



# Montana Audubon

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## **Montana Audubon's Bird Conservation Program Update**

*(Summary of Accomplishments from August 2008 through October 2009)*

The long-term protection of birds, wildlife, and their habitats is a major goal of Montana Audubon. Our long-standing riparian, wetland and land use protection efforts continue to drive our successful conservation work. In the last few years, the Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program has become a vital tool as we work to integrate our policy and habitat protection efforts. The IBA Program is a global initiative to identify, monitor, and protect a network of sites critical for the conservation of birds. BirdLife International initiated the IBA program in Europe in the 1980's, and National Audubon began implementing the program in the US in 1995. Montana Audubon has spearheaded the IBA program in Montana since 1999.

IBAs help focus conservation efforts on the highest priority sites. The IBA concept is relatively simple: identify and map areas that sustain healthy populations of birds (especially rare and declining species), and then work to protect these sites. By focusing attention on those areas most critical for birds IBA conservation efforts play a key role in biodiversity conservation. Here we highlight our IBA program successes and bird conservation efforts during the past 15 months.

### **A note on Program Staffing**

Montana Audubon's Bird Conservation Program is staffed primarily by Amy Cilimburg, who serves as the (part-time) Director of Bird Conservation (the balance of her full-time position is devoted to Montana Audubon's Climate Change Campaign). In addition, Program Director Janet Ellis works extensively on stream and wetland conservation and wind siting issues, and both she and Executive Director Steve Hoffman often lend their expertise to our Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program. Montana Audubon's short-term staffing goal for the Bird Conservation Program is to add a half-time IBA Assistant. Longer term staffing plans include establishing Regional Bird Conservation Coordinators to work with Audubon chapters and local communities to implement priority conservation strategies that protect Important Bird Areas (IBAs) across Montana and integrate this program with our policy, education and other bird conservation efforts.

### **Sage Grouse/Sage-Steppe Important Bird Areas**

A century ago 16 million Sage-Grouse filled the western landscape. Today less than 200,000 grouse survive, *a reduction of 99%*. (The Sage-Grouse is currently under consideration for federal listing as a Threatened Species.) Fortunately, Montana still boasts some of the healthiest remaining Sage-Grouse populations on Earth.

In August 2008 five new sagebrush IBAs were approved—these IBAs encompass more than 6 million acres of public and private lands. We are conducting public outreach, and feature these IBAs on our website (with links to maps and site descriptions):

<http://mtaudubon.org/birds/sageiba.html>.



During the past year we have increased collaborative efforts to advance sagebrush habitat protection. Highlights include sharing our sage IBA boundaries with MT Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to assist with their development of Sage-Grouse Core Areas. (FWP’s Core Areas closely mirror our sage IBAs.) We have shared our sage-steppe IBAs with the Montana Natural Heritage Program, Western Governors’ Association, The Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and private land owners, and continue to work collaboratively to conserve these vital lands.

We are currently developing a brochure to help advance public understanding of the IBA program and how folks can help advance Sage-Grouse conservation in Montana. Additionally, we are working with an independent film-maker to produce a video to emphasize the value of sage habitat and describe impending threats to this endangered ecosystem. (Stay tuned this winter for both products.)

### **Oil and Gas Development**

Previous studies have shown severe adverse impacts to Sage-Grouse from oil & gas development. Hence, Montana Audubon is working to minimize these impacts in future developments. Last winter we collaborated with NWF to provide comments to Montana’s Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) on their oil and gas leasing proposals. Unfortunately our request was denied, but DNRC staff appreciated our input and agreed to work with us to address our concerns.

### **Windpower Siting**

Wind is an important component of renewable energy development in the US. Some places, such as agricultural and reclaimed mining lands, are entirely suitable for development, whereas other locales, due to concentrations of vulnerable wildlife, are not appropriate. Program Director Janet Ellis has been working to ensure appropriate siting and biological monitoring for all proposed wind development projects in Montana. Janet continues to work with all state agencies to develop guidelines for windpower siting to minimize wildlife impacts. ***Our goal is to discourage wind energy projects where there will likely be significant impacts to wildlife, and encourage wind projects on non-sensitive land (especially tilled agriculture land) to help build the low-carbon energy sources necessary to address climate change.*** Some of our specific accomplishments in 2009 are described below:



**Judith Gap Technical Advisory Committee (TAC).** The Judith Gap Wind Farm is Montana’s first large-scale wind development. Janet Ellis serves on the TAC, which has recommended extensive wildlife mortality studies. Those studies revealed fatality rates of 405 birds/year and 1,200 bats/year. Bat deaths were higher than predicted, and the company agreed to conduct additional studies in 2009.

**Wildlife Working Group for Wind Siting.** Based on experiences in other states we have established a Wildlife Working Group to make recommendations on wind siting in Montana. During the 2009 Montana Legislature we worked with numerous groups to pass a bill to establish voluntary “best management practices” for locating wind facilities to minimize impacts on wildlife. Although the legislation was passed in the MT House of Representatives, it was defeated on a tie vote in the MT Senate.

