



International Shorebird Survey (ISS) Protocols

Updated July 2026

Thank you for participating in the International Shorebird Survey (ISS). Founded by Brian Harrington at the then-Manomet Bird Observatory in 1974, ISS has grown into one of the longest-running shorebird monitoring programs in the Western Hemisphere. ISS contributors have conducted more than 240,000 surveys and documented over 100 million shorebirds across the hemisphere. These observations have helped identify important migration sites, inform conservation planning, guide habitat management, and support scientific research, including studies documenting widespread shorebird population declines.

The following guidelines are designed to help you collect consistent, high-quality shorebird data while still enjoying your time in the field. Consistency between surveys is one of the greatest strengths of ISS, allowing scientists to detect changes in shorebird populations over time.

ISS uses **eBird** for data entry, allowing you to submit your shorebird surveys using the same system you use for your regular birding. After completing your checklist, simply select **International Shorebird Survey (ISS)** from the list of **your projects** before submitting your observations.

If you are new to eBird, instructions for entering data for both the website and app are here:

<https://support.ebird.org/en/support/solutions/folders/48000697107>

Detailed instructions for joining the ISS eBird project are at this link:

<https://www.manomet.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Entering-ISS-data-into-eBird.pdf>

What is an ISS survey?

Becoming an ISS contributor is straightforward. Choose a shorebird site, survey it repeatedly during migration, count all shorebirds observed within your designated survey area, and submit your data through eBird.

An ISS survey consists of visiting the same survey site throughout migration and counting all shorebirds observed within your designated survey area. The goal is to survey the same area, using approximately the same methods and spending approximately the same amount of time during each visit so that changes in bird numbers reflect changes in shorebird use rather than differences in survey effort.

We encourage contributors to select a nearby shorebird site that is not currently being surveyed. Before selecting a site, please check the ISS Mapping Tool to confirm that it is not already being surveyed. If possible, consider adopting a historical ISS site that is no longer active. Re-establishing surveys at historical sites is especially valuable because it allows comparisons with data collected years or even decades ago.

To maximize consistency over time, we ask that each ISS site be monitored by only one contributor or one coordinated group of contributors.

For a checklist to be an ISS survey, we ask that you count all of the shorebirds at your site to the best of your ability. Identification and estimating counts are covered below.

If you report all shorebirds but intentionally leave other bird species off your checklist, please select **No** when eBird asks whether you are submitting a complete checklist. Your shorebird data will still be included in the ISS database. If you report every bird species you were able to identify, please select **Yes**.

Survey Frequency

ISS relies on repeated visits to each survey site throughout migration.

We ask contributors to survey each site **at least three times during each migration season**, with one survey occurring during the period of peak migration. Additional surveys greatly increase the scientific value of the data, and many contributors find that visiting approximately every ten days is an achievable goal.

If your schedule doesn't allow that level of coverage, don't worry. Surveys conducted every few weeks, or even once per month, still provide valuable information.

	Southern United States, Mexico, and Caribbean		Northern United States and Canada	
	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall
Season Start	Mar 15	Jul 15	Apr 01	Jul 11
Peak Start	Apr 15	Aug 15	Apr 24	Aug 10
Peak End	May 12	Sep 15	May 16	Sep 10
Season End	Jun 05	Oct 31	Jun 15	Oct 25

Migration timing might vary according to your exact location. If you have questions about the best survey period for your area, please contact us.

This table is intended for North American contributors. Survey timing differs in Central and South America, so please contact us for regional guidance.

The most important elements of ISS participation are repeated surveys within a migration season and long-term continuity. Consistency is what makes the data powerful.

Survey Timing and Location

Whenever possible, conduct your survey under conditions that maximize your ability to count shorebirds accurately. For coastal sites, this is often during high tide when birds gather at roosting areas, although some sites are best surveyed during lower tides while birds are feeding. Whatever conditions you choose, try to survey your site under similar conditions during each visit. For inland wetlands, lakes, and ponds, note whether water levels appear **Normal**, **High**, or **Low**. Always record the duration of your survey accurately.

Counting Shorebirds

Whenever possible, record exact counts rather than estimates.

Large flocks are often difficult to count precisely, and estimating flock size is a skill that improves with practice. If you estimate the size of a flock, indicate in the **Species Comments** field that the count is estimated.

We encourage ISS contributors to review the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [How to Count Birds](#) guide, which includes practical techniques for:

- [Bird Counting Best Practices](#)
 - [Counting groups of one species](#)
 - [Counting large, stationary flocks](#)
 - [Counting large, moving flocks](#)
 - [Big numbers of multiple species](#)
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Species Identification

The goal of ISS is to record the most accurate representation of the flock that your observations support.

