

Idaho & Western Montana



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The Region's summer temperatures were mostly average to above average, and precipitation amounts were near to slightly below normal. Noted exceptions occurred in parts of southern Idaho and southwestern Montana, where a serious and persistent five-year-long drought continued.

Abbreviations: A.F.R. (American Falls Res., Bingham/Power, ID); Camas (Camas N.W.R., Jefferson, ID); Latilong (area encompassed by one degree latitude and one degree longitude used in mapping bird distribution in both Idaho and Montana).

LOONS THROUGH NIGHTJARS

Especially rare in summer was the imm. Yellow-billed Loon in Kootenai, ID 16 Jun (EK). Although Clark's Grebes are increasingly reported away from breeding areas in s. Idaho, 2 in Idaho's *Benewah* and *Kootenai* 4–20 Jun (m.ob.) were far n. of typical range. Apparently American White Pelicans continue to wander northward: a flock of 12 at Priest L., Bonner, ID 20 Jun (BB) provided a rare record for Latilong 1. A Broad-winged Hawk that stopped at Camas 2 Jun (CW) represented a first for Latilong 21. Only two other local records for Ferruginous Hawk preceded one reported in *Kootenai*, ID 21 Jun (JW). A record-late Rough-legged Hawk was identified near Camas 4 Jun (MCR).

The best shorebird of the season was a rare Whimbrel seen at Camas 5 Jun (MCR). Marbled Godwits staged in impressive numbers at A.F.R., with a peak count of 650 there 10 Jul (MCR). At least

4 Franklin's Gulls strayed to n. Idaho 5–20 Jun (CS, WW), where they are locally rare. The only report of a Band-tailed Pigeon was in *Benewah*, ID 6 Jun (LS). Reports of Eurasian Collared-Doves at new locations in Idaho included 2 in Twin Falls and a singleton in *Jefferson* 1–8 Jun. A Common Poorwill found sw. of Three Forks, MT 1 Jul (JP) provided the first record in Latilong 38 in over 30 years.

CUCKOOS THROUGH GRACKLES

A Yellow-billed Cuckoo in *Kootenai*, ID 9 Jun (JW) provided a 2nd local record and was the first reported there since 1895. Another Yellow-billed was a rare migrant at Camas 30 Jul (DCI). A singing Alder Flycatcher in *Lake*, MT 21 Jun (MS) provided the first record for Latilong 14. Three Northern Mockingbirds were reported in s. Idaho, where they are rare but annual breeders. A flock of 10 Sprague's Pipits s. of Three Forks, MT 20 Jun (JP) represented the first report for Latilong 38 in 32 years. A wayward Black-throated Gray Warbler near Challis, ID 25 Jul (DF) brought in a first record for Latilong 13. The bird of the season was a well-documented Prairie Warbler in *Park* 19 Jun (ph., †EH) that furnished Montana's 3rd record. Camas hosted a rare Ovenbird and Idaho's 4th Hooded Warbler 1 Jun (MCR, CT). Apparently the spring season "invasion" of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks continued into summer, with an excellent total of 5 reported throughout the period. A singing male Blue Grosbeak was notable in *Oneida*, ID 8 Jul (HK), where they are scarce and irregular breeders. Noteworthy Common Grackle sightings included one well n. of expected Idaho range in *Nez Perce* 14 Jun (HK), and a report of fledglings in Somers, MT 23 Jul (DC) that documented a first breeding record in Latilong 2.

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State of the Region

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Avian populations in the Idaho and Western Montana Region face many threats, among the most serious of which are the degradation or loss of habitat from agriculture, unsustainable logging and mining, poorly managed grazing, drought, fire, invasive non-native plants, and urban development. The Region is divided into two ecoregions or Bird Conservation Regions (BCR), the Northern Rockies (BCR 10) and the Great Basin (BCR 9), both of which harbor a number of habitat types both stark and subtle, from the alpine meadows of Glacier National Park in northwestern Montana to the sagebrush flats of southern Idaho. All of the Region's habitats are threatened in some respect.

Agricultural Impacts • Millions of acres of native grasslands, sagebrush desert, wetlands, and forests have been converted to croplands in the Region's valleys, and virtually all surface waters in arid areas have been tapped, channeled, or diverted for irrigation. As a result, sensitive riparian obligates such as Willow Flycatcher and Yellow-billed Cuckoo have suffered very steep population and range losses over the last century, but even relatively common riparian species such as Yellow Warbler have declined. The winners, if any, have been species that can coexist with humans—e.g., Rock Pigeon, American Crow, European Starling, and House Sparrow—but even some of these birds are scarce or absent in modern irrigated crop fields. Other agricultural impacts that threaten birds and their habitats include pesticide use and water-quality problems that stem from irrigation return flows.

