

2023 NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Historically the Nongame Wildlife Account revenue was ~\$40,000, resulting from the option to check a box on the state tax form to contribute to the account. FY24 was the second year the nongame program operated with a substantially higher budget resulting from the addition of marijuana tax revenue. Program expenditures by category:

- \$315,623 on SGCN habitat and conservation
- \$626,907 on SGCN inventory and monitoring
- \$140,845 on research to inform SGCN conservation & management
- \$15,000 on internship program to support 2 interns who assisted regional biologists with implementing the nongame program at the regional level.
- \$39,000 on K-12 education and one wildlife viewing project – Danford Pond in R1

Total: \$1,137,375

HIGHLIGHTS OF NONGAME PROGRAM WORK IN 2023

This report does not cover all work to manage or conserve nongame species or the habitat they use across the state. Rather it is intended to highlight the scope and diversity of work being conducted, with a focus on new work made possible by marijuana tax revenue in the Nongame Wildlife Account.

SGCN habitat restoration and conservation work

1. Monitoring bat populations and surveillance for White-nose Syndrome, a disease that kills bats during hibernation. The USFWS listed northern long-eared bats as endangered in March 2023 and a decision on whether to list little brown bats is expected in fall 2024. Montana's bat monitoring program provides critical information that will minimize the impact of ESA listings on private landowners and industry.
2. Created and filled a new position: State Bat Biologist to lead bat conservation and monitoring efforts. This position will lead the agency's response to bat conservation challenges and build partnerships with other agencies to have a coordinated response.
3. Collaborate with the Forestry Program on habitat enhancement projects on Calf Creek and the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Areas. Treatments will thin forests and reverse conifer encroachment to restore riparian habitats and montane grasslands, key habitats for many SGCN and other nongame wildlife.

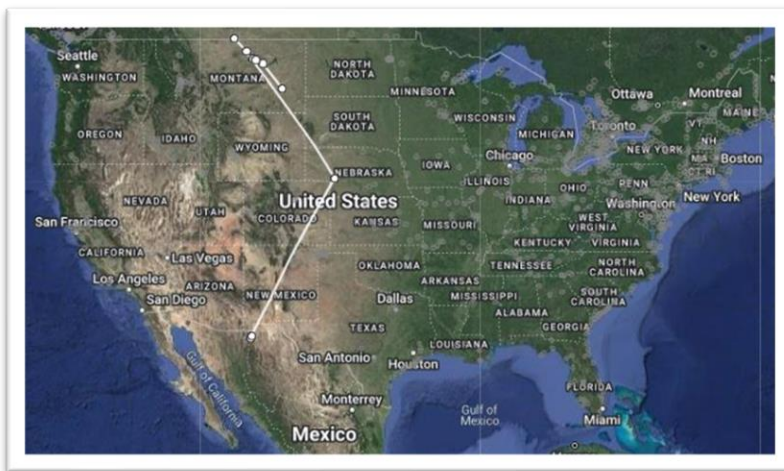
SGCN inventory and monitoring

1. Nongame wildlife biologists and university interns conducted over 300 surveys on 25 Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). The primary objective is to obtain information to inform conservation and maintain state control of species management.
2. Statewide bird monitoring program that provides estimates of occupancy and/or abundance for 180 birds, including 35 SGCN. The program provides critical information that will prevent the need for ESA listings and provide information needed to conserve, restore, and enhance populations of SGCN species and the habitats they depend on.
3. Statewide shorebirds surveys in conjunction with 11 other states in the Pacific Flyway are expected to provide information on up to 42 shorebird species, 21 of which are identified as data deficient, 3 are SGCN, and 11 are listed as "Tipping Point Species" that have lost 50% of their population in the last 50 years. The program will yield data to inform species status assessments, potentially averting ESA listing.

4. Targeted surveys for 2 species that were anticipated to be petitioned for ESA listing in 2023: Pinyon Jay and pygmy rabbit. Proactive surveys will produce credible distribution and occupancy data that can be used to respond to a USFWS request for information, as well as inform conservation and management actions.

Research to inform SGCN conservation & management

1. Supporting 5 graduate student research projects: (1) Evaluating the efficacy of Motus technology to monitor wildlife movement and habitat use (continuation from 2023, completion date: July 2024); (2) Investigating the characteristics of roost sites for the Endangered northern long-eared bat and little brown bat (continuation from 2023, completion date: July 2024); (3) Comparing standard and novel techniques for surveying Harlequin Ducks (continuation from 2023; completion date: December 2024); (4) Estimate beaver and beaver dam persistence in prairie ecosystems to inform aquatic and riparian restoration (project period 2024 – 2026); (5) Effects of smelter contamination at Mt Haggin Wildlife Management Area (project period 2023 – 2026).
2. The Motus Wildlife Tracking System is a collaborative network of stations equipped with radio antenna that detect birds and bats marked with tiny radio transmitters (as little as 0.15 grams) as they fly by. The Motus-Wildlife Technician deployed 6 Motus stations in 2023, with a goal of deploying 50 stations by 2025. The Miles City Motus station (*right*) went live on September 22nd and detected its first tagged bird, a Baird's Sparrow, just 2 days later! This bird was tagged Jan 7th, 2023 in Mexico, it bred in southern Saskatchewan and was detected at several stations in Montana on its southward migration. The Motus network gives us information on the full lifecycle, and the tri-national travel plans, for imperiled grassland birds.



K-12 Education and Wildlife Viewing

1. The Danford Pond Wildlife Viewing Project, approved by the Commission in 2023, was finally completed in June 2024. A parking area was constructed to provide safe access for the public to view wildlife. The parking area is large enough to accommodate a school bus, so the viewing area also provides a venue for school groups to learn about the migratory waterfowl of Montana.
2. Biologists operated a bird banding station for a second year at Spring Meadow State Park in collaboration with park staff and MT WILD.



SONGBIRD BANDING STATION

Conservation & education in action



CONSERVATION

This summer, FWP biologists and trained volunteers set up mist nets to capture songbirds at Spring Meadow Lake State Park. Birds are gently removed from nets and banded with a small metal leg band that uniquely identifies each bird. Biologists determine the age, sex, and whether birds are breeding. The protocols we use follow a continent-wide collaborative effort called Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS). This supports the mission to reverse population declines and keep common birds common.

STATS

- Over 300 birds banded
- 38 species recorded
- 6 banding days open to the public
- An average of 100 visitors each day
- 12 volunteers banding and educating

This research is important for conservation, and the more people get to observe the stations, the more opportunities there are to foster a love of wildlife. -Jen Fritz, MT WILD Volunteer



EDUCATION

FWP scientists teamed up with Montana WILD so that the banding station could be open to the public to observe. Educators were on hand to explain the banding process, guide the groups to observe the nets, and talk about bird research and conservation.

Along with the general public, the station was visited by school field trips, summer camps, pre-schools, and youth groups.