Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 2 Wildlife Quarterly

April 2020

Pintails south of Ovando, on April 4, 2020

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Welcomed Migration

During a time when we humans subject ourselves to a self-imposed lockdown, out of an abundance of care for our families, friends and neighbors near and far, we are joined this spring by wild, winged throngs in thrilling migrations, like few we've witnessed here before.

"Here" is the Blackfoot Valley, and the Nevada Valley, near Aunt Molly Wildlife Management Area.

"Now" is the end of March and early April. We first became personally aware of this spectacle on March 21, when Snow Geese and Pintails dominated. By March 28, the Snow Geese appeared to have moved on, replaced by Tundra Swans in seemingly equal numbers. Thousands. On April 4, vice-versa. And by April 12, they were all gone.

To see this is to feel the need to share the experience. While the birds have moved on north for the summer, we can still share some pictures that we collected for you, faint shadows of the real thing though they may be.

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Waterfowl erupted in dizzying multitudes (above) of beaks and butts in the late afternoon of April 4.

The Region 2 Wildlife Quarterly is a product of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; 3201 Spurgin Road; Missoula 59804. Its intent is to provide an outlet for a depth of technical information that normally cannot be accommodated by commercial media, yet we hope to retain a readable product for a wide audience. While we strive for accuracy and integrity, this is not a peer-refereed outlet for original scientific research, and results are preliminary. October 2015 was the inaugural issue.

Not far past Ovando, a flock of maybe 500 snow geese circled overhead on March 21—a teaser, if you will, for what lie ahead. You might recognize the place, on the road to the Ovando dump. Ice on a pond, close by, afforded a resting spot, where we found the flock on two consecutive afternoons. Pilots call these maneuvers "touch and goes," although the birds stayed on the ice for longer than a touch. Next page: Lined-out (get it?) in better light.

Along the Way

Northern Shrike reminded us that winter still looms over the Blackfoot on March 28, even though the calendar says Spring. They migrate to breed in northern latitudes.

Pintails and Widgeon in migration joined Mallards on potholes as the ice came off in the last week of March.

A small fire burned a sagebrush slope just past the dump in 2019, and white-tailed deer wasted little time in making use of the first nutritious regrowth, almost as quickly as it sprouted between residual patches of snow.

A Red-tailed Hawk hunted from a power pole along the Ovando-Helmville Road. Though some Red-tailed Hawks winter in western Montana, odds are that this bird was a recent northward migrant.

Skunked. This was perhaps one indicator that a few attractant scraps had found their way outside of the fenced dump compound over the winter.

When out of the East,
It began snowing geese.

Marcum Mountain & Mineral Hill,
March 21, 2020

Wings set, landing gear lowered and deer shooed off the runway for touchdown.

The Blackfoot River, Blackfoot Valley and Blackfoot Waterfowl Production Area (managed by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service) lie out of sight between the field in the foreground and the snowy slope of Marcum Mountain behind it. The juxtaposition of food, broad undeveloped spaces and open water makes a mecca for hundreds of thousands of waterfowl migrating north along the Continental Divide. In most years, birds shopping for habitat from the vantage point of several thousand feet above the Earth would not find the snowy Blackfoot particularly attractive, when a tilt of the wings in the opposite direction would deliver them to the chinook-warmed plains to the east. This year seems an anomaly.

Wave after wave,
It kept snowing geese.

Sweeping and swirling across the face of Mineral Hill, flock after flock came into view, each landing alongside their predecessors. They might've arisen from the Blackfoot River or from iced-over marshes on the Blackfoot Waterfowl Production Area. Or maybe we happened upon a migratory mega-flock on its direct route from points far to the South. We can only report that wave after wave, like this one, kept coming.

Until there were too many.

It sounded like a jet engine coming to full-throttled life when wave after wave of Snow Geese, spiced with a few Pintails here, a squadron of Canada Geese there, a stream of Mallard pairs and occasional Tundra Swans—even a white-tailed deer or two—finally bumped and ruffled the wrong pile of feathers, one too many times. What a spectacular sight—and sound. Bird must've struck bird during lift-off; how could they not? Equally amazing was that the entire flock, now airborne and circling, swirling, yet again, seemed only to resettle themselves, returning to the pivot and landing once again. Settled, temporarily, while small flights of waterfowl continued to join them, until—again—the wrong bird ruffled the wrong other bird. And with that unmistakable roar, the whole lot would rise up and resettle again, repeatedly, ever the optimists.

