands sandpipers use a variety of habitats across their breeding range, including prairies, pastures, wet meadows, barrens, and croplands (Shaffer et al. 2019). Their choice of winter habitat is similar, including both natural and anthropogenic grasslands (Blanco and López-Lanús 2008). In Michigan the upland sandpiper shows a stronger affinity for natural openlands, (e.g. pine barrens) than in other states, where agricultural land may be more commonly used (Corace et al. 2016). Home ranges are relatively large, making this an area-sensitive species, requiring large tracts (>100 ha) of habitat for breeding (Shaffer et al. 2019, Griffis and Campa 2023). These home ranges must provide foraging areas with low vegetation (<15 cm), as well as nesting spaces where taller grasses (15-60 cm) can be pulled over to conceal the nest (Shaffer et al. 2019, Griffis and Campa 2023). Short perches are an essential habitat component, as they often perch atop fenceposts and rarely in trees (White 1983, Carter 1992, Houston et al. 2023).

**Biology:** Adult upland sandpipers arrive in Michigan during the end of April and beginning of May (eBird 2025). Pairs appear to form during early May and, depending on their destination, individuals may or may not be paired upon arrival at their breeding grounds (Houston et al. 2023). Both males and females participate in courtship flights/displays, including a circling flight with a long whistle, followed by a plummet from a great height (Johnsgard 1981). Once paired, the male may continue to perform the flight display, while the female responds vocally from the ground (Houston et al.

2023).

Both adults contribute to nest construction, taking turns scraping at the soil and vegetation to create hollows (Houston et al. 2023). Completed nests are formed in one of these hollows, lined with grass and leaves, with surrounding vegetation pulled over to cover the nest (Baicich and Harrison 1997). This cover is usually made up of more grass than forbs (Griffis and Campa 2023).

Upland sandpipers produce one brood per year, though females may re-nest if a clutch is lost (Higgins and Kirsch 1975, Casey et al. 2011). Average clutch is four eggs (Baicich and Harrison 1997). Both parents participate in incubation, and the eggs hatch after 21-28 days of incubation (Carter 1992, Casey et al. 2011). Though an occasional victim of brown-headed cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) brood parasitism, this is generally not an issue for the upland sandpiper, as its young are precocial and leave the nest shortly after hatching (Shaffer et al. 2019). Young are tended by both parents, though the male provides more care on average (Houston et al. 2023). The young have grown to full size and are capable of flight at approximately 30 days after hatching (Carter 1992). They leave Michigan on their southward migration around the end of July (eBird 2025), departing earlier from higher latitudes than lower latitudes (Vickery et al. 2010). Upland sandpipers are insectivores, with grasshoppers, crickets, weevils, and beetles being the most common prey items (Carter 1992, Houston et al. 2023). They prefer to forage in shorter vegetation (<30cm), with their most frequently visited sites changing throughout the season as vegetation heights change (Dechant et al. 1999).

A recent record of a 13-year-old individual suggests this species may be more long-lived than the previous longevity estimates of approximately 8 years (Sandercock and Kramos 2020). Though hatching return rates are low, some adults display high breeding site fidelity, returning to the same site over several years (Hill et al. 2019, Shaffer et al. 2019, Sandercock and Kramos 2020).



**Conservation/management:** North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data suggests that across its breeding range the upland sandpiper population is holding steady or slightly increasing, however populations in Michigan and other states and provinces east of the Great Plains are decreasing (Hostetler et al. 2023). Habitat loss and fragmentation appear to be major factors in population decline (Griffis and Campa 2023).

It is important that breeding sites are maintained as grassland or openlands, as increased shrub cover results in decreased upland sandpiper densities (Kempema et al. 2023). Burning and low intensity grazing not only reduce woody vegetation, but also aid in producing the habitat heterogeneity necessitated by differences in foraging and nesting habitat (Griffis and Campa 2023). These management activities also increase prey abundance (Sandercock et al. 2015).

It is generally recommended that management disturbances (e.g. mowing, burning, etc.) are implemented outside of the nesting season (Dechant et al. 1999). No-till or low-till farming practices would also benefit upland sandpipers, as they are less likely to use tilled cropland for nesting and have lower nesting success when they do use it (Schaffer et al. 2019). Burning or grazing should be done in a rotational manner, leaving some areas undisturbed each year to provide good nesting sites (Sandercock et al. 2015). Additionally, potential display perches, such as fence posts, rock piles, and tree stumps, should be retained (White 1983).

**Research needs:** The demography of the upland sandpiper has not been extensively studied, leaving open questions regarding timing of first breeding, survival rates, and yearly and lifetime productivity. While many studies have been done regarding the effect of habitat manipulations on nest site selection, less is known about daily nest survival under different management regimes (Griffis and Campa 2023). There is some evidence that pesticides applied to crop fields may be a cause of mortality in the non-breeding range (Vickery et al. 2010). More

research is needed to determine the extent to which pesticides impact mortality during the breeding season.

There is evidence of breeding site fidelity, but little is known about this species' non-breeding site fidelity. There is little documentation of upland sandpiper migration routes, timing, mortality, and stopovers. While recent studies have begun to address this knowledge gap (e.g. Grosselet et al. 2019, Hill et al. 2019), sample sizes are small and much remains to be learned.

It is unclear if, in addition to habitat availability, habitat quality differs between the core populations in the Great Plains and the more peripheral populations of the eastern United States and northwestern Canada. This could have conservation implications if some areas are acting as population sinks. While individuals display nest site fidelity, natal philopatry and dispersal patterns are unknown. Genetic testing would reveal the degree to which populations interbreed, as well as the prevalence of natal philopatry and related individuals within loose colonies during the breeding season.

**Related abstracts:** Pine barrens, oak-pine barrens, hillside prairie, dry sand prairie, dry-mesic prairie, Hill's thistle, Kirtland's warbler, eastern massasauga, dusted skipper, secretive locust

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