

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE PEREGRINE VISITS: A MARBLED GODWIT'S STEALTH DEFENSE

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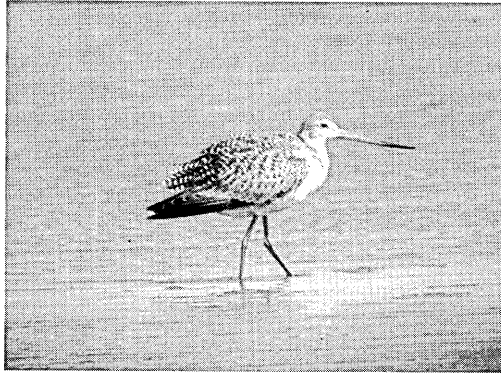
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On 14 Sep 1995 my wife, Birgit, and I, observed a notable instance of defensive behavior by a Marbled Godwit (*Limosa fedoa*) in response to a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*). Using a spotting scope and binoculars, we studied this behavior from the parking lot immediately east of the south end the Ponquogue Bridge, near Shinnecock, Suffolk Co., NY. The drama took place on an islet a short distance east of that bridge and in the waters of the bay immediately west of that islet. The wind was northwest, which can be propitious for raptors at that time of year, and on this occasion we observed 3 Merlins (*Falco columbarius*) and 1 Peregrine Falcon (but not simultaneously). The Marbled Godwit was present when the Peregrine appeared, and it was the odd behavior of the godwit at this time that alerted us to the approach of this particular raptor.

The Marbled Godwit was initially spotted relaxing on the upper shore on the southwest side of the islet. At one point some of the smaller shorebird species appeared to become restless, and we noticed some very peculiar behavior from the godwit. It was moving relatively slowly and very stealthily, with apparent deliberation, directly toward the nearest water, all the while keeping a very low profile. Having noticed this seemingly stealth behavior, we began a scan for a raptor. Almost immediately we spotted a Peregrine some distance to the east, near the marina on the east end of the barrier island, heading west-northwest, apparently for a menu reading of the birds on the islet. What follows are our field notes made right after this incident, unedited but for the addition of one comma and the correction of one misspelling:

“When Peregrine appeared, Godwit moved slowly and deliberately from beach into water. Then, while Peregrine was almost directly overhead, Godwit hunkered down in water until only its back, top of head, and base of bill remained unsubmerged. It looked like a rock in the water. Occasionally it would cock its head sideways, bringing most of its bill out of the water, and would scan sky for Peregrine. It was perhaps about 4-5 min. after the Peregrine left before Godwit began to stand erect. It then cautiously left water and went onto the beach.”

The godwit's body was, as it hid in the water, oriented east-west, with head toward the west. For most of the time when the Peregrine was essentially over the island, the godwit kept its bill largely submerged in the water, almost up to the nostrils. When, briefly, it cocked its head to get a better view of the



Marbled Godwit - 8 Sep 2000 - Mecox Bay
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Peregrine as the raptor passed very close at hand (and at the highest angle of elevation), substantially more of its bill would emerge above water. Those were the only times when it looked like much other than a large elongated rock or tiny island (its back) close behind a small rock (its head and bill base). The godwit appeared to crouch, unmoving, in this position (except for the head cocking) until the Peregrine departed. This entire episode was unparalleled in our experience and left us admiring the proactive and highly effective defensive strategy of this Marbled Godwit. This was one outing in which we both deeply regretted not having a video camera at hand! Perhaps some readers have encountered this or similar defensive behaviors on the part of Marbled or other godwit species.

A. C. Bent, in his *Life Histories of North American Shore Birds* (Part I), quoted Hamilton M. Laing's 1913 account of having observed a flying Marbled Godwit that, being virtually exhausted from repeated pursuit by a Peregrine, then splashed into the water, thereby narrowly escaping capture (Bent, 1927, p. 284). Due to obscuring vegetation, Laing was unable to know whether the godwit actually had dived beneath the water to escape. The water-seeking behavior of the Marbled Godwit that we observed in September 1995 seemed more proactive in character. Its behavior seemed intended to avoid detection rather than representing an escape strategy.

The Shinnecock Marbled Godwit probably was fortunate to have initiated an effective stealth strategy immediately upon detecting the approach of the Peregrine, rather than taking flight. The latter can be risky business when the interloper is this very speedy raptor. This godwit had the good wits to know just what to do!

Literature Cited

- Bent, A. C. (1962). *Life Histories of North American Shore Birds* (Part I). New York: Dover. (Original work published 1927 as Smithsonian Institution United States National Museum *Bulletin* 142.)