

The Art of Shorebird Decoys

Theme: Natural History

*Author: Dale Rosselet
Environmental Education Coordinator
New Jersey Audubon Society
Center for Research and Education
Goshen, NJ*

Subject Areas

Science, Social Studies, Art

Duration

Two class periods of 45 minutes

Setting

Classroom

Skills

Interpreting, identifying, classifying

Charting the Course

Traditional uses of the Delaware Bayshore are an integral part of the film *Down Jersey* and exposure to them will provide students with a better understanding of both the people and the region.

Vocabulary

Shorebird, decoy, utilitarian, millinery, transients

Correlation to New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards

Visual and Performing Arts

1.5 (3, 6, 8)

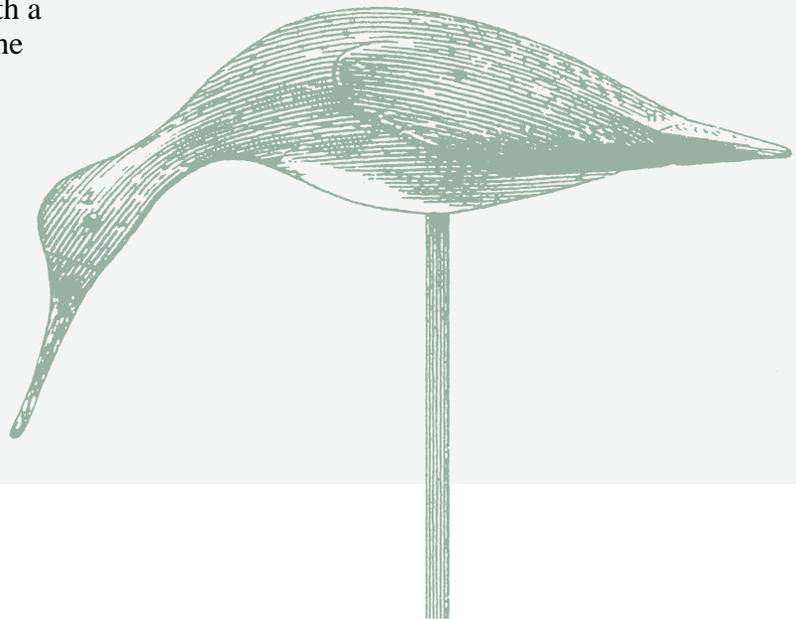
Science

5.12 (2, 3, 4, 6)

Social Studies

6.2 (1, 3)

6.5 (10)



The Art of Shorebird Decoys

■ Objectives

Students will:

1. Describe why shorebirds were hunted
2. Explain how shorebird decoys were used (historically)
3. Demonstrate an understanding of decoys from utilitarian to art form

■ Materials

Shorebird templates

Cardboard and/or mat board (or wood)

Popsicle sticks

Tape and/or glue

Crayons, markers, paint

Bird identification books

Scissors or utility knife

■ Making Connections

The Southern New Jersey Delaware Bayshore has always been known for its concentration of migratory shorebirds. The historical practice of hunting them and using decoys is an integral component of the unique flavor of the region.

■ Background

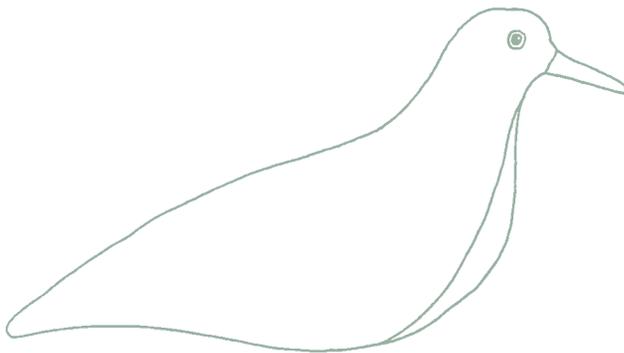
Excerpts from *Working Decoys of the Jersey Coast and Delaware Valley* by Kenneth L. Gosner, 1985, Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corporation, from pages 161-167.

