The ballet dancer of the shorebirds is the American Avocet, here shown as the wintering flocks we've been seeing for several months. They sift plankton and insect larvae from the water column, feeding on the surface or well below. Note the solid dark wings.

Let's look at some bird flocks. On the left are Black-necked Stilts, with Willets, Yellow-legs, dowitchers and a male shoveler on the right. Female shoveler flying. Blue-winged Teal in with the stilts. This is the 2nd wetlands on the left, on the Brazoria NWR road.

This dock almost always is busy with birds. It's ¾ the way out Sportsman Road, off eight mile road on Galveston's West End. These oystercatchers, Willet, Royal Tern and Short-billed Dowitcher are often there, along with less common species.
Below are avocet, both pelicans, Forster's Tern and Laughing Gulls off San Luis Pass.

Size matters. From R to L, a Greater Yellowlegs (heavy barring and long beak), Eastern Willet and two dowitchers, all in front of a white Reddish Egret. Picture taken in August.

I have never seen this before or since. This was a huge flock of Long-billed Curlew over on Bolivar Peninsula's beach. It's always interesting what goes into flocks of birds, like one species? One family with several species, like some plovers? An entire order, like all shorebirds? The next question is, "Why are they flocking together?" Safety? Navigation?

Long-billed Curlew breed in the short-grass prairie in the Colorado vicinity, along with a lot of Marbled Godwit. This individual lays the eggs, coz her bill is reeeeally long. Males have shorter beaks but the plumage is similar. Out there, they eat mostly arthropods.

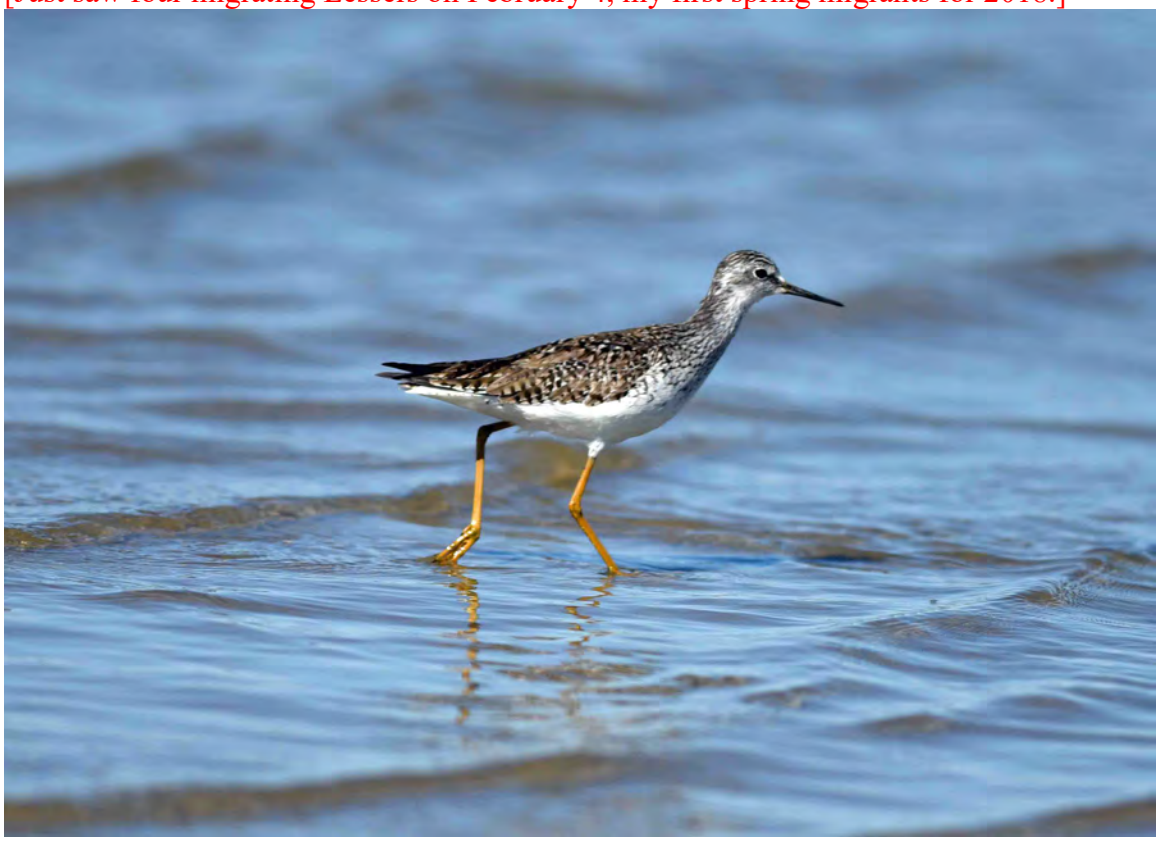
Joining the curlew out West are loads of Marbled Godwit, whose bill curves up instead of down. They work the land for earthworms and tide flats for polycheate worms.

See if you can visually detect the difference in the length of the male above and the lady below. If you get them together, it's much easier. Above is the low angle that's pleasing to the eye. Below a curlew shows off [her] size near a Greater Yellowlegs. Wowsers!

