NOTES

FIRST TWO RECORDS OF THE GREAT KNOT (*CALIDRIS TENUIROSTRIS*) FOR WASHINGTON

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ABSTRACT: We document the first two records of the Great Knot (*Calidris tenuirostris*) for Washington, which also represent the second and third records of the species during spring migration in the Pacific Americas Flyway south of Alaska. The first Great Knot, which was in breeding plumage, was observed 15–20 May 2024, the second, in basic plumage, 12–18 May 2026. Both were at Willapa Bay: the one in 2024 was seen initially south of the mouth of North River Cove and subsequently at Ellen Sands, a high-tide roost site. The one in 2026 was observed at Ellen Sands on four dates. It is likely that the two Great Knots overwintered in northwestern Mexico and migrated northward with Red Knots (*C. canutus*).

With an estimated population of 425,000 individuals in the East Asian–Australasian Flyway (Hansen et al. 2016, 2022), the Great Knot (*Calidris tenuirostris*) breeds, migrates, and winters entirely within the Eastern Hemisphere (Cramp and Simmons 1983). The species breeds in alpine areas in the northeastern Russian Arctic and spends the boreal winter along the coasts of Pakistan, southern China, southeast Asia, and Australia (Cramp and Simmons 1983, Tomkovich 1997, Lisovski et al. 2016). The Great Knot's major stopover sites in the East Asian–Australasian Flyway, notably those in the Yellow Sea, are well documented (Chan et al. 2019). Except in western Alaska, where the Great Knot occurs semi-regularly (Kessel and Gibson 1978, Roberson 1980, Kessel 1989, Paulson 1993, Gibson and Byrd 2007), vagrants to the Western Hemisphere have been documented rarely. Here we report on the first documented observations of the Great Knot in Washington.

On 15 May 2024, Anholt, Buchanan, Cox, and Loverti observed a Great Knot at Willapa Bay, Pacific County, Washington (Figures 1, 2). It was foraging with a flock of about 150 Red Knots (*C. canutus roselaari*) on silty mudflats approximately 800 m south of the east side of the mouth of North River Cove in the northern part of the bay (46.726° N, 123.880° W). We observed the Great Knot from 20 m with spotting scopes from an airboat stopped on the mudflats. We watched it for about 5 minutes until it departed with the Red Knots to a new foraging location. On 20 May 2024, Anholt observed it at Ellen Sands, a shoal on which shorebirds roost at high tide in northern Willapa Bay (46.672° N, 123.964° W), implying that it remained at Willapa Bay for at least 6 days.



FIGURE 1. Great Knot observed south of North River Cove, in Willapa Bay, Washington, on 15 May 2024. This bird was foraging with a group of Red Knots when first observed. For much of the time it was observed, its feathers were erected, as can be seen in the image.

Photo by Cameron Cox

On 12 May 2026, Buchanan, Hutcheson, Loghry, and Swift also observed a Great Knot at Ellen Sands (Figures 3, 4). When Hutcheson saw the bird initially, it alternated between roosting and foraging among a group of ≥100 Red Knots in the interior of the shoal. The knots remained at Ellen Sands throughout the high tide. During three subsequent visits to Ellen Sands on 14, 17, and 18 May, the Great Knot



FIGURE 2. Great Knot in flight at Willapa Bay, Washington, on 15 May 2024. This represents the first record for Washington and the second observation during spring migration in the Pacific Flyway south of Alaska.

Photo by Cameron Cox



FIGURE 3. Great Knot in flight at Ellen Sands, a shoal in northern Willapa Bay, on 12 May 2026. This represents the second record for Washington and the third observation during spring migration in the Pacific Flyway south of Alaska.

Photo by Liam Hutcheson

was always seen roosting with Red Knots, indicating a minimum stopover period of 7 days. It was not found on 19, 20, 21, or 26 May.

The Great Knot observed in 2024 was similar in size, profile, and posture to the Red Knots with which it was foraging, but its bill was slightly longer (Figures 1, 2). It was in alternate plumage and had several distinctive plumage features: the back and breast were heavily marked with black, darker than the head, nape, or throat; the belly was white with dark chevrons or triangles that were slightly more pronounced on the flanks than on the belly; and the scapulars had distinct rufous banding. The head had a mix of light and dark feathers that resulted in a moderate gray appearance. The Great Knot observed in 2026, in contrast, was in basic plumage. The belly was



FIGURE 4. Great Knot foraging at Willapa Bay on 14 May 2026. In contrast to the Great Knot observed in 2024, this individual was in basic plumage.

