Wilson’s Phalaropes at Great Salt Lake

» Global population estimated at 1.5 Million (2006)
» Great Salt Lake hosts the largest fall concentration in the world, representing 33-40% of the population (500,000-600,000 individuals (1999))
» Rely heavily on brine flies of all life stages as a food resource while staging on the South Arm (aka Gilbert Bay) of Great Salt Lake in the fall (July-Aug.)

» During breeding season, and to a lesser extent in the fall, feed on other invertebrates in freshwater wetlands and less salty bays of Great Salt Lake
» Continuing low water levels and increasing salinity of the South Arm can adversely affect the overall food chain including brine flies, which could have serious implications for a significant portion of the Wilson’s Phalarope population.

Wilson’s Phalaropes are open-water specialists, and unlike most other shorebirds, swim on the surface of the water and actively feed on aquatic invertebrates. In migration, this species congregates in large numbers on open shallow-water hypersaline lakes. As lakes in the Great Basin are threatened with loss of freshwater inputs, it will become increasingly important to maintain a network of high-value saline wetlands to support this and many other western shorebird species.

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Photo: Maina Handmaker

Photo: Max Malmquist
Habitat Attributes

Water

- Depth: 0-30 cm
- Salinity: Saline and hypersaline lakes – within a certain range of salinity that sustain brine flies and shrimp
- Quality: Selenium and mercury are a concern

Landscape

- Open-water specialist, rarely found on land in migration
- Require a network of saline lakes

Vegetation

- Feed and roost in open water and avoid areas with thicker vegetation

Timing

- Spring: April to May
- Fall: Mid-June to September

Diet

- Brine fly, other invertebrates
- Birds spin to create a vortex that draws invertebrates to the surface

Predators

- Peregrine Falcons, Prairie Falcons, Northern Harriers, Merlin and Short-eared Owls

Soil

- Open water, drying mud

Habitat Class

- Saline and hypersaline lakes
- Sometimes flooded meadows, alkaline ponds, coastal estuarine marshes, and sewage pond

Size

- Length: 22-24 cm
- Weight: 38-110 g