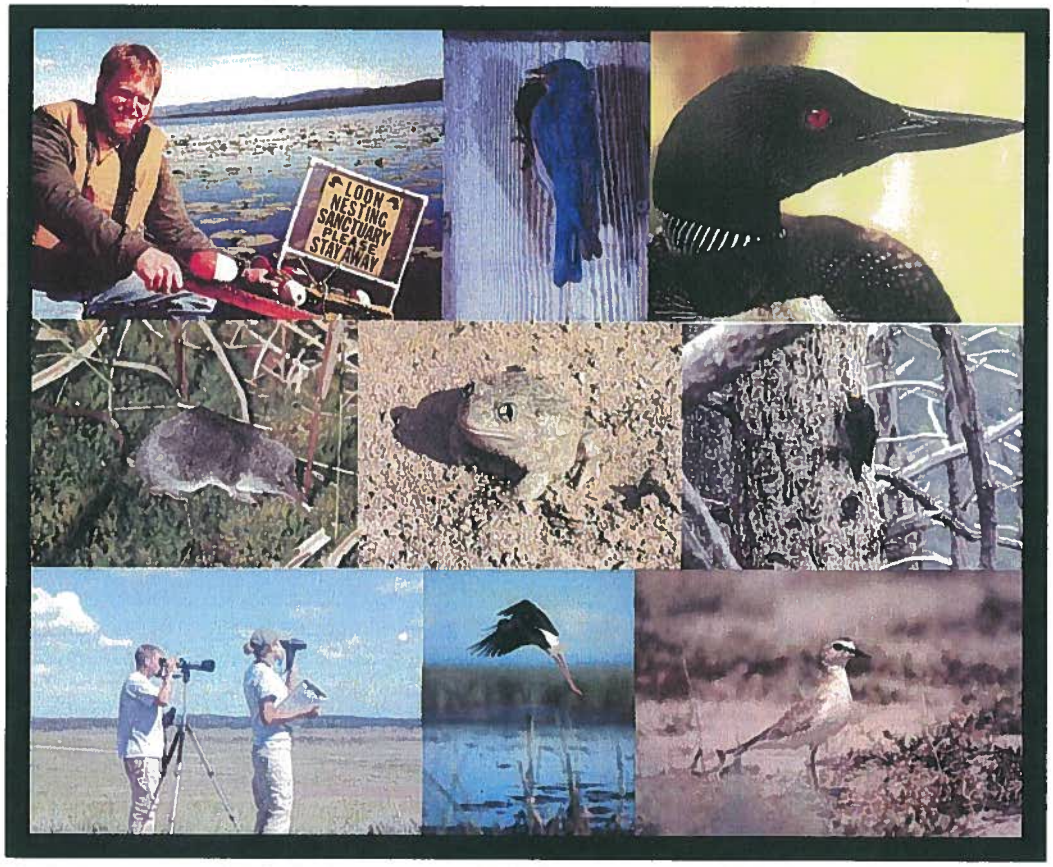
Report to the 60th Legislature

Use of Nongame Check-off Funds in the Nongame Portion of FWP's Wildlife Program



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PROJECT REPORT SUMMARY - NONGAME CHECK-OFF FUNDS
FY06 and FY07

Donations to the Nongame Wildlife Tax Check-off line 19A of Montana's 2006 income tax form are used to make progress toward three primary goals:

1. Keep common wildlife species common.
2. Reverse population declines of wildlife species deemed "of concern" in Montana (http://fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/concern/default.html), to prevent the need for future listing under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).
3. Foster awareness and appreciation of *all* Montana's wildlife, through outreach, technical assistance, and citizen science.

	FY06	FY07
25% of "Native Species Specialist" position in Billings	**$13,000**	**$13,000**

This FWP position serves the public in eastern Montana by addressing education and conservation needs of prairie wildlife, with emphasis on Species of Concern. In FY06-07, the native species specialist presented talks to the public, led field trips, and responded to numerous requests for information from the public on Montana's native nongame species. Examples of the wide variety of groups she has presented talks to include the 4X4 Association of Montana, Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society, and The Wildlife Society. She has also provided technical assistance to internal and external agency personnel, private citizens and non-government organizations on planning processes, Environmental Assessments and development. She taught bird identification classes at the Becoming an Outdoor Woman workshop, assisted with training NRCS field staff, and served as a science fair judge.