Logging Impacts • According to forest bird expert Sally J. Hejl, little is known about the specific relationships of western U.S. coniferous forest birds and logging. In addition, few studies have shed light on the distribution and habitat use of these species, and almost nothing is known of their demographics. Even with this tremendous knowledge gap, it appears that we can safely say that populations of uncommon and resident cavity-nesters—such as Black-backed Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, and Brown Creeper—have been adversely affected by logging, fire suppression, and the creation of fragmented forests. On the flip side, studies show that salvage logging and fires may benefit some species that forage in open areas, such as Lewis's Woodpecker, Tree Swallow, and Western Bluebird. In any case, there is a critical need for more studies that will monitor forest bird populations and their responses to various silvicultural practices and fire.

Mining Impacts • The mining industry has left tragic and permanent scars on vast areas of Idaho and Montana. A nightmare of problems—large open pits filled with toxic water and mine wastes, extensive areas of soils laced with arsenic, lead, and other heavy metals, contaminated surface and groundwater—are of such a scale as to defy technology and the financial resources necessary for cleanup and remediation. Over time and with reclamation efforts, bird habitats have been re-established in some areas. But many others, such as the sparsely vegetated spoil piles throughout Idaho's Boise Basin, remain virtually birdless, even though they were mined a century ago. Even more ominously, heavy metal-laced wetlands in north Idaho continue to take a deadly toll on Tundra Swans and other birds that visit these deathtraps each year.

Unsustainable Grazing and Invasive Non-native Plants • Overgrazing of private and public rangelands by livestock is a very serious conservation problem and a highly politically charged issue throughout the West. Improper rangeland management has eliminated native plants and allowed the introduction and invasion of non-native plant species over many thousands of acres. Even worse, these invasive plants (such as Cheatgrass Brome and Spotted Knapweed) now form veritable monocultures across huge portions of the Region. Furthermore, cheatgrass has the ignominious property of providing fine fuels for catastrophic range fires that help maintain the viability of this invader. Of all the bird

species in the Region, grassland birds have likely suffered the steepest population declines in the past century. Even formerly plentiful species such as Greater Sage-Grouse and Sage Sparrow are now in trouble, and populations of rare and local breeders such as Mountain Plover and Upland Sandpiper are in drastic decline in the Region and are in danger of Regional extirpation in the near future.

Drought • As in other areas throughout the world, the Region's climate appears to be warming. The past five years have seen significant environmental responses to this trend, and most of them have been ominous: record-high summer temperatures, unusually dry and mild winters, reduced snowpack and stream recharge, and an increasing incidence of fires. Rangeland and forest bird species, already beleaguered in this Region, have been negatively impacted by drought and fires, and nesting success for waterfowl on many of the Region's lakes and reservoirs has been much reduced.



Western Tanager—here in the Daggett Creek drainage of Boise County, Idaho—is still relatively common in forests of the Rocky Mountains. Nonetheless, virtually all of the bird conservation challenges in the Idaho–Western Montana Region have relevance for the conservation of this species, and there is no better time to protect a species than when it is still numerous. *Photograph by Colleen Sweeney.*

Urban Development • The Region's human population centers are among the fastest growing in the West. This factor alone undoubtedly provides one of the greatest single challenges for bird conservation, since the impacts of urbanization are permanent. Other impacts on wildlife associated with urban areas include unregulated pesticide use on lawns and gardens and predation by house cats.

Final Thoughts, Possible Solutions • With the Region's avian life in grave danger from so many threats, is there anything that we can do to slow or stop the losses of our bird populations? Perhaps the formation of "regionally-based, biologically-driven, landscape partnerships"—as advocated by the various bird conservation plans—can meet the conservation challenges ahead. Any solution with likelihood for success will also need new and increased funding for bird conservation objectives, as advocated by the NABCI Action Plan. But ultimately, the solution will have to come from all who cherish birds and cannot imagine a world without them. As the National Audubon Society and others suggest, each one of us can help by adopting a local Important Bird Area, petitioning lawmakers for increased funding of the Land and Water Conservation Act and State Wildlife Grants Program, defending the Endangered Species Act, and participating in citizen-science projects.