

Wilson's Phalarope

Phalaropus tricolor

Every year in late summer, migrating Wilson's Phalaropes put on an amazing show as enormous flocks amass on salty lakes of the West. There they spin round and round in the nutrient-rich waters, creating whirlpools that stir up invertebrates that will fuel their migration to South America. Females are rich peachy and gray, and are more colorful than the males. Females court and defend male mates—several per season—while males do most of the work of raising the young.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Wilson's Phalaropes are small shorebirds with long legs, slender necks, and very thin, straight, long bills. They have sharply pointed wings.

Color Pattern

Wilson's Phalaropes are grayish birds with cinnamon or rusty highlights especially on the neck. In the breeding season females are more colorful than males, with a dark line through the eye extending down the neck. The throat is white and the neck is washed rusty. Nonbreeding birds are pale gray above, white below, without the strong facial markings of other phalarope species.

Behavior

Phalaropes are the only shorebirds that regularly swim in deep water. They bob on the surface, often spinning in circles to bring small food items within reach of their slender bills.

Habitat

Wilson's Phalaropes breed in marshes of the Great Plains and intermountain West. They spend winters in South America, mainly on high lakes in the Andes. On migration, great numbers congregate on salty lakes and coastal marshes of the West.

Cool Facts

- While stopping over to molt on salty lakes in the West, Wilson's Phalaropes usually eat so much that they double their body weight. Sometimes they get so fat that they cannot even fly, allowing researchers to catch them by hand.

Measurements

Male

- Length - 8.7 - 9.4 inches
- Wingspan - 15.4 - 16.9 inches
- Weight - 1.3 - 3.9 ounces

Female

- Weight - 1.8 - 4.5 ounces