Shorebird decoys, also called “snipe stools” hold a special appeal. These are the decoys intended to lure the different kinds of plovers, sandpipers, and their variously named relatives. These decoys are valued not only for their aesthetic attributes, but they are also valued for their relative scarcity and assumed greater antiquity. The last open season on shorebirds other than upland species was in 1927, although at an earlier date complete or partial bans on interstate traffic of game birds and an increasing scarcity of many species due to hunting and nest robbing had put a crimp in snipe gunning.

Shorebirds come at a time in spring after most of the winter ducks have left and return again in late summer and early fall before waterfowl have appeared en masse. Thus, they provided game for the ardent hunter when other legitimate quarry were scarce. They were also hunted

for market, although their gustatory (taste) appeal is likely to vary both seasonally and with the species. The pioneer ornithologist Alexander Wilson had praise enough for the dowitcher, robin snipe, and black-bellied plover, but he qualified his enthusiasm for the willet and the curlews by saying that they were good later in the season but less so earlier, differences he attributed to changes in diet. Curlews, for instance, were “not so good,” in spring while they subsisted on animal food almost exclusively, but later, having fattened on a diet of berries, they were viewed in better light.

Shorebirds are found in New Jersey mainly as transients. Among the few exceptions is the willet, a species that breeds locally. It seems to be recovering in numbers and has spread from a limited refuge on the Delaware Bay shore to become common again on parts of the coast. The other New Jersey nesting species is the piping plover, a statewide and nationally endangered species. The piping plover is an open beach nester and habitat destruction and use continues to be the major cause of decreased numbers of these birds. Two other sandpipers, the so-called upland plover and the woodchuck, also breed in the state, but these upland birds were not hunted with decoys. Most other shorebirds are here but briefly while en route between summer breeding grounds and winter quarters. May is the prime month for them in spring migration, although the time for the different kinds extends from late April to early June.



Mud flats, marshy pools and banks, and sand bars rich in small burrowing and wavecast animals are prime shorebird habitats. Some birds, notably the sanderling, favor the oceanfront itself. In all these places, mixed flocks may be seen while the tide is down, feeding together with busy probings and frantic rushes along the foam line.

Species identification of the shorebird decoys is difficult at best. In their spring finery, the different kinds of sandpipers and plovers are nicely differentiated, but the fall plumages are another matter. At that time, identification often presents a stiff challenge to bird-watchers. The baymen, excellent practicing naturalists and observers though they were, did not aspire to great precision in painting fall plumages on their decoys. Nor was there a need for it, since these birds have a reputation for being easily decoyed.

■ Procedure

Collect the appropriate materials needed to make the shorebird decoys.

Suggestion: Grades 4 to 6 use cardboard or mat board - for older students, include the shop teacher and have students cut decoys from wood.

Warm Up

Have the students bring in pictures or samples of animal carvings. Discuss whether the carvings are realistic or a general impression of the animal. Discuss why people might carve an animal (utilitarian, hobby, make a living, etc.) Compare types of materials that people use to make their carvings.

The Activity

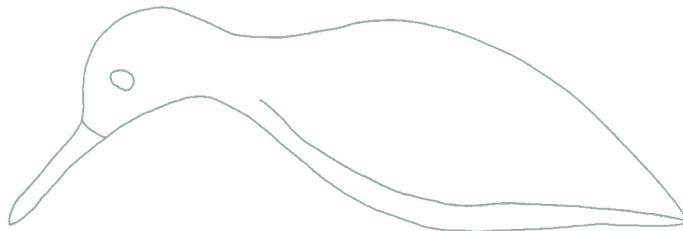
1. Read the following to set the tone for this activity:

“I prepare for a short shooting trip either to Atlantic City, West Creek or Long Branch on or about the 20th to the 25th of the month to find if the robin snipe have arrived and taken up their quarters on the innumerable bars and meadow islands for which the New Jersey coast is noted. As the sun rose, we saw countless numbers of robin snipe and bullhead plover, moving from the bars and flats, the rising tide driving them to the meadows to feed. Spreading our (blanket) in our hiding place, our stool birds having been artistically arranged ten or fifteen yards from us, we prepared ourselves for the robin snipe which were passing.”

Written in *Forest and Stream Magazine*, May 1876.

