



MONTANA AUDUBON

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For Immediate Release

November 28, 2007

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Some of the U.S.'s Most Imperiled Birds Make their Home in Montana *New Report Identifies Species at Greatest Risk*

HELENA, MT - Forty of the bird species that Audubon and the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) have identified as in need of immediate conservation attention spend at least part of the year in Montana. They are included on WatchList 2007, the newest and most scientifically sound list of America's birds at greatest risk. These species are often rare and limited in range; consequently, they face a more imminent threat of extinction. Conservation efforts in Montana as well as nationally will play a critical role in determining their future.

The continental WatchList is based on a comprehensive analysis of population size and trends, distribution, and environmental threats, and has received extensive scientific review. The 59 species on the "red list" represent species of greatest concern, and another 119 species merit inclusion on the "yellow list" due to their rarity or severe population declines. Species found on either list demand immediate conservation attention while there is still time to save them.

"All of us in Montana have an opportunity and responsibility to help protect our birds at greatest risk – including the Greater Sage-Grouse and Trumpeter Swan," said Steve Hoffman, Montana Audubon's Executive Director. *"We need conservation action now, while there is still time – and the WatchList helps focus that action where we need it most."*

The new Audubon/ABC WatchList is based on the latest available data from the Christmas Bird Count and annual Breeding Bird Surveys, along with other research and assessment from the scientific and bird conservation communities. The data were analyzed and weighted according to methods developed through extensive scientific peer review, yielding an improved assessment of actual peril that can be used to determine bird conservation priorities and funding.

In Montana, 22 of the 40 species (55%) listed on the 2007 WatchList require wetlands or streamside habitats, and another nine species (22%) are grassland-dependent. Three species are restricted to sagebrush habitats, and two species prefer Ponderosa pine forests. The remaining four species inhabit coniferous forests, alpine or pinyon-juniper habitats.

Some of the listed species may seem unfamiliar to many Montanans. Priority WatchList species found in Montana include:

Greater Sage-Grouse. This widespread game bird is threatened primarily by loss of sagebrush habitat. Heavy livestock grazing, global warming, recent introduction of the West Nile virus, invasion of exotic plants and fragmentation of sagebrush habitat due to agricultural expansion and energy development are the most significant threats facing the species in Montana. Long-term, range-wide declines have fueled proposals for federal listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act. Montana Audubon and American Bird Conservancy are working to identify sagebrush conservation opportunities, incorporate bird habitat needs in energy facility siting guidelines, and ensure that conservation efforts benefit not only the Greater Sage-Grouse, but other WatchList species that depend upon sagebrush habitats (e.g., Brewer's Sparrow).

Trumpeter Swan. Trumpeter Swan populations have recovered from the critically low numbers of the early 1900's, but Montana is one of the few states still supporting natural populations of this threatened species. Trumpeters historically bred throughout much of western Montana; now they are found only along the Rocky Mountain Front and in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. American Bird Conservancy (ABC) has worked with a number of partners to help secure North American Wetland Conservation Act funding to protect key swan habitats in the Centennial and Madison Valleys. Reintroduction of swans in the Blackfoot and Flathead Valleys will require persistent efforts to protect and restore suitable wetlands for pioneering nesting pairs, and ABC continues to work with local land trusts to achieve this goal. Montana Audubon has identified critical nesting and wintering sites for Trumpeter Swans as part of its Important Bird Area (IBA) program.

Long-billed Curlew. This species is listed as "Highly Imperiled" in the North American Shorebird Conservation Plan, and has shown significant range-wide declines as native grassland habitat is converted to other uses. Fragmentation of the remaining large blocks of grassland habitat in Montana remains a significant threat to this species. Long-term survival will depend on protection of these areas (such as the Rocky Mountain Front) and livestock grazing management that provides grassland in the proper condition for nesting. American Bird Conservancy has worked closely with The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Wildlife Program to delineate important curlew habitat on private lands along the Rocky Mountain Front, and to protect important sites in the Madison and Big Hole Valleys. Montana Audubon's IBA program has identified a number of critical nesting sites for the curlew, including extensive grasslands in northern Valley County.

Flammulated Owl. This tiny migratory owl depends on mature stands of ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir with open, shrubby understory near grassland edges. It continues to lose habitat to residential development on the fringes of Montana's western valleys, and as a result of crown fires in pine stands that have grown thick with young Douglas-fir. Restoration of pine stands by thinning, providing snags for nesting, and by maintaining grass/shrub areas for the owl's insect prey have great potential to reduce fire risk and increase habitat for this species. American Bird Conservancy's recent survey work in the Bitterroot Valley has expanded the known range of the owl in Montana, and identified key private land parcels for habitat enhancement efforts and long-term protection. In addition, the University of Montana's Avian Science Center has been organizing a network of volunteers to conduct Flammulated Owl playback surveys in likely habitat across portions of western Montana.