Then came Pintails.

Til Pintails blew up.

What's in a Field

Kevin Ertl has lived in the Blackfoot for 20 years, headquartered on the H2-O Waterfowl Production Area. Kevin works as the Land/Easement Manager in the Valley for the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and this explosion of a waterfowl migration landed practically in his backyard.

He's seen a lot in his time. Once early in his tenure we spoke about a big wind that blew the night before. "Yeah, for a minute I thought I was Dorothy," he quipped. Let that sink in for a moment.

We asked Kevin how this congregation of waterfowl compares with the previous spring migrations in his experience, and about the contents of the magical field that attracted all this attention.

"Yes the number of birds was incredible for the Blackfoot," he answered. "The field [owned and managed by a neighboring rancher] was seeded down last year to alfalfa with a cover crop of hay barley. With the wet weather it was never cut for hay. It was grazed last fall so there was quite a bit of grain left in the field for fall and spring migration. There is not a lot of grain around in this immediate area anymore so the fields that are in grain get a ton of use, especially if left through the spring."

"It was also neat that with many of the wetlands still froze, the river use was way more than I ever noticed before. The teardrop at the end of my entrance road around to the bridge was loaded with roosting birds."

Sandhill Cranes were first seen on March 22,
In the field where they weren't seen or heard the day before.

Sandhill Cranes add distinctive voice, color and silhouettes to the Spring migration in the Blackfoot. Sandhills bring to mind Hank Goetz, one of the founding fathers of the *Blackfoot Challenge* collaborative of landowners and land managers, who called them his Whisky Warblers. According to *Birds of Montana* (Marks, Hendricks and Casey, 2016), Sandhill Cranes that breed in the Rocky Mountains come from winter habitats in New Mexico and northern Mexico, where birds banded in western Montana have been recovered. Sandhills are known for their elaborate courtship dances, which will be underway soon (note to self). When we returned to the Blackfoot the next weekend, on March 28, Sandhills had become more prominent members of the migratory flocks, as documented in some of the photos on the following pages.

March 28, 2020

Alongside Sandhill Cranes, Tundra Swans were noticeably more numerous on March 28 than the week before.

Tundra Swans are a different species than the Trumpeter Swans that have been restored to the Blackfoot Valley in recent years. Tundra Swans are a greatly more abundant relative of the Trumpeter, and Tundras are here only for a brief visit. While scattered Trumpeter Swans nest and raise their young in wetlands across the Blackfoot Valley, some sporting colored collars for identification, Tundra Swans are on their way to breeding grounds on Arctic and sub-Arctic wetlands.

While we noticed Tundra Swans amongst the crush of waterfowl the week before, swans appeared to be more prominent in the mix during our revisit on March 28. Conversely, Snow Geese were not absent on March 28, but it seemed as if a lot of geese had moved on north in the space of a week. Snow geese were back, in force, on April 4, but swans then appeared scarce.

Still there on April 4, 2020

More Snow Geese than Tundra Swans this week.

In Their Wake

An Easter storm roared through on April 11, icing sagebrush and grain alike with heavy snow, accompanied by wind and freezing temperatures. What had been a blooming landscape looked wintery again on April 12.

A male Northern Harrier occupies airspace that might've been crowded only a week or two earlier. The Easter storm was preceded by a few days of unseasonable warmth. We wonder if the geese and swans moved north with the onset of the warm weather, or was it merely a matter of time?

Osprey returned to their Blackfoot nests in early April and were shoring up their nests on April 12. Banded osprey from Montana have been known to winter in

Mexico and Costa Rica. Like the Osprey, we wonder if the geese and swans will return to the Blackfoot in such numbers next spring.

A Golden Eagle hunted from a power pole along the Cutoff Road, overlooking ponds peppered with recent arrivals of Ruddy Ducks, Shovelers, Green-winged Teal and American Coots.

A flight of migrating Gray-crowned Rosy-finches flare up inside a fenced hay stackyard, not quite the spectacle created by thousands of Snow Geese in almost the same location. Did the geese and swans stay on the field in the Blackfoot until they'd scavenged most of the available grain?

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