

A California Riceland Success Story

Among the most striking of all shorebirds, the American Avocet and Black-necked Stilt rely on California ricelands for food, breeding areas and migratory habitat.



BLACK-NECKED STILT
Himantopus mexicanus

AMERICAN AVOCET
Recurvirostra americana



Current and past population data and region's population objectives

Prior to European settlement of the Central Valley, stilt and avocet populations were likely much higher because wetland habitat was much more abundant. By the 20th century, populations had declined due to loss of wetlands to agriculture incompatible with wildlife needs, but some decline was offset by creation of various artificial habitats and salt ponds in the San Francisco Bay and by rice cultivation in the Central Valley. From summer surveys in 2003, the Black-necked Stilt population in the Central Valley was estimated to be about 30,000 individuals and the American Avocet population about 11,000. Of these, about 22,000 stilts and 4,000 avocets were in the Sacramento Valley. The current population objective for these species according to the Southern Pacific Regional Shorebird Plan is to “maintain or increase” populations.

Science-based estimate of the number of successful surviving new birds in an average year from birds that nested in rice

Although such a high percentage of adults were found in rice during the breeding season, it is not known how many of those were actively breeding in rice. As well, there is little information on productivity of stilts and avocets breeding in rice.



CALIFORNIA RICE

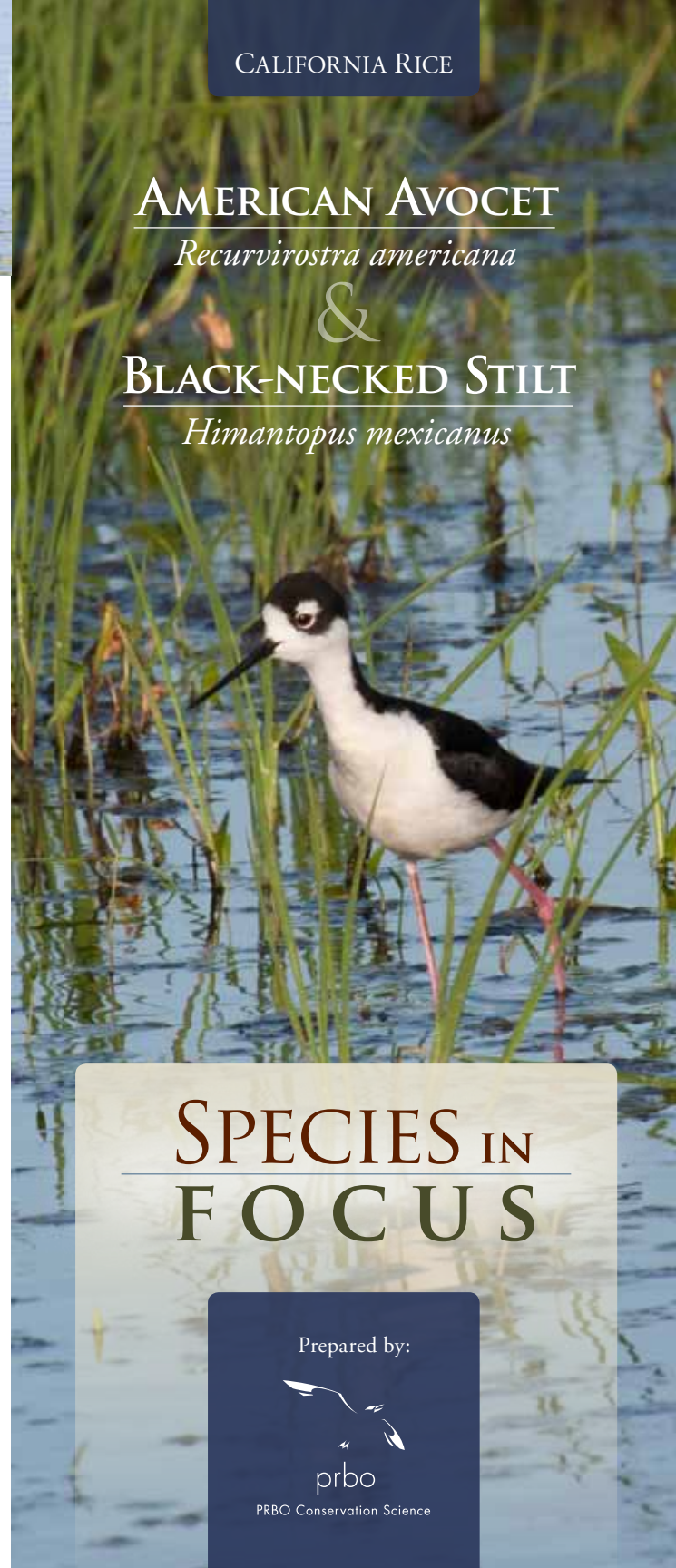
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SPECIES IN FOCUS

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AMERICAN AVOCET & BLACK-NECKED STILT

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Appearance



STILT

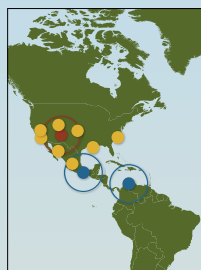
Size: 14–15 in
Weight: 5–8 oz



AVOCET

Size: 17–18 in
Weight: 10–12 oz

Both are large shorebirds with skinny legs, a long neck and an elongated, dark bill. The Avocet is larger, has grayish-blue legs and a bill that curves upwards (female's bill shorter than male's and curves up more strongly). In non-breeding plumage (September–February), avocet has light grey to white on head, neck and body, and wings mostly black with a white stripe. In breeding plumage (March–August), head, neck and breast become rusty orange. The Stilt is smaller, has bright pink legs, straight bill and is largely black above, white below with a thick white eyebrow patch. Female's plumage is duller than male's. Males are slightly larger than females of both species.