Discuss the following:

- What does a “shooting trip” mean? (It was common in the 1800’s for people to hunt shorebirds for a variety of reasons: food, the millinery trade [makers of women’s hats], and sport.)
- Explain “bars and meadow islands.” (Bars and meadow islands would be part of the vast system of mudflats and saltwater marshes along the New Jersey coast.)
- Why would the bird be driven to the meadows to feed with rising tide? (As high tide approaches, the mudflats that the birds are using get covered with water and they must relocate to higher ground.)
- What are stool birds? (Stool birds are the actual decoys that hunters used to entice shorebirds to land in a particular area.)
- Why would the stool birds have been artistically arranged? (Hunters would arrange their decoys to imitate the behavior of shorebirds that they want to attract.)



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Read the following:

Black-bellied, golden plovers and the lesser and greater yellowlegs were left as legal game until the fall of 1928. All shorebird gunning ceased at this time.

a. What might have been some of the reasons why shorebird hunting was ceased?

(Depletion of the population through sport hunting, commercial hunting, habitat alteration and development.)

b. What do you think has happened to the old decoys? (Many have become collector's items in antique shops, etc.) Why are there still decoys around? (Carvers continue the decoy tradition but have built upon that to create a variety of carving styles.)

2. Refer to the template sheets. Instruct students to color their sheet according to the bird's real colors (use bird identification guides).
3. Have each student construct a "decoy" using the appropriate materials (cardboard, wood, etc.) And paint and color the decoy according to their practice drawing.
4. Have the students do follow-up research on their shorebird so they can explain it to the class.

Wrap Up

Students prepare a short poem, description, notes about their shorebird and share them with the class.

Action

Students could develop and formulate a debate for and against shorebird hunting and hold a mock trial to discuss the issues and opinions about this topic.

A mud flat/saltmarsh habitat diorama could be created as a bulletin board or mural and all of the "decoys" displayed in their natural habitat.

Assessment

List three reasons why shorebirds were hunted. List three reasons why hunting was ceased.

