



# Mud Glorious Mud



## Birds Come From All Directions to Enjoy the Tasty Treats Hidden Beneath the Mud

In late summer, fall, and winter, reservoir levels in the Tennessee River Valley drop drastically to expose acres of mudflats. Although unsightly to some, these areas are rich in prey for a large variety of migrant and wintering birds creating an all-you-can-eat buffet that is hard to resist—at least for the birds.

## Changing Water Levels

In late summer the Tennessee Valley Authority begins to release water from its series of reservoirs along the river. This release alters bird habitat quite radically throughout Northern Alabama. Although the timing of low water levels does vary, when it coincides with shorebird migration, the result can be spectacular. Hundreds of shorebirds of various species take advantage of this rich habitat. Wading birds such as herons and egrets also benefit greatly at this time. Later in the year, ducks and gulls take advantage of the shallow waters.



Great Egret/Walt Burch

## Wading Birds

Hérons and egrets hunt in shallow water for frogs, snakes, crayfish, and small fish. The large expanse of shallow water at the end of the summer can produce spectacular birding when large concentrations of young wading birds flock to the pools.



Greater Yellowlegs/Jeff Nadler

## Sandpipers

The Sandpiper family (*Scolopacidae*) is the largest group of shorebirds as well as the most variable. For a novice, distinguishing between sandpipers can be a somewhat daunting task since many species are very similar. Easy groups to separate include the yellowlegs, the dowitchers, and peeps. Peeps are the smallest and most confusing group of sandpipers. The brownish Least Sandpiper is the only commonly encountered peep in Alabama with yellow legs.



Killdeer/Terry Hartley

## Plovers

While many people are familiar with Alabama's most common resident plover, the Killdeer, there are several other species that migrate through the area. The Semipalmated Plover is similar to the Killdeer, but is slightly smaller, with only a single black breast band. Other plovers such as American Golden and Black-bellied may be found in more vegetated areas and short grass fields.



Adult Bonaparte's Gull/Cornell Lab of Ornithology, J. Surman

## Gulls

Another frequent visitor to the mudflats is the Bonaparte's Gull. These gregarious birds find easy pickings in the shallow waters nearby and can often be seen loafing on the exposed mud. Check these flocks carefully for any vagrant gulls that may join them.

## One of These Birds is Not Like the Others

The biggest thrill of scanning mudflats for shorebirds is discovering a species that does not regularly occur in the area. Since shorebirds travel great distances during migration, it is not uncommon for a number of vagrants to turn up almost anywhere.

- **American Avocet** - With its characteristic upturned bill, black and white wings and golden brown neck, it is hard to mistake this handsome bird with others. The closely related Black-necked Stilt is also a rare possibility.
- **Ruddy Turnstone** - This small sandpiper is seen along the coast, although uncommon sightings do occur inland. Ruddy Turnstones are a warm reddish color as their name suggests. Their short wedge-shaped bills are used to turn over stones in search of prey.
- **White-rumped Sandpiper** - This is one of the larger peeps but can still cause serious confusion when mixed in with other small sandpipers. Fortunately, when in flight, its white rump is diagnostic of the species.