Range

Both species occur year round in California's Central Valley, around the San Francisco Bay Area and south along the coast, with winter and year-round ranges extending into Mexico and Central America and along the southern and eastern coastal areas of the United

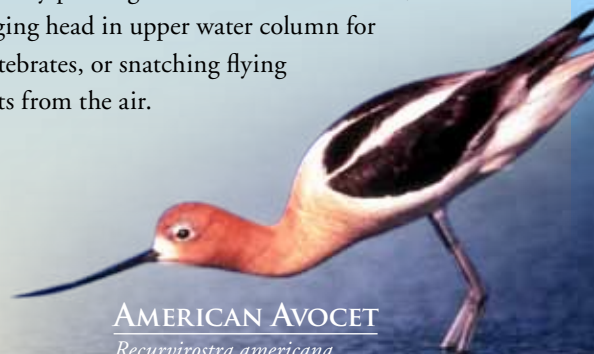
States. Both have breeding-only ranges in the central and western interior of the United States, but American Avocet's range is more extensive. The Black-necked Stilt's year-round range is more extensive in Mexico and extends to northern South America as well as the West Indies and Hawaii.

Habitat

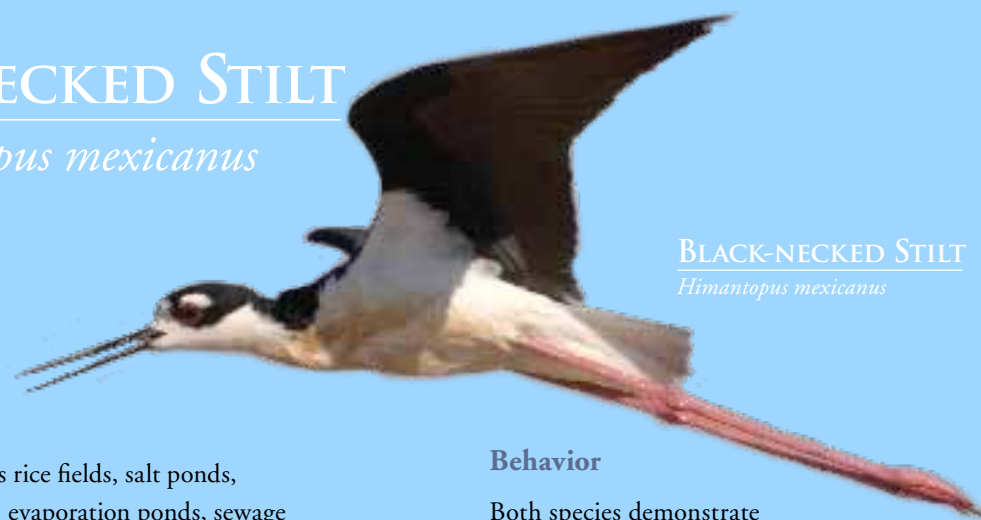
Breeding habitat includes rice fields, salt ponds, shallow inland wetlands, evaporation ponds, sewage ponds, edges of irrigation canals, borders of inland lakes and flooded lowlands and pastures. Spring/fall migration habitat includes rice fields, salt marshes, shallow lagoons with muddy shores, salt ponds, managed and seasonal wetlands, evaporation ponds and sewage ponds. Winter habitat includes managed and seasonal wetlands, evaporation ponds, sewage ponds in the Delta and, particularly, the San Joaquin Valley.

Food/feeding

Both species wade in shallow water, sometimes up to breast level, to forage for aquatic invertebrates and fish. American Avocet forages by sweeping its bill back and forth on top of or just below water's surface and can also vary feeding technique, depending on food availability, and eat terrestrial insects and plant material. Black-necked Stilt forages by pecking at water or mud's surface, plunging head in upper water column for invertebrates, or snatching flying insects from the air.



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Behavior

Both species demonstrate territorial behavior during nesting and forage in either single- or mixed-species flocks during migration and winter.

Conservation Status



No special status at this time in most of their ranges, but negative effects have been documented from selenium runoff from irrigated agricultural fields as well as wetland habitat destruction and disturbance. In places like San Francisco Bay there is concern for predation by native gulls and corvids. General protection provided under wildlife laws like the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Benefits of rice cultivation to species/group

Flooded rice fields provide good foraging and nesting habitat.

Additional benefits of adjacent managed wetlands to species/group

Wetlands with sparsely vegetated islands provide good breeding habitat. Managed wetlands also provide foraging habitat.