**Crucial Areas Mapping.** We are working to ensure that the Montana FWP includes wind siting information in their “Crucial Areas and Corridors Initiative” planning process. This process includes mapping where development projects—including wind and other energy development—can proceed with minimal wildlife concerns, as well as areas wind companies should avoid because of crucial wildlife habitat. ***Montana Audubon’s 39 Important Bird Areas have become a key resource in the development of these crucial area maps.***

### **New Important Bird Areas**

Montana Audubon recently gained approval for a 6th sage-steppe IBA in the upper Madison Valley. The 5,000-acre **Sun Ranch IBA**, entirely on private land and under conservation easement, was designated specifically for the uncommon and declining Brewer’s Sparrow. In addition, we are pleased to report the nomination and approval of Flathead Lake’s 3,500-acre **North Shore IBA** – Montana’s 39<sup>th</sup> IBA! This newest IBA provides outstanding breeding and stopover habitat for a tremendous abundance and diversity of waterfowl and other water-dependent birds.

### **IBA Website Enhancements**

We continue to update our website and have added several pages to highlight specific IBAs. We now feature five IBAs and continue to develop these pages (<http://mtaudubon.org/birds/areas.html>).

### **Public and Auduboner IBA Outreach**

We have given numerous IBA slideshows to Audubon chapters across Montana. This has generated considerable interest in our IBA program. As a result many chapters are “adopting” local IBAs, making plans to conduct monitoring and outreach, and working to protect these critical sites.

The Madison Valley IBA brochure was printed in late summer and is being widely distributed (available for download: <http://mtaudubon.org/birds/madison.html>). We are now crafting text, maps and graphics for two new IBA brochures: one for our sage-steppe IBAs and one for all 39 Montana IBAs. We also helped develop and pay for printing costs for the new Bitterroot River IBA brochure: <http://mtaudubon.org/birds/broot.html>.

National Audubon recently awarded official “Globally Significant” IBA status to 11 Montana IBAs. We have begun to promote these ***Globally Significant IBAs*** through our website, in Montana Audubon newsletter articles, and through our slideshows to chapters.

## **General Bird Conservation and Partnerships**

In the past year we increased our collaborative work with the newly energized Montana Bird Conservation Partnership. Highlights include these citizen science and education opportunities:

### **2009 Flammulated Owls Surveys**

With funding from MT FWP, and in collaboration with the University of Montana's Avian Science Center and Helena National Forest, Montana Audubon continued this volunteer “citizen science” program (for the third consecutive year) to survey for Flammulated Owls (a nationwide species of concern). In 2009 42 volunteers detected a total of 52 owls!

### 2009 Waterbird Surveys

Many western states have identified a priority need to gather information on colonial waterbirds (including grebes, terns and pelicans). Montana Audubon is working with FWP and US Fish & Wildlife Service on a 3-year project to determine their status, identify conservation issues, and refine conservation actions for Montana. *Results from 2009 surveys were disappointing, with nest counts for many species extremely low.* Surveys in 2010 and 2011 are now being planned to better assess the status of these species of concern.



### 2009 Bridger Raptor Migration Count

Montana Audubon has initiated a new partnership with HawkWatch International (HWI) to continue raptor migration monitoring in the Bridger Mountains (near Bozeman, just above Bridger Bowl Ski Area). *This is the most important Golden Eagle population monitoring site in the Western US.* The purpose of the project is to assess the health and trends of migratory raptor populations using the Bridger Mountain Flyway, with an emphasis on the Golden Eagle. This project was begun by HWI in 1991 and has continued every autumn. These annual counts are essential to determine regional trends in Golden Eagle populations.



### Montana's Bird Distribution Project

As we work to prepare for the new 7th edition of P.D. Skaar's *Montana Bird Distribution* in 2011, we are actively recruiting folks to "adopt" specific areas in the state, called "quarter-quarter latilongs". *Our goal for the coming year is to encourage birders from across the state to help us develop a more complete picture of the seasonal distribution of birds in Montana.*

### Book Project

*Birds of Montana*, slated for release in 2011, will summarize information on the status, distribution, biology, conservation, and historical aspects of the 424 bird species known to occur in Montana. Co-authors Jeff Marks, Dan Casey, and Paul Hendricks have completed 170 species accounts for the book thus far. Several new accounts are posted on our website: <http://mtaudubon.org/birds/book.html>.

### Future Plans

In the coming year Montana Audubon plans to emphasize public outreach and education as well as stewardship activities, focusing on our IBA program. New IBA brochures will be developed and distributed, press events will be held to publicize new IBAs and successful IBA conservation efforts. Most importantly, we will work to further engage our nine Audubon chapters to conduct public outreach about their local IBAs, monitor key bird species and habitats, gather relevant bird data on both existing and potential IBAs, and initiate (or strengthen) IBA stewardship activities. We will continue to work collaboratively with key partners around the state, and will further integrate these efforts with our highly successful land use and climate change policy work.