

Black-necked Stilt: An elegant bird

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

April and May are peak times to see Black-necked Stilt in central Washington.

It is entirely possible that you will need to get in a car and drive to see these delicate, seasonal birds. I think that any trip you need to take to view them is worth your time.

I've seen them in ephemeral ponds near Mansfield, at the mouth of the Walla Walla River in the Tri-cities area, in the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in southeast Oregon, and at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge in Utah.



Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.

Their range is mostly in the southern United States, Mexico and Central America so we are lucky to have them as seasonal visitors to many areas in eastern Washington.

The Black-necked Stilt is an elegant bird. With its slender,



A pair of Black-necked Stilts walk slowly through the shallow water, looking for insects to feed on.

long black beak, dramatic black-above-white below color pattern, and long, rose-pink legs they seem to beg you to linger with your binoculars or scope.

These 14- to 15-inch-long birds feed visually. You will see them walk slowly along the edges of marshy areas and occasionally grab an insect from the surface. They will also plunge their beaks into the water to grab crustaceans and other aquatic organisms.

They are one bird that may be increasing in number due to increasing habitat created by dikes, flooded fields and sewage ponds. Climate modeling by the Audubon Society shows their range expanding into Nebraska,

the Dakotas and north into Canada with a three-degree warming.

Black-necked Stilts nest on the ground, often on small islands or clumps of vegetation. They are often seen in the company of American Avocet and may mix nesting in the same area. When you see a Black-necked Stilt (or several) you should quickly start looking for the American Avocet to enrich your time out birding.

Like most shorebirds, Black-necked Stilts will tend to be wary of your presence. However, if you sit still long enough, they may move in close to you.

I sat on the ground next to a small pond and just watched the birds for about 30 minutes. My

camera was ready when they got closer and began parading back and forth in front of me. It was wonderful to watch them up close and to have multiple photo opportunities.

May is a premier time to be out birding. When you get your fill of warblers and other small migrant songbirds (is that possible?), grab your lunch, camera and binoculars and go for some early-day viewing of long-legged shorebirds on the vernal ponds in central Washington.

When you find Stilts, look for Avocets and other seasonal shorebirds. Be prepared to spend enough time to watch them all.

Good luck!