Large flocks do not require every individual bird to be examined individually. It is appropriate to estimate species composition based on careful sampling of the flock. However, if you cannot confidently determine the composition because of distance, lighting, flock movement, or other conditions, record birds at the most appropriate identification level rather than assuming they belong to the most common species.

eBird provides many useful identification categories, including:

- peep sp.
- yellowlegs sp.
- dowitcher sp.
- phalarope sp.
- *Calidris* sp.
- shorebird sp.

Use the most specific identification that your observations support. Conservative identification is an important part of good science, and recording uncertainty honestly produces more valuable data than reporting a level of certainty that was not actually achieved.

Recording Survey Conditions in eBird

When submitting data through the eBird app or website, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology has added supplemental checklist fields that allow ISS contributors to record important survey conditions alongside their shorebird observations. These fields provide valuable context that helps scientists better interpret and analyze your survey data.

Wind, Precipitation, and Tidal Stage

For **Wind**, **Precipitation**, and **Tidal Stage**, select the option that best represents conditions during most of your survey.

- **Wind:** Select the Beaufort wind category that best reflects conditions while you were actively surveying shorebirds.
- **Precipitation:** Select the category that best describes weather during your survey.
- **Tidal Stage:** For coastal surveys, select the tidal stage that best represents when most shorebirds were present (High, Falling, Low, or Rising). If your survey spans multiple tide stages, choose the one that best reflects when you observed most of the birds. This field is not applicable for inland surveys.

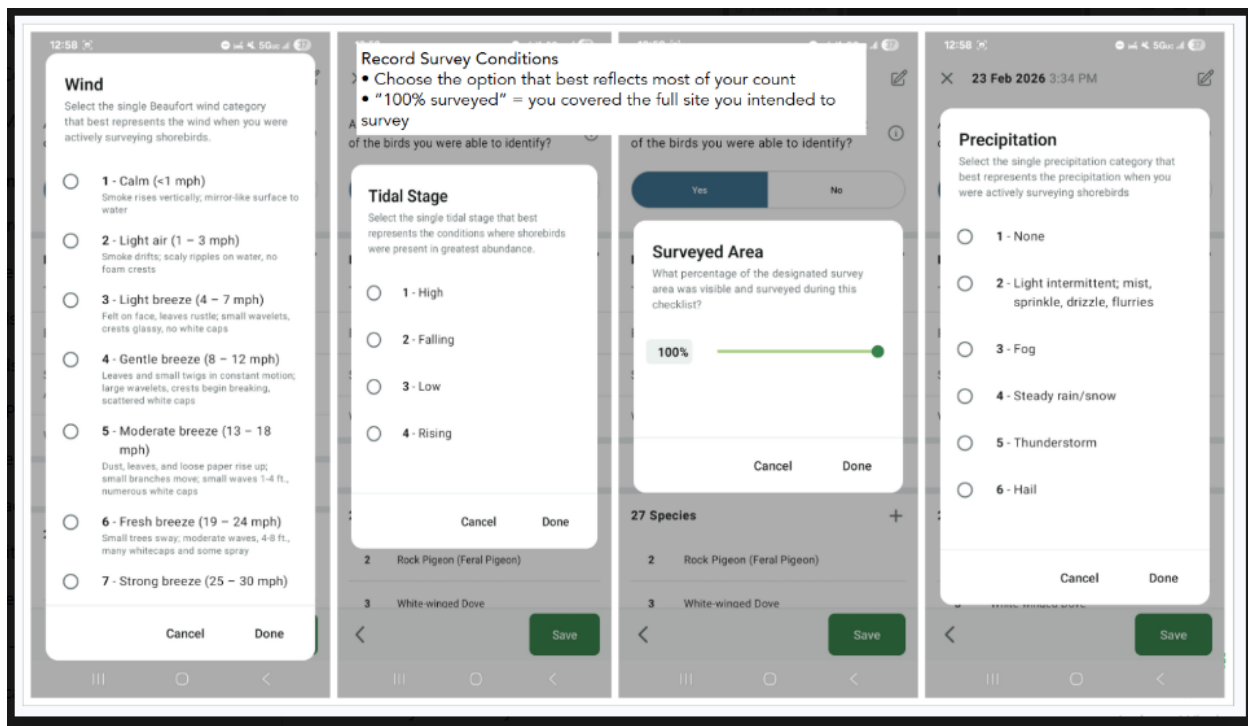
Surveyed Area

The **Surveyed Area** field is one of the most important pieces of information you can provide.