The Native Species Specialist chaired the Montana Prairie Dog Working Group, coordinated meetings of that group, and facilitated progress toward full implementation of the Conservation Plan for Black-tailed and White-tailed Prairie Dogs in Montana (January 2002). As FWP's representative to the Interstate Prairie Dog Conservation Team, she contributed to development of the Conservation Assessment and Conservation Strategy for the white-tailed prairie dog. She also completed the EA process for translocation of white-tailed prairie dogs within a road right-of-way in Carbon County, and drafted a landowner incentive proposal designed to assist landowners who would agree to manage for prairie dogs on their property.

The Native Species Specialist coordinated an inventory of waterbirds (shorebirds, marsh birds, water birds) using over 115 wetlands in Eastern Montana. The project provided the opportunity for University students to work as interns for Fish, Wildlife and Parks and yielded data that provided insight for the Comprehensive Strategy under State Wildlife Grants. The Native Species Specialist is assisting other efforts (e.g. Biodiversity surveys, planning and implementation efforts) to continue to develop a statewide Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy (2005).

The Native Species Specialist serves as Montana's representative on the newly formed Central Flyway Nongame Technical Committee. In collaboration with other states in the Flyway, she provided comments supporting the removal of the Bald Eagle from the Endangered Species List and changes in the Federal Falconry Regulations. She conducts bald eagle nesting surveys in southeastern Montana, which are critical to the on-going efforts to remove this species from ESA listing now that the species has exceeded recovery goals. She assists with the Peregrine Falcon Working Group that is now examining take of peregrine falcons by Montana falconers.

The native species specialist in Billings acts as the statewide coordinator for the North American Amphibian Monitoring Program, which is a nation-wide program to survey amphibians using volunteers. She held a second meeting of the Amphibian and Reptile Working Group, to share information and assist with the further development of amphibian and reptile conservation plans. She is also nearing completion of a "Snakes of Montana" identification poster in the style of our popular "Frogs and Toads of Montana" and "Salamanders of Montana" posters.

Matching Funds: These funds are matched with federal Pittman-Robertson funds at a 3:1 ratio ($39,000 federal, $13,000 check-off funds; yielding an effective total of $52,000/year).

Multi-species survey and inventory efforts **$5,500** **$5,500**

Montana FWP is moving toward multi-species inventory and monitoring surveys which are more cost-effective than traditional, single-species surveys. Although species "of concern" are often the intended targets of these inventories, information gathered on all species is used to refine our management strategies, contributes to information and species lists provided to the public via the on-line Animal Field Guide (http://fwp.mt.gov/fieldguide/) and Visit a Park planner (http://fwp.mt.gov/lands/searchparks.aspx), and provides a baseline for future monitoring efforts. During FY06-07, Nongame Wildlife Check-off funds have supported several important survey efforts, including the continuation of a statewide amphibian inventory, waterbird inventories in eastern Montana, a songbird banding station along the Clark Fork River at Beavertail Hill State Park, and small mammal inventories. These efforts are primarily conducted on public lands and conservation easements administered by FWP. Partners included the Montana Natural Heritage Program, University of Montana Avian Science Center, U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Future efforts will emphasize the Tier 1 species groups, habitats, and focus areas from the CFWCS.

Matching Funds: These funds are matched at least 3:1 with federal funds from SWG, Montana's Natural Resource Damage program, and other state and federal funds; yielding an effective total project cost of $22,000.

Important Bird Area data gathering and compilation **$5,000**

The Important Bird Area (IBA) program was initiated by Partners in Flight and National Audubon Society to promote conservation of geographic areas important to birds. An area must meet specified levels of bird use to quality for Important Bird Area designation. IBA designation does not confer any legal or regulatory obligations, but instead is used as an educational tool to promote protection of these areas through voluntary actions such as conservation easements and application of Best Management Practices (BMPs). A total of 26 IBAs are currently recognized in Montana (at the state level) but have yet to be officially designated by the national program. Most of the bird information for these areas was gathered by volunteers and cooperating landowners. Check-off funds were used to assist Montana Audubon to enter bird information for all 26 Montana IBAs into an online database maintained by the National Audubon Society. Also, there are 6 new Montana IBAs in the nominations process, and data from these sites entered into the NAS database. Check-off funds also supported bird inventories at sites along the Bitterroot River in preparation for a new IBA nomination. Partners included Montana Audubon, National Audubon Society, the Five Valleys Land Trust, and numerous volunteer birders.