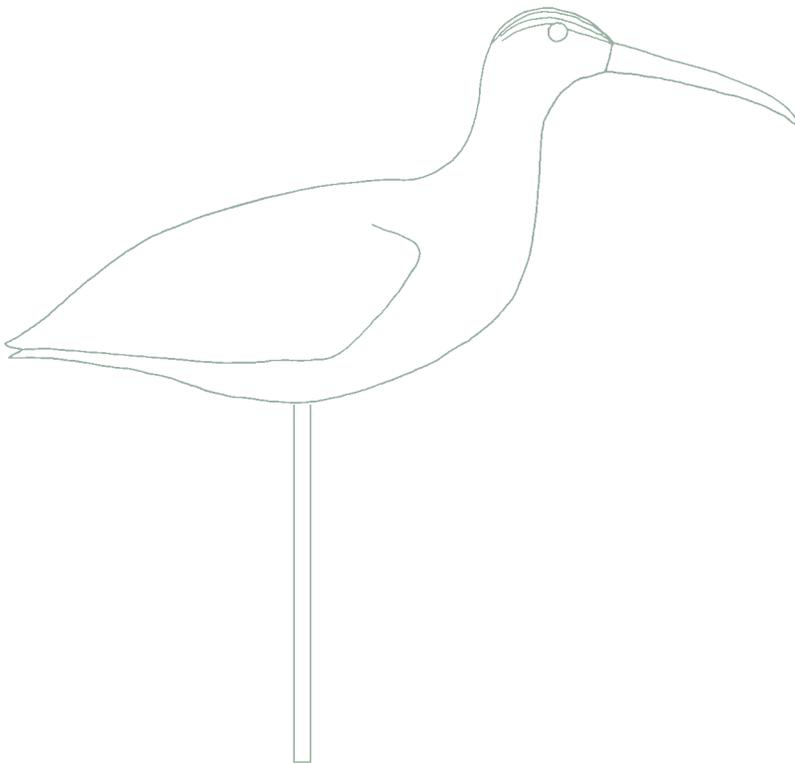
Extensions

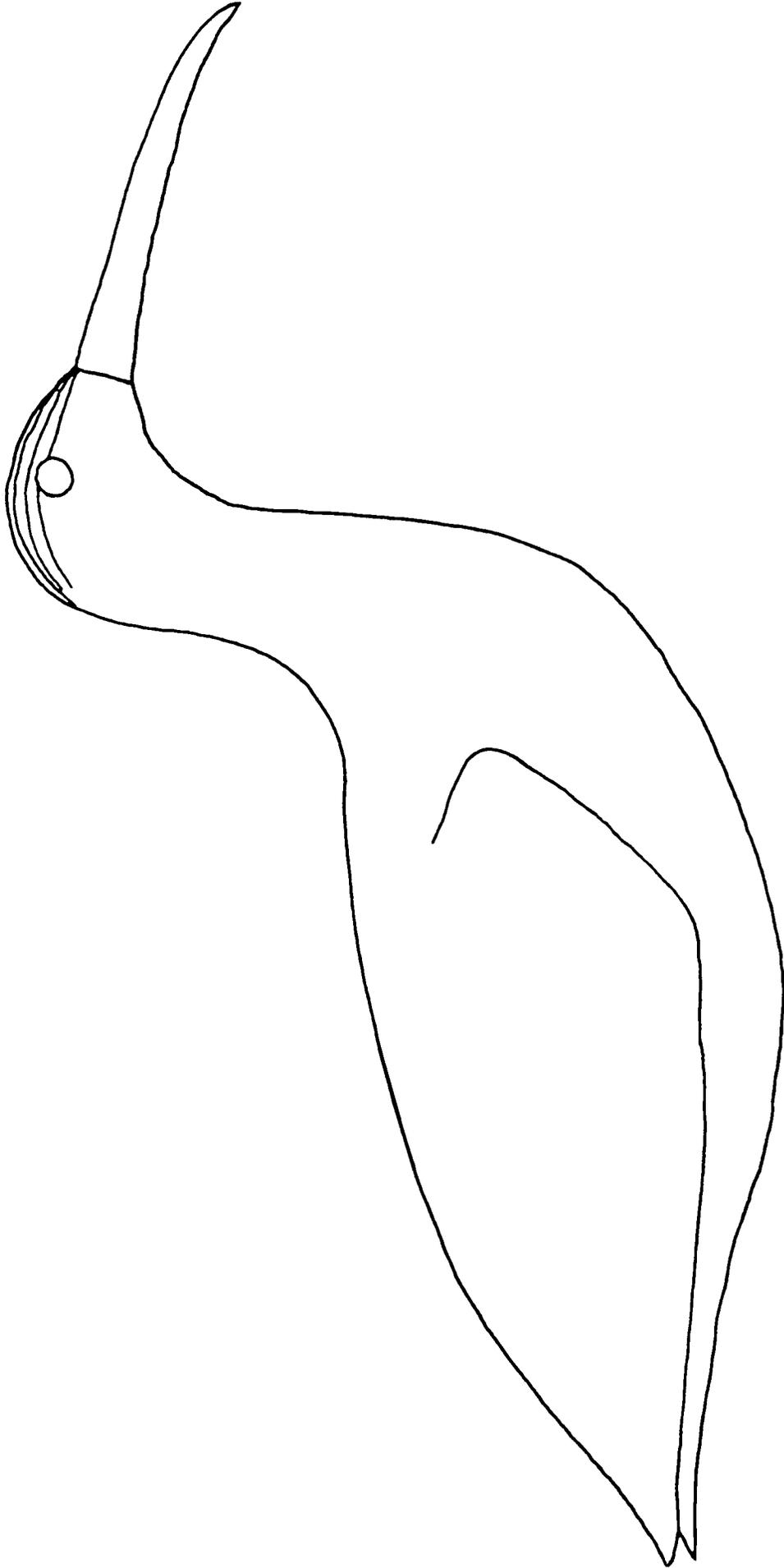
Invite a local decoy carver to come into class and speak about their art. Have students interview people that are descendents of carvers, have collections of decoys, etc.