Lewis's Woodpecker. This species, first discovered by Lewis and Clark near Helena, has declined throughout its range. Like the Flammulated Owl, it prefers large snags for nesting in pine forests, as well as old cottonwood trees in riparian areas, where it must now compete for nest sites with the European Starling. Mature cottonwood stands along our rivers continue to be lost to agricultural activities and residential development. The Bitterroot River IBA (from Lolo to Hamilton), recently identified by Montana Audubon, is home to more than 40 nesting pairs of Lewis's Woodpeckers.

Williamson's Sapsucker. The Williamson's Sapsucker inhabits mainly mature and old-growth Ponderosa pine forests, and aspen to a lesser extent. All these forest types have declined across the Montana landscape. They will often use open, harvested timber stands, but it is unknown whether nesting success is high enough in these areas to sustain populations. ABC has been working to build a west-side cavity-nester initiative to address the needs of this and other WatchList species dependent on standing dead trees. Montana Audubon is working to identify key habitats (called "Important Bird Areas") for this and other WatchList species in Montana so these areas can be prioritized for conservation action.

Mountain Plover. Mountain Plovers are entirely dependent on shortgrass prairie for breeding, and have experienced habitat loss and population declines throughout their range, in part due to severe declines in prairie dog colonies (which provide ideal habitat conditions for nesting plovers). The Montana population is now estimated to be fewer than 1500 birds. Protection and enhancement of large blocks of native prairie and restoration of prairie dog colonies will be required to maintain or increase Mountain Plover populations.

Calliope Hummingbird. Western Montana is a stronghold for North America's smallest bird, which has shown significant population declines. The causes for these declines are unknown. The species requires healthy riparian or montane shrubland habitats for nesting. Noxious weed infestations may be reducing feeding habitat at critical times of the year for this species.

Black Swift. A highly specialized, poorly known bird, the Black Swift nests behind waterfalls and raises a single chick each year. Based on recent surveys, Glacier National Park and the surrounding area is a key nesting area in Montana for this rare species. Climate change and its effect on glacier-fed waterfalls will most likely have a profound impact on the swift. A more thorough inventory of potential nesting sites is needed, although recent surveys by Montana Audubon and American Bird Conservancy found the first new nest sites in over 40 years, and confirmed occupancy of a traditional nest site in the Mission Mountains.

Baird's Sparrow. As one of the myriad of grassland bird species that have shown significant long-term declines, the Baird's Sparrow depends on large blocks of lightly-grazed native bunchgrass prairie for nesting. Northeastern Montana is within the core of the species range. Protection of Baird's Sparrow habitat in Montana will help meet the needs of two other WatchList species, the **Sprague's Pipit** and **Chestnut-collared Longspur**.

Piping Plover. The Piping Plover has suffered population and habitat losses throughout its range, primarily due to disturbance and development of its preferred beach nesting habitat. It is listed as a Threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. The species' preferred nesting habitat in

Montana includes gravel bars along the lower reaches of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers, and large alkali prairie wetlands in northeastern Montana.

Interior Least Tern. The Least Tern has suffered both habitat and population losses throughout its range in North America, primarily due to recreational impacts and development of its preferred nesting habitat. The Interior Least Tern is listed as an endangered subspecies by the US Fish & Wildlife Service, due to declines throughout the Mississippi River drainage. Riverine nesting populations are susceptible to nest flooding, and have lost habitat to dams and development. In some areas reservoirs have created suitable beach-nesting habitat. Least Terns in Montana are restricted to the east and northeast along the Missouri River, the lower reaches of the Yellowstone River, islands in Fort Peck Reservoir, and in the Medicine Lake-Plentywood area. In most years the highest numbers of terns nesting (as many as >100) are found on the Missouri below Fort Peck, with lesser numbers (~25) on the Yellowstone River below Miles City.

Willow Flycatcher. In other portions of the arid West the (Southwestern) Willow Flycatcher has been listed as an endangered species, due primarily to habitat loss and parasitism by cowbirds. Montana populations have not decreased to the same extent, but are susceptible to the same effects of habitat degradation and cowbirds in landscapes dominated by livestock production. ABC and Montana Audubon have been working with private ranches, land trusts, state and federal agencies and local watershed groups to restore riparian shrublands and through fencing, planting and grazing agreements.

Unlike those on Audubon's recent list of Common Birds in Decline, the WatchList species are often rare and limited in range.

For the complete WatchList, and information on how to help, visit <www.audubon.org>. To learn more about Montana Audubon's work protecting these and other species, visit <www.mtaudubon.org>. For high resolution photos of priority national WatchList species, B-roll and other press resources, visit <www.audubon.org/news/pressroom/WatchList2007/>. Please contact either Dan or Steve for high-quality digital images of Montana's WatchList species.

Montana Audubon promotes appreciation, knowledge and conservation of native birds, other wildlife and their habitats. Founded in 1976, Montana Audubon has steadily built effective statewide programs in public policy, education and conservation. The organization works closely with nine community-based chapters to ensure that all native birds in Montana have healthy, sustainable populations and long-term protection of their natural habitats. The American Bird Conservancy works to conserve native wild birds and their habitats throughout the Americas. ABC acts to safeguard the rarest bird species, restore habitats, and reduce threats, while building capacity in the conservation movement. ABC, a membership organization, is consistently awarded a top, four-star rating by the independent group, Charity Navigator.