***SPECIES OF THE MONTH***

# WILSON'S PHALAROPE

JULY 2026

Wilson's Phalarope (female), Ashurst Lake, Coconino County, 10 May 2026. Photo by Tonie Hansen

In spring migration in Arizona, the largest and most colorful Wilson's Phalaropes (*Phalaropus tricolor*) are the females. This, however, is not the only reversal of expected sexual roles. When they reach their breeding grounds in the Great Plains and Great Basin regions of northwestern United States and western Canada, each female mates with a male, typically lays 4 eggs, and may move on to mate with 1 or 2 other males. When she is done laying eggs, she departs by mid-June for staging areas at hypersaline lakes in western United States (e.g., Great Salt Lake, Utah; Mono Lake, California, and Lake Abert, Oregon). Meanwhile, the males incubate the eggs and care for the nestlings. Males depart for the staging areas after nesting, followed later by the juvenile birds. At these staging areas the phalaropes undergo a premigration molt. They also put on critical weight feasting on the saline lakes' abundant crustaceans and insects, which include brine shrimp, brine flies, and alkali flies.

After leaving staging areas, some southbound birds may make a nonstop trip to South America, where they winter. Other birds, however, stop briefly at small wetlands in the U.S. southwest and lagoons on the Pacific coasts of Mexico and California. In Arizona, Wilson's Phalaropes are considered to be common transients as they pass through in spring and fall migration. The only confirmed breeding in Arizona were several males tending nests at Pintail Lake near Show Low, Navajo County, in June 1981 and June 1982.

Wilson's Phalaropes have a unique feeding behavior. Unlike most shorebirds, they are highly aquatic doing most of their foraging while swimming. They are often observed spinning in the water using their lobed toes to create a vortex that brings up food which they pick off the surface with their long, pointed bills. Two other phalarope species also migrate through Arizona—the Red-necked Phalarope (*P. lobatus*) and the Red Phalarope (*P. fulicarius*). In all plumages, in flight, the white rump and plain wings (lacking a white stripe) distinguish the Wilson's from the other species. In nonbreeding plumage, Wilson's can be distinguished from the other phalaropes by the long thin bill, an indistinct face pattern without a black mask, and plain upperparts. The nonbreeding adults and juveniles also have taller yellow legs, distinct from the shorter black legs of the other phalaropes (in all plumages).

Although Wilson's Phalaropes have a broad range and a large global population, they remain vulnerable to sharp declines because the small number of saline lakes where they stop over during migration are threatened. The diversion of water from these lakes for agricultural irrigation is destroying this food-rich habitat that phalaropes and other species depend on for migration. In January 2026, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced a 90-day finding that triggered a 12-month review and scientific analysis to determine if listing the Wilson's Phalarope as a threatened species is warranted.