Resources

Working Decoys of the Jersey Coast and Delaware Valley,
by Kenneth L. Gosner

1985, Rosemont Publishing
and Printing Corporation

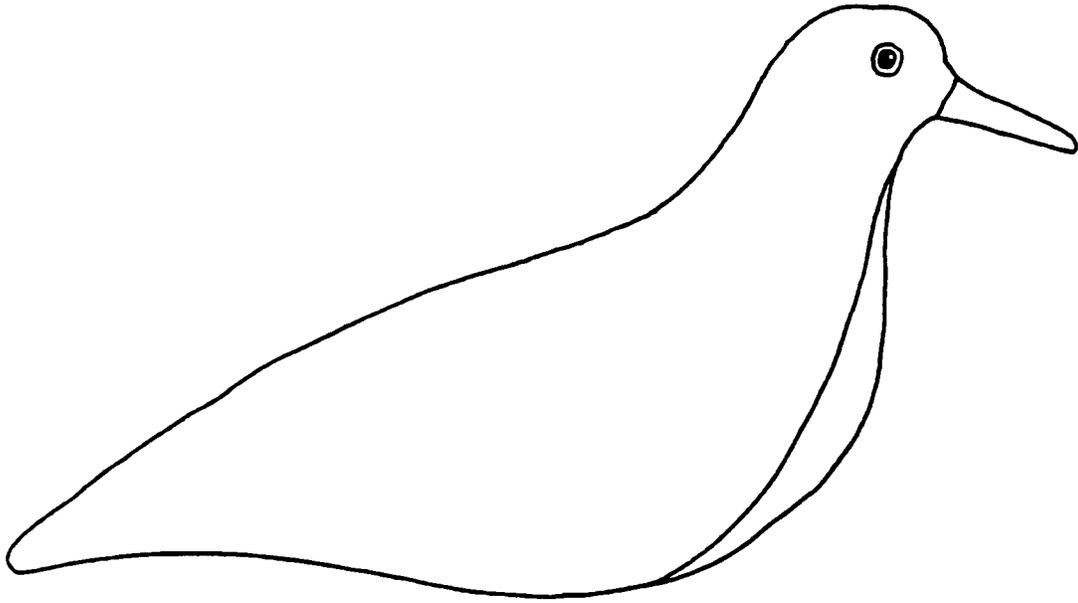




WHIMBREL

(Also called: curlew)

Mostly dark brown with mottling, the Whimbrel has a lighter chest than back. It has two white lines above its eyes and one on top of its head, giving the bird a striped look.

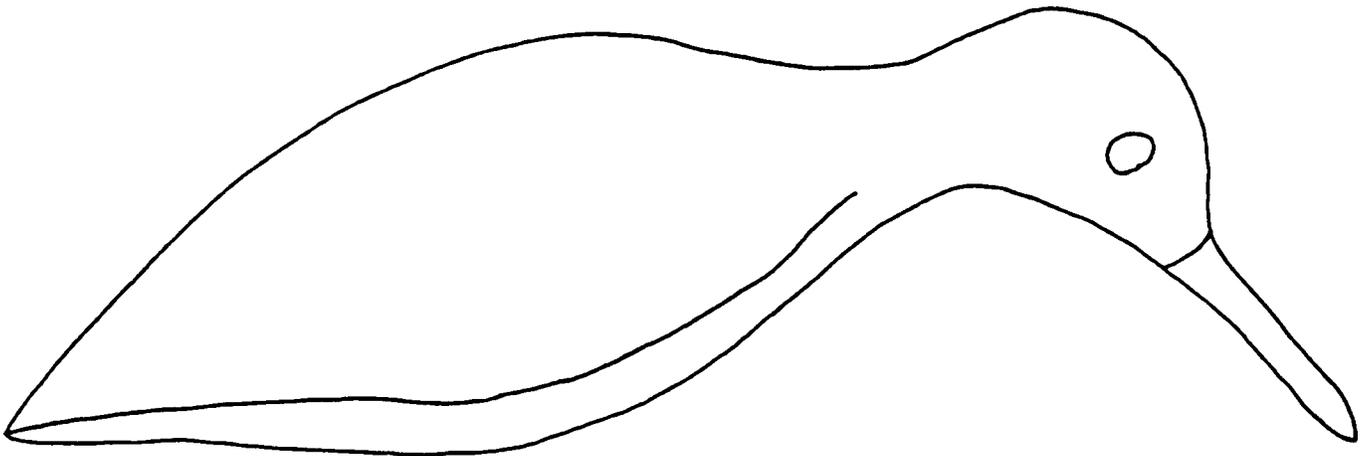


RED KNOT

(Also called: robin snipe, rosy plover, silver back)

This short-billed shorebird has a chestnut-colored breast in spring which gives way to white on the lower belly and undertail.