Matching Funds: These funds are matched 3:1 with $20,000 from the Sargent Endowment, yielding an effective total project cost of $20,000.

Support the Montana Bird Distribution database and web page, and a new/updated list of Montana bird species **$ 5,000** **$4,500**

The Montana Bird Distribution (MBD) database and associated publications is a collaborative undertaking by Montana Audubon, FWP, and the Montana Natural Heritage Program to maintain up-to-date information on the status and distribution of Montana's bird species. The first edition of MBD was published in 1975, and the MBD database was developed in 1991. The Montana Natural Heritage Program maintains an interactive web site (http://nhp.nris.mt.gov/mbd/) that allows the user to search this database for bird information within a specific geographic area. FWP contributed funding to Montana Audubon to support the evaluation of bird records, data quality control, and data entry into the MBD database, and funding to the Montana Natural Heritage Program to support development of a new web page interface, and to meld the MBD database and bird observations in other state databases into a single bird observation database. FWP nongame staff anticipates updating the Checklist of Montana Birds in 2007 based on information from the Montana Bird Distribution database. Copies will be printed for free distribution to the public and also posted on FWP's web page as a downloadable PDF file format. The bird checklist was last updated in 2004.

Matching Funds: These funds are matched at least 2:1 with other state, private and federal funds; yielding an effective total project cost of $19,000, and countless hours of volunteer efforts from birders throughout Montana.

Contribute to development of Birding and Nature Trails **$ 6,500**

Several Birding and Nature Trails have been developed around the state as collaborative efforts involving local communities, Travel Montana, regional tourism offices, FWP, the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Avian Science Center, and local Audubon chapters. Nongame Wildlife Check-off funds will support development of Birding and Nature Trails in West Yellowstone and in the "Russell Country" tourism region, and help fund the printing of the brochure for the "Montana Northeastern Plains Birding Trail". FWP also contributed technical expertise and photos to these efforts. Nongame Check-off funds in FY06-07 will primarily be used for printing Birding and Nature Trails brochures.

Matching Funds: These funds are matched at least 5:1 with private, state, and federal funds; yielding an effective total project cost of at least $40,000.

Support publishing and distribution of educational materials **$ 6,750** **$3,500**

Nongame Wildlife Check-off donations help fund a variety of "Watchable Wildlife" projects that help foster awareness and appreciation of our lesser-known wildlife species, and enhance public enjoyment of our common wildlife species. Efforts scheduled for completion during FY06-07 include development and printing of a poster identification guide featuring the snakes of Montana, reprinting the "Salamanders of Montana" poster, purchase of additional copies of the "Pocket Guide to Prairie Birds" for distribution to the public, and publication of a poster featuring the common birds of Montana. Nongame Wildlife Check-off funds ($250) supported the cost of constructing a roadside educational sign about nesting bald eagles that was designed by a high school student as an Eagle Scout project.

Matching Funds: These funds were matched with Federal, ZooMontana, Plum Creek Timber Company, and other funds, along with donated materials, photos, and volunteer efforts, yielding an effective total of approximately $25,000.

Promote placement and maintenance of nesting boxes for bluebirds and other cavity-nesting species **$ 2,500** **$2,500**

The goal of this project is to promote conservation of bluebirds and other cavity-nesting birds by providing nest box plans, materials and building instructions to youth groups, interested landowners, and other members of the public. Several years ago, FWP entered into a cooperative agreement with Mountain Bluebird Trails, Inc. (MBT), a local chapter of the North American Bluebird Society. In 2006, MBT members built and distributed 1,490 bluebird nest boxes with Nongame Wildlife Check-off and matching funds. Some of these nest boxes were constructed through a cooperative project with the prison in Shelby. Most bluebird houses were placed on private land, with landowner permission. MBT donated 50 nest boxes to Beaver Creek County Park south of Havre to help them with establishment of a nature trail. In 2006, they purchased sets of educational books and videos for donation to libraries in the following small towns: Havre, Shelby, Boulder, Lima, and Drummond. In response to specific requests, educational books and videos were also provided to Sentinel High School (Missoula) and MSU Northern. Their members spent 165 hours and drove 5,131 miles to deliver 28 educational programs and field trips to schools and groups from Lima to Glasgow and from Roundup to Eureka. MBT members also staffed booths at several county fairs and at the Montana Stockgrowers Convention, where they handed out nest box plans and ran educational videos. Additional plans for 2007 include providing materials for youth to build nest boxes and toad houses at the Boone & Crockett Club's Theodore Memorial Ranch at Dupuyer, and expansion of the kestrel nest box program.