ISS analyses assume that each survey covers the same area, in approximately the same way, and in roughly the same amount of time. Selecting **100% surveyed** confirms that you completed your normal survey route and covered the entire area you intended to monitor.

Sometimes that isn't possible. Flooding, closed roads, temporary construction, dense vegetation, poor visibility, or severe weather may prevent you from surveying part of your site. In these situations, record the approximate percentage of your designated survey area that you were actually able to survey.

Recording this information allows us to distinguish changes in bird numbers from changes in survey coverage. It also means that partially completed surveys can still provide valuable scientific information.



Color-marked Shorebirds

While conducting ISS surveys, watch for flagged shorebirds whenever possible. Color flags provide valuable information about migration timing, stopover duration, survival, and movements between breeding, migration, and wintering sites. Whenever possible, photograph or carefully record flag colors and codes and report them to <https://bandedbirds.org/> or <https://www.reportband.gov/>

These observations complement ISS count data by helping researchers understand how individual birds use important stopover sites.

ISS Site Documentation

The ISS Site Information Form and Site Report

In the early years of ISS, Brian Harrington asked contributors to provide more than shorebird counts. Contributors also submitted descriptions of their survey locations, including habitat characteristics, disturbance levels, management practices, and detailed explanations of the areas

they surveyed. This information helped ensure surveys remained consistent over time and allowed scientists to better interpret changes in shorebird numbers.

When ISS transitioned to digital data entry through eBird, submitting count data became much easier. However, this important site-level information was no longer collected systematically.

Why Site Information Matters

One of the fundamental assumptions of ISS is that the same area is surveyed in approximately the same way during each visit. Without documentation describing a survey location, it becomes much more difficult to:

- Verify that the same area is being surveyed over time.
- Maintain consistency when a new observer takes over a site.
- Compare survey sites of different sizes or habitats.
- Incorporate habitat characteristics, management, and disturbance into future analyses.

Providing this information helps preserve the long-term scientific value of your surveys and makes them more useful for future researchers.

The ISS Site Information Form

The ISS Mapping Tool now includes an **ISS Site Information Form** that allows contributors to document the characteristics of their survey locations. Once submitted and reviewed, this information becomes part of the permanent ISS site record and is displayed through an accompanying **ISS Site Report** on the Mapping Tool.

The form allows contributors to document information such as:

- Description of the survey area
- Habitat types
- Access information
- Ownership and management
- Typical disturbance levels
- Restoration activities, if applicable
- Survey notes and other information that helps define how the site is monitored

Each submission is reviewed by the ISS team before being added to the database. Once approved, the information becomes available to future observers, researchers, and conservation partners, helping ensure continuity for years to come.

The form takes approximately **10 to 15 minutes** to complete and only needs to be submitted once for each survey site unless conditions change substantially.

Accessing the Site Information Form

1. Visit the ISS Mapping Tool:

<https://www.manomet.org/iss-map/>

2. Use the dropdown menus to select your country and region, then click **Show Map**.
3. Zoom to your survey site and click the site's hotspot marker.
4. In the information window:
 - Click **ISS Site Report** near the top of the window to view an existing report, if one has already been submitted.
 - Click **Site Information Form** near the bottom of the window to complete a new form or update an existing one.
5. Log in using your email address and complete the form.

Once approved, your submission becomes part of the permanent ISS database and is displayed through the ISS Mapping Tool as ancillary information supporting your survey data.

Additional Notes

- Photograph unusual species whenever possible.
- Record unusual disturbance events or other important information in your checklist comments.
- Continue submitting surveys even if bird numbers are low. Surveys during poor migration conditions are just as valuable as surveys during peak migration.
- If conditions at your survey site change substantially over time, including restoration projects, habitat loss, or access changes, please update your ISS Site Information Form.

Additional Resources

ISS Data Entry Guide

Step-by-step instructions for joining the ISS eBird project and submitting ISS surveys.

<https://www.manomet.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Entering-ISS-data-into-eBird.pdf>

ISS Mapping Tool

View survey results, complete Site Information Forms, and access Site Reports.

<https://www.manomet.org/iss-map/>

International Shorebird Survey

Learn more about ISS with links to protocols and newsletters.

<https://www.manomet.org/project/international-shorebird-survey/>

Thank You

Every ISS survey contributes to one of the longest-running shorebird monitoring programs in the Western Hemisphere. Whether you survey your site three times each season or every week for decades, your observations help improve our understanding and conservation of migratory shorebirds.

Thank you for being part of the International Shorebird Survey. Your time in the field is making a lasting contribution to shorebird conservation.