The Marbled Godwit just pulled its head out of the water and is letting the saltwater drain out of its eyes. Their two-toned beak is common in many waterbirds, where the black tip is made stiff by melanins. Upturned bills are termed “recurved,” as the opposite of curlew which have “decurved” bills. They really serve different functions, as godwit probe and avocets swish. And swishers are among my very favorites… ;)

Willets are more traditional sandpipers, though far larger than most. This is the Western Willet, our only one from August - mid March. Easterns are in the Tropics for the winter. They are pretty bland gray until the bird flies, where wings explode with black and white. This species of Willet is far more aquatic than the Eastern Willet, which generally stays on the shore, chasing critters like fiddler crabs.

Here you can compare a bulky, long-billed Greater Yellowlegs (top) to the Lesser below. [Just saw four migrating Lessers on February 4, my first spring migrants for 2018.]



Sandpiper wings are long & narrow, one reason they can fly so well. Long-billed Dowitchers are built like snipe, able to probe way deep for worms and other invertebrates. Note yellowish legs & unstreaked face, the latter of which separates it from a short-billed. This is in a freshwater lake at Brazoria NWR, but SBs are usually in salt water. See related paragraph below the Dunlin in red.

These Long-billed Dowitchers, at a glance, have bills like godwits. Now, my children, ya gotta look at a LOT of dowitchers over the years to discern that difference, and there isn't much difference between male LB and female SB, but with a flock it pretty well slaps me in the face. They are also in fresh water, where LB should be, as are these sleeping birds below, with the pleasant reflections. But the best field mark BY FAR is the call, which often will happen if they fly: LB- eek! And SB- tu tu.

Let’s “face” it: The SB above has a streaked face (San Luis Pass). LB below R does not.

This species used to be called a Common Snipe, but since “common” means found in the Old World and New, and since they were recently divided between hemispheres, this one in North America is now the Wilson’s Snipe, in honor of Alexander Wilson.
Below: There are birds with fantastic cryptic coloration to blend in with the environment immediately around them. Such is the case with snipe, nighthawks, woodcock, the female ducks incubating, sparrows and so-forth. Did ya see the second snipe – over to the right?

Far more common in the swampy state of Louisiana, the American Woodcock normally hides in wetlands with large trees and some standing water. Nicknamed “timber doodle,” this species is basically a snipe in a swamp, but still pulls up the worms that are eaten by dowitchers and snipe as well. Like flamingos, this trio of sandpipers have an upside down brain, since their most delicate work is when their head is held upside down.
Below is my only woodcock as a yard bird, taken at night, through my windshield!

These Dunlins on gray pavement are not cryptic coloration, but they could be! Notice the kinda long beak with a droop on the end. These are one of our latest shorebirds to arrive for the winter – seldom seen before October – but once they roll in they're very common. It's hard to believe what a color transition they make in late April! Look it up! :0

From the dowitcher segment:

In certain places you can see dowitchers in salt marshes, such as the Carbide Ponds south of La Marque, and these are likely long-billed. From contacting Jim Blackburn recently, I can tell you salt marshes have a salinity between about ten to twenty ppt (parts per 1000) salt, far less than typical sea water, which is roughly 34 ppt. I believe this explains why the dowitchers I normally see in salt marshes are LB instead of SB. It's not the salt, but the polycheate worms and such that live in various salinities.

Western Sandpipers are our winter peep that's usually found around the water. They are also our Continent's most abundant shorebird. Note the gray back and longish beak.

Our Hemisphere's smallest waterbird is this Least Sandpiper, with a browner back than a Western and yellowish legs. They can be near the water, like the top bird, but frequently wander well away, like the lower one. I even see them in ditches and puddles.

Sandpipers are among our greatest fliers, zipping along on narrow, long wings like sabers.

Here’s an immature Black-bellied Plover on top and an adult in winter below. Big bill!

The Piping Plover is a threatened species, but fairly common on Galveston Island's sand and mud beaches. Plovers pick up food morsels off the surface, so their bill isn't much to write home about. It's their orange legs that separate them from the Snowy Plover, and a lighter back eliminates the Semipalmated Plover. Winter plovers lack the full neck ring.

Given their listed status, PiPl are the subject of a lot of banding work. It is crucial to find out a lot about birds we are working hard to protect, such as migration routes, breeding & wintering locales, and matching up breeding and wintering sites. The health is ascertained by weighing them, so scientists use a strong magnet to pull them over to the vehicle.

I can’t beLIEVE you thought I was serious about that “attractive” idea!

Snowy Plovers west of the Mississippi are slightly darker than Piping, but much lighter in the East. That Cuban Snowy Plover is endangered and principally found in Florida. Ours are gray-brown on top, with gray legs and a longer bill than the Piping. I can’t tell any of their ecological differences, and they flock together quite often. Anyone? Sue?

Having a far greater population and a huge range is the Semipalmated Plover. It's darker on back with legs not far from the orange of the Piping. Curiously, this is not nearly as common on the UTC as one might think, a fact that tasks me driving the beaches. Their name refers to the partial webbing on their feet for walking on mud, like the sandpiper.

Wilson's Plovers are not generally winter birds on the UTC, but do nest here later.

Killdeer are sort of links between those larger black-bellies and goldens, and the smaller ones we just covered. Obviously they have two rings instead of one, and rings remain full all year, unlike those of the smaller plovers. Of course, they are up in grassland more than beaches, often by roads or driveways. They are one of many birds that say their name.