

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

In 2006, the American Ornithological Union (AOU) made significant changes in the scientific nomenclature of several species of beach-nesting shorebird and seabird, including the Willet. It was previously listed in the family of *Catoptrophorus* which is the Plover family. It has been changed to the family of *Scolopacinae* (the Sandpiper family), genus of *Tringa* and is now referred to as *Tringa semipalmata*. When looking up information, you may want to search both names. Most birds of the Sandpiper family, winter in Florida and nest in the Arctic tundra. However, Willets are the only North American Sandpiper that nests in Florida. They range throughout North America and into the Caribbean. Although they usually inhabit coastal marshes and mudflats, they may be seen along beaches of Barefoot Beach Preserve year-round.

Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*)



Some say the trill they make sounds like *pill-will-willet*, therefore, their common name. Adults are 13 - 16 inches long and the sexes look similar, although it is reported that the male is usually smaller than the female. This shorebird has long blue-gray legs and a long thick, straight bill. The bill is black or blue-gray with a darker tip. Its head, neck, back, and upper wings and breast are a brownish-gray, while its belly is white. Only in flight can you see its striking white wing pattern bordered in black. Breeding plumage is a deeper brown with more prominent barring. Immature Willet is similar to the adult, but more brownish and with light edges to back feathers.

Although there are no known Willet nests in our Preserve, these birds are ground nesters and usually nest during the spring and early summer months. According to Stevenson and Anderson (1994), breeding Willets inhabit "short-grass salt marshes and beaches where dunes rise above the high-tide line and are covered with clumps of beach grass (*Panicum amarum*) and sea oats (*Uniola paniculata*)." Willets sometimes nest on open beaches but, most often, the nest is carefully hidden in marsh grasses. The Willet is a semi-colonial breeder, in the sense that several pairs may nest closely together. Willets are secretive in their nesting habits. The adults, themselves, can be highly conspicuous. If you approach too closely to the nest, adults will harshly scold you from an elevated perch. However, observers rarely elicit this response since the nests are often well-hidden and out-of-the-way within dune and marsh vegetation. If you do find yourself face-to-face with a raucous Willet obviously displeased with your presence, you may have a nest nearby. Tread lightly! The birds lay 3 to 5 buff colored eggs that are spotted with brown. Incubation takes 22 to 29 days. Two to three weeks after the eggs hatch, the female leaves and the male cares for the young for another two weeks.

You can see Willets running in and out of the surf line while probing for food. They mainly feed on aquatic invertebrates and, rarely, fish. Fiddler crabs are a common food item. Other crabs, mollusks, crayfish, and insects make up the remainder of its diet.