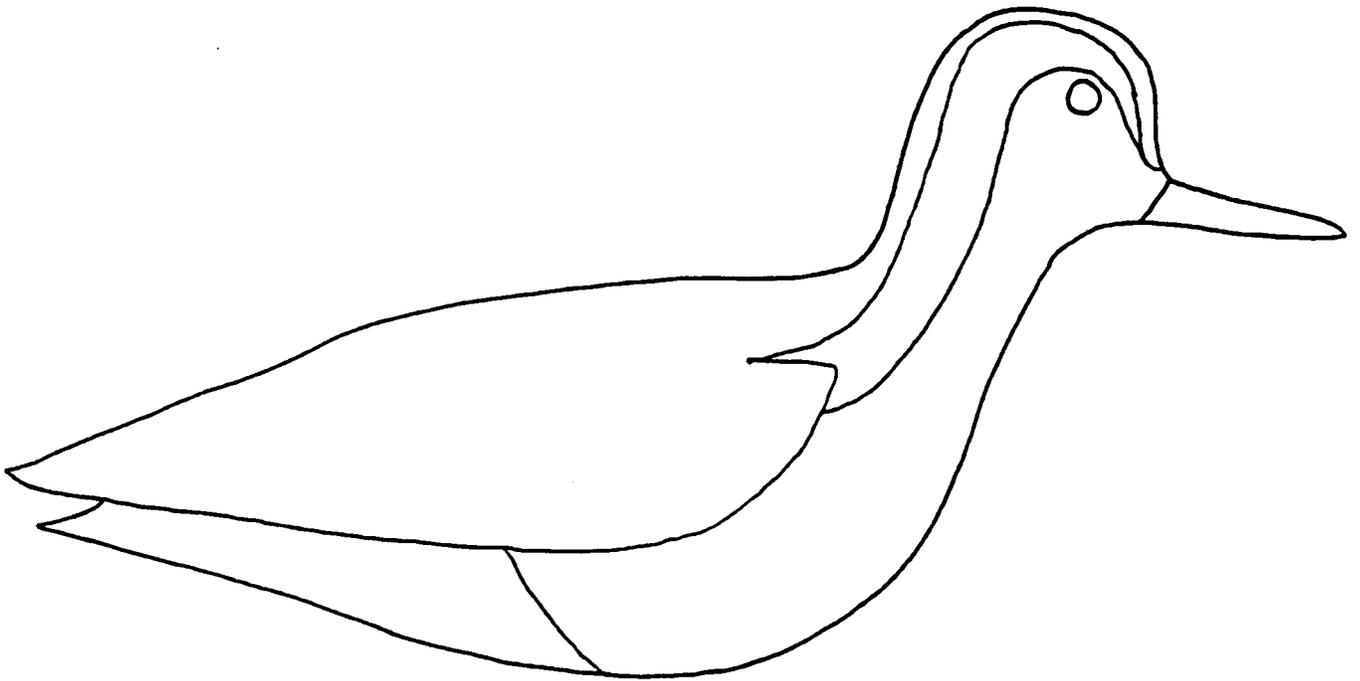
The back feathers are gray with chestnut edges.



YELLOWLEG

(Also called: tell-tale, great tattler, winter turkey-back)

A Yellowleg's head, neck, and upper breast are white with dark brown streaks. The bird's back is grayish-brown with white streaks. The wing tips are dark grayish-brown. The legs are bright yellow. Its bill has a dark tip and gray base. There is a narrow white ring around the eye.



BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER

(Also called: bull-head, beetle-head, black-breast)

During the spring season, a Black-bellied Plover has a black belly and face, a white head and a mottled black and white and gold back. It is white under and near the tail.