Photo by Jason Loghry

white with sparse dark gray spots and chevrons on the sides. The throat, nape, back, and ear coverts were finely speckled with dark gray and light markings. The crown was slightly darker than the nape. The scapulars and coverts were gray with white margins and dark central shafts. The coverts were heavily worn as in spring migrant Red Knots in western Washington (Figures 3, 4). Shorebird biologists working in the East Asian–Australasian Flyway examined our photographs and concurred that the knot observed in 2026 was in first-year plumage, having hatched in 2025 (D. Rogers, C. Hassell, P. Battley, pers comm.).

Battley et al. (2006) reported that Great Knots appear to undergo a presupplemental molt in the Yellow Sea before moving north to breeding grounds in northeastern Russia. During that time the rufous-colored scapulars increase through molt, and the breast darkens slightly because of wearing off of the white tips on the black feathers. The Great Knot we observed in 2024 did not appear to be in presupplemental molt, which would have made it look brighter (Howell 2010), nor were its white feather tips worn.

Great Knots are known to associate with other shorebird species—including the Red Knot—during the nonbreeding period (Choi et al. 2015). They consume a variety of food items, but bivalves are considered an important if not an essential food source (Zhang et al. 2011). Migrating Red Knots in Washington also appear to favor bivalves (J. Buchanan pers. obs.), and they and the Great Knot were actively foraging on bivalves when our first observation was made.

The Great Knot's status is of growing conservation concern. While some analyses indicate seemingly stable abundance, information from Australia is uncertain, possibly because of high variability in the data (Clemens et al. 2016). More recently, the International Union for Conservation of Nature listed the species' status as endangered (www.iucnredlist.org.). Since the turn of the century, sites of major migratory stopovers along the East Asian–Australasian Flyway (e.g., in Korea and China) have been substantially altered or degraded through elimination of vast amounts of coastal habitat (Choi et al. 2015, Moores et al. 2016, Studds et al. 2017). Moreover, annual survival rates of the Great Knots that migrate through the Yellow Sea have declined abruptly, presumably in response to habitat loss (Piersma et al. 2016, Peng et al. 2023).

South of Alaska, as of July 2026, there were two records of the Great Knot from British Columbia (13 May 1987 at Boundary Bay and 15 January 1998 at Iona Island; https://bcrarebirdrecords), one record from coastal Oregon during autumn migration (1–17 September 1990; https://oregonbirding.org), and single records from West Virginia (13 and 14 August 2007 from Winfield Locks; https://ebird.org/checklist/S18542374) and Maine (23 July 2016 from Seal Island National Wildlife Refuge; https://ebird.org/checklist/S30822170). The Washington Bird Records Committee reversed its decision on an earlier report from western Washington from 6 September 1979 (https://wos.org/records). That committee accepted the 2024 observation of a Great Knot in Washington, and its review of the 2026 report is pending. The Western Hemisphere's remaining records from spring and summer (Kessel and Gibson 1978, Roberson 1980, Kessel 1989, Gibson and Byrd 2007, https://eBird.org, accessed 23 July 2026) are from the coast of and islands in the Bering Sea. The records of the Great Knot from Washington are the first documented for the state and are the second and third spring records in the Western Hemisphere south of Alaska.

Although it is uncertain how the Great Knots made their way to Washington, the following hypothesis seems probable. Red Knots that migrate along the Pacific coast of North America breed in northwestern Alaska and at Wrangel Island, Russia (Carmona et al. 2013). The mainland coast of Russia near Wrangel Island is within or adjacent to the breeding range of the Great Knot (Tomkovich 1997, Lisovski et al. 2016). It seems likely that the Great Knots we observed joined Red Knots somewhere in the far north, perhaps at a staging area, and then migrated to overwintering areas in northwestern Mexico (Carmona et al. 2013) or elsewhere along the flyway. Given

that the timing of the Great Knot's northbound migration (Tomkovich 1997; but see Lisovski et al. 2016) is like that of the Red Knot (Buchanan et al. 2017) and both species prefer bivalve prey (Booth and Buchanan 2020), we might expect that Great Knots would migrate north with Red Knots or at least stop at locations they favor.

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