

## *Tringa flavipes* (Lesser Yellowlegs)

Family: Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Snipe)

Order: Charadriiformes (Shorebirds and Waders)

Class: Aves (Birds)



**Fig. 1.** Lesser yellowlegs, *Tringa flavipes*.

[<https://birdsna.org/Species-Account/bna/species/lesyel/introduction>, downloaded 9 March 2017]

**TRAITS.** Lesser yellowlegs are medium-sized (24-26cm) sandpipers (Animal Diversity Web, 2017), with long slender necks and black slightly upturned bills. Its distinguishing feature and what gives it its name is its long yellow legs (Fig. 1). Males and females are similar in size with the females having the longer wingspan. Normally, lesser yellowlegs are grey on their backs, white with grey spots on their bellies and black primary feathers. During mating season their backs are grey, black and white and their feathers are mottled. Their bellies are completely white and the white of the necks are streaked with brown.

**DISTRIBUTION.** *Tringa flavipes* are found in South and Central America and the eastern and western Caribbean in winter. During the mating season, they are found in North America (Alaska and western Canada). Their natural flight passage to their mating grounds is over Central America (Fig. 2). On occasion, they are sometimes found in some places in Europe, South Africa and Australia.

**HABITAT AND ACTIVITY.** During the non-breeding season, they nest in wetlands; bogs, marshes, swamps, fens and peatlands (IUCN Red List, 2016). In the breeding season, they are found in freshwater marshes (Encyclopedia of Life, 2016). Lesser yellowlegs nests can be seen on elevated mudflats during winter, or in saltwater marshes or lagoons near the coast. Flooded agricultural plains are also ideal for lesser yellowlegs to nest. During spring and fall migration they can be seen inland at pools and temporary waters formed from melted snow and at coastal wetland habitats. Lesser yellowlegs build their nests in depressions in the ground and line them with dry grass or decayed leaves. Foraging areas includes freshwater lakes, saltwater marshes, sloughs, and estuaries (Animal Diversity Web, 2016). *Tringa flavipes* are mainly active during the day and can be seen searching for food with its bill in the shallow waters of its habitat (Encyclopedia of Life, 2016).

**FOOD AND FEEDING.** Lesser yellowlegs are carnivorous. Their primary diet consists of insects, aquatic worms and molluscs (Encyclopedia of Life, 2016). They sometimes eat small fish, snails, spiders, crustaceans and seeds (Animal Diversity Web, 2017). They walk around in the shallow water to find prey (Fig. 3). Using their long bills, they make short jabs or move their bill from side to side to pick at their prey. Foraging is primary done in shallow waters, however they are sometimes seen in water reaching their bellies. Since these birds travel in flocks there may be times when they compete for resources. They tend to show aggression when competing for food.

**POPULATION ECOLOGY.** *Tringa flavipes* travel in loose flocks and typically nest in loose colonies. In 2006 an estimated 400 000 were recorded in North America (Andres et al., 2012). The population is on a decline with reports from 2001 showing an estimate of 660 000 birds in North America. Surveys carried out in 2008-2009 also show population decline in South America. In the Caribbean and parts of South America these birds are hunted and its population is continuing to decline. In St. Martin, 348 birds were counted in January 2001 (IUCN, 2016). The general population trend of *Tringa flavipes*, is decreasing. Lesser yellowlegs nest near or with other shorebirds. These include greater yellowlegs, stilt sandpipers and semipalmated sandpipers (Encyclopedia of Life, 2016). Little is known about longevity and life expectancy of the lesser yellowlegs.

**REPRODUCTION.** Once a year lesser yellowlegs migrate to breeding habitats where around May they mate. They are seasonally monogamous. Once they mate, they make their nests in elevated areas; they may make several before deciding on the perfect one. Lesser yellowlegs lay an average of four eggs with a maximum of six eggs per season. Eggs hatch within 22-23 days. During the nesting period, the males guard the females from other males. The young can fly 23 days after hatching, during this time they are cared for by both parents. Most lesser yellowlegs wait two years before mating. Although it is customary to mate once a year, some individuals may skip a year (Animal Diversity Web, 2014).