Matching Funds: These funds are matched approximately 2:1 by MBT through private donations for nest box materials, their volunteer labor, and unreimbursed mileage to give educational talks, build bluebird houses, and put them out ($10,000 MBT, $5,000 check-off funds for an effective total of $15,000).

Inventory and monitor sensitive wildlife species
This work focuses on Species of Concern, which are either known to be rare or declining – or perceived to be rare or declining due to a lack of basic biological information.

Loon conservation efforts in northwestern Montana **$ 7,000** **$5,000**
Montana has the most significant common loon population in the continental United States west of the Mississippi River. Approximately 160-180 adults arrive in Montana each spring. Only 22 to 26 pairs nest successfully each year producing a range of 30-49 chicks as counted in the mid-July Loon Day survey. The common loon is a species of concern in Montana due to small population size and sensitivity to activity during the nesting season. Active conservation efforts are deemed necessary to ensure that Montana's small nesting loon population is maintained in the long-term. This cooperative project includes conservation measures designed to improve nesting success, monitoring of population trends and education of water-based recreationists and wildlife viewers, and consists of three main components: the Montana Loon Ranger Program, a research project to identify the habitat requirements and population dynamics of Montana's nesting loon population, and a loon migration study.. Cooperators include the Montana Loon Society, Plum Creek Timber Company, US Forest Service, the Biodiversity Research Institute, Glacier National Park, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), and private landowners.

The Loon Ranger Program is a cooperative educational effort funded by multiple partners. Four seasonal loon rangers cover lakes in the Clearwater, Thompson Chain of Lakes, Kalispell, and Kootenai areas. Loon rangers educate the recreating public about the needs of nesting loons, post temporary "quiet" zones around active loon nests, and work with public land managers, lake homeowners, and volunteers to monitor loon nesting success.

As of summer 2006, 140 loons have been color banded, including 80 chicks and 60 adults as part of the research project funded primarily by State Wildlife Grant funds. Nongame Check-off funds provided part of the required non-federal match for this project. The color-banding allows the individual loons to be relocated from year to year, track movements between lakes, and estimate survival. A 2-year Masters level study through Montana State University to determine the habitat requirements and population characteristics for Montana's breeding common loons was completed in 2006 (*Paugh, J.I. 2006. Common Loon Nesting Ecology in Montana. M.S. Thesis, Montana State Univ., Bozeman. 90pp.* A second 2-year Masters level study through University of Montana was initiated in 2006, to look at broader scale lake and other habitat relationships, population demographics and survival rates, and population modeling. Physical data will be collected from as many as 750 lakes during this study and analyzed. Population characteristics will be estimated using recapture information on banded loons, using both re-observations and recovered mortalities. Additional field work monitoring band returns on juveniles may be needed in 2008 and 2009.

The migration study was initiated by the CSKT, to evaluate staging, migration, and wintering areas for both non-breeding and possibly breeding loons. This study consisted of implanting satellite transmitters into adult loons staging on lakes within the Flathead Indian Reservation. Four loons were captured and implanted with transmitters during 2006, and tracked to their wintering areas off the coasts of California and the Baja Peninsula, and then north, to nesting areas in Canada. Additional loons will be captured during 2007. The loon research project is expected to continue through 2008, with a project to draft an updated Loon Conservation Plan for Montana.

Matching Funds: These funds are being matched with federal State Wildlife Grant funds and other partners ($88,000 federal, $29,000 donations/volunteer time/waived overhead, $12,000 Check-off funds; yielding an effective total of $129,000 for FY06-07).

Pygmy Rabbit Research in Southwestern Montana: **$2,000**
FWP contributed $2,000 in FY2006 towards a pygmy rabbit study initiated in 2004 by the University of Idaho. The goal is to determine levels of population connectivity between Montana's small pygmy rabbit populations and nearby populations in Idaho, in the vicinity of Bannack and Lemhi passes. Genetic samples were collected at two Montana sites during the 2006 field season and genetic analysis will be completed in 2007. The FY06 contribution of $2,000 provided part of the match for an Idaho SWG grant.

Matching Funds: These funds are being matched with Idaho State Wildlife Grant funds, BLM, and other funding sources at a 3:1 ratio for an effective total of $8,000).