**BEHAVIOUR.** During mating, *Tringa flavipes* form territorial pairs. After breeding, juveniles are the last to begin migration southward, while females who did not mate are the first. They fly in small mixed flocks ranging from 3-50 individuals. They walk gracefully and are excellent flyers (Fig. 4). They usually walk around in shallow waters but occasionally when the water reaches their bellies they are known to swim. Most of their time is spent searching in shallow water for food. When they sleep, their bills are tucked into the feathers while they stand on one leg. *Tringa flavipes* violently defend their nests and young from predators. They sometimes fight their predators together. When distressed, they bob their heads and call out to others. They sometimes dive at

predators or try to distract them away from the nest. Most females stay with their nest until the predators are no more than a metre away (Animal Diversity Web, 2014). Lesser yellowlegs communicate using various calls and visual displays. Some calls may indicate greeting or warning others are mating calls. During courtship, males sometimes put on a display which involves chasing prospective mates.

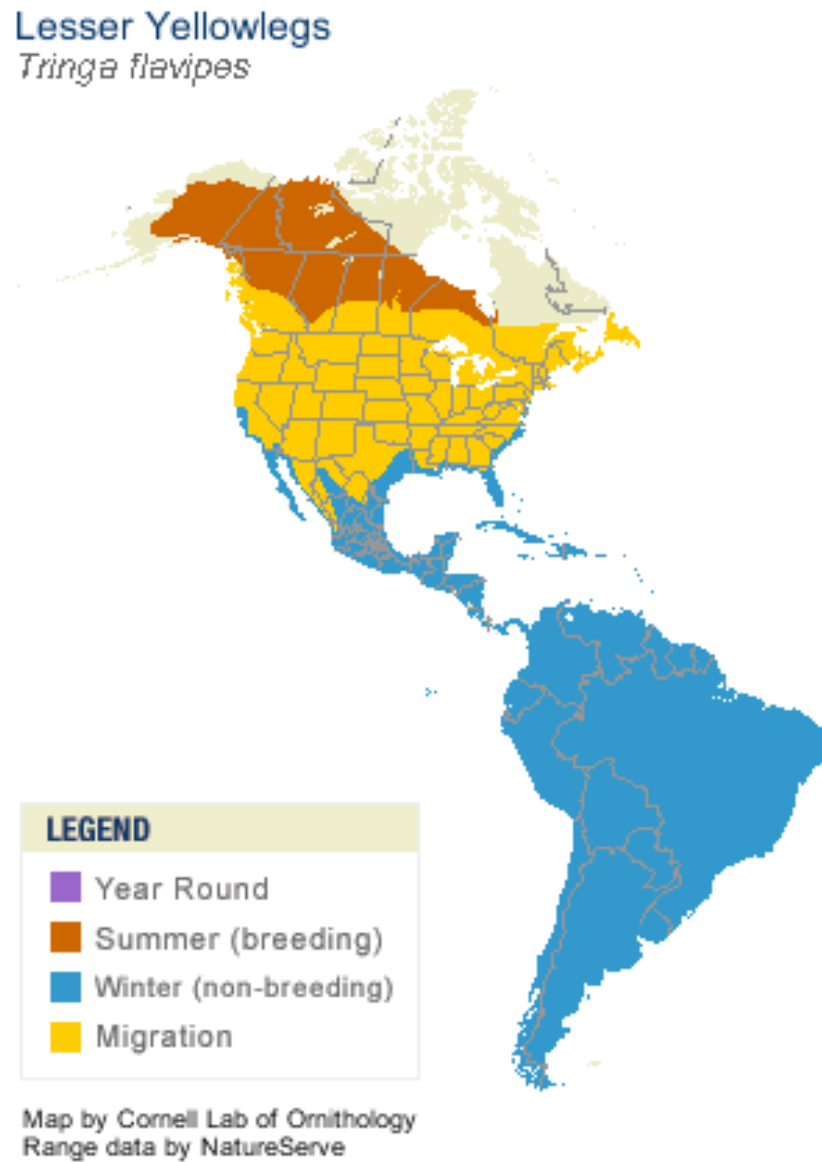
**APPLIED ECOLOGY.** Although its population is decreasing, *Tringa flavipes* is listed as Least Concern by IUCN (2016). This is because it can be found in a wide range of places. This species was previously hunted but is rarely hunted currently and not generally kept as pets.

#### REFERENCES

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**Fig. 2.** Distribution map of lesser yellowlegs.

[[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Lesser\\_Yellowlegs/id](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Lesser_Yellowlegs/id), downloaded 9 March 2017]



**Fig. 3.** Lesser yellowlegs foraging.

[<http://www.arkive.org/lesser-yellowlegs/tringa-flavipes/image-G58990.html>, downloaded 9 March 2017]



**Fig. 4.** Lesser yellowlegs in flight.

[<http://www.arkive.org/lesser-yellowlegs/tringa-flavipes/image-G58460.html>, downloaded 9 March 2017]

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