



4,000 Miles of groomed snowmobile trails in Montana.

Waterfowl up, other birds down

The latest report on U.S. bird populations offers a tale of two trends, one hopeful, one dire. Published by 33 leading science and conservation organizations and agencies, the “2022 U.S. State of the Birds Report” is the first comprehensive look at the nation’s birds since a landmark 2019 study showed the loss of nearly 3 billion birds in the United States and Canada in 50 years. Key findings from the new report:

- ▶ Waterbirds and ducks in the U.S. have increased by 18 percent and 34 percent, respectively, since 1970.
- ▶ U.S. grassland birds are among the fastest declining, with a 34 percent loss during the same period.
- ▶ Over half of U.S. bird species are declining.

The report advises that meeting declining birds’ needs will require a strategic combination of partnerships, incentives, science-based solutions, and public will to dramatically scale up the conservation of fast-disappearing bird habitats such as native grasslands. ■



Peak migration is usually the last week of March. But check the Freezout web page before you go.

WILDLIFE WATCHING

FWP web page updates Freezout waterfowl count

Each year in late winter, photographers and bird watchers thrill to the sight of snow goose “tornadoes” rising up from Freezout Lake, about 20 miles northwest of Great Falls. But the spectacle is witnessed only by those who show up on the right days.

Tens of thousands of migrating ducks, geese, tundra swans, and other birds pass through this area on their way to northern nesting grounds. The lake and surrounding barley fields provide an essential pitstop for resting and refueling during the long journey.

Because the birds stay only a few weeks, visitors need to know what stage the migration is in before making the drive to Freezout Lake

Wildlife Management Area (WMA). On average, the last week of March sees the largest number of migrating waterfowl, but that can change due to storms and other weather.

FWP has a new web page that includes daily Freezout Lake updates during spring and fall migrations. The page also includes information on the WMA’s history and management, as well as hunting, wildlife watching, and trapping opportunities and a detailed map.

To view the page, visit fwp.mt.gov and click on the Conservation tab at the top. From the menu on the left, select “WMAs,” then search for “Freezout Lake WMA.” On the Freezout Lake WMA page, click on the “Freezout Lake WMA Story Map” link under the photo. ■

CLIMATE

State climatologist predicts even warmer days ahead

Dr. Kelsey Jencso, state climatologist with the Montana Climate Office, believes that by 2069, some areas of Montana can expect up to five more weeks of above-90-degree days each year.

During a Zoom conference on climate change this past November, Jencso explained his prediction by pointing out that, over the past 65 years, the state’s temperature has increased 0.42 degree per decade while the national average is 0.26 per decade. That’s an increase of 2.7 degrees in the past 65 years, which is also above the national average.

The greater rate of change is due to Montana’s higher altitude, making it more sensitive to temperature

fluctuations, Jencso told the conference, organized by the Montana League of Women Voters. He also said:

- ▶ Total precipitation from spring rains has increased by 1.3–2 inches per year in eastern Montana and declined by 0.9 inch in western Montana.
- ▶ By mid-century, computer models predict a 5-degree temperature increase in eastern and north-central Montana and a 4-degree increase in central and western Montana.
- ▶ Also by mid-century, eastern Montana is expected to have 39 more days above 90 degrees each year, and western Montana will see 10 to 15 additional days of 90-degree-plus temperatures. ■



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MIKE MORAN ILLUSTRATION; CHRIS MCGOWAN; SHUTTERSTOCK

MORGAN JACOBSON/FWP

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

FWP Partnerships: Bighorn Sheep

With their massive curled horns, heavily muscled bodies, and gravity-defying scrambles across steep cliffs, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep are one of the West’s most iconic wildlife species. Montana is home to several dozen herds comprising roughly 6,000 bighorn sheep, including some of the continent’s biggest rams.

The foremost conservation groups helping Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks with bighorn sheep conservation and management projects are the Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF) and Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MWSF), an affiliate of the national group. Both based in Bozeman, the groups were founded in 1977 and 1992, respectively, in response to declining wild sheep numbers and shrinking range across the North American West. Working with hunters, state and federal conservation agencies, landowners, and others, they have raised funds and supported research that have helped increase wild sheep numbers continent-wide.

In Montana, the groups have been instrumental in key research and habitat projects aimed at stemming declines of imperiled herds. For instance, they are helping fund the department’s Highland herd study, featured in the November-December 2022 issue of *Montana Outdoors* (“Whatdunit?”), and prescribed-burn and conifer-removal projects to restore grassland habitat.

FWP officials say the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation has been especially vital in establishing a working relationship with the Montana Wool Growers Association to help limit the spread of pneumonia and other diseases by reducing interactions between wild and domestic sheep. “It’s the only partnership between the sheep industry and wild sheep conservationists that we know of in the entire country,” says Brian Wakeling, chief of the FWP Game Management Bureau.

Though Montana’s overall bighorn population is growing, several herds have been decimated by pneumonia over the past several decades. The disease can also kill domestic sheep. The Montana Wild Sheep Foundation



Volunteers with wild sheep conservation groups and other organizations help FWP biologists take blood samples from a bighorn sheep headed for the Little Belt Mountains.

is working with wool growers to reduce contact between the two species.

Among tools being considered for study are guard dogs trained to keep bighorns away from domestic herds, increased use of mobile electric fencing, and GPS radio collars for tracking wild and domestic sheep movements. “We strongly value the relationships we’ve built over the years with our conservation and agricultural neighbors,” MWSF president DJ Berg says. “The cooperative agreement between the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation, the Montana Wool Growers Association, and FWP continues to be the cornerstone of wild sheep restoration progress in Montana.”

Wakeling says both groups also help department biologists access private land for research. “For instance, we can’t test for pneumonia in wild sheep on private property without permission from the landowners,” he says. “Our partners have been essential to helping us open those doors.”

The national Wild Sheep Foundation manages the auction of a single statewide FWP bighorn sheep permit that allows the winning bidder to hunt in any Montana hunting district. Held since 1986, the auction has

generated more than \$8 million for FWP bighorn sheep programs. “We’re honored with the trust that FWP places in the Wild Sheep Foundation to sell this tag for the state,” says Gray N. Thorton, the group’s president and chief executive officer, who notes that the 2023 tag recently sold for \$320,000. “We support FWP 100 percent and hope the new proceeds go to support more cooperative projects in the future.”

The wild sheep conservation groups also helped fund FWP’s translocation of bighorns from the Missouri River Breaks to historic bighorn habitat in the Little Belt Mountains southeast of Great Falls (*Montana Outdoors* “Bringing Bighorns Back,” September-October 2021). And they assisted in designing studies that measure the effectiveness of reducing numbers of mountain lions and other predators in key bighorn areas.

FWP director Hank Worsch says the partnerships “are definitely having a major positive effect on bighorn sheep management in Montana. Strong relationships like these increase FWP’s reach and allow us to accomplish far more than we could alone. They also bring in the perspective of people outside our department, which we always value.” ■

SOCIAL MEDIA

Playful FWP Fisheries social media crew racks up followers and awards

One video explains the cuss words you might hear while ice fishing. A poster introduces a new word to the English language—"fishstancing"—to define social distancing during the Covid 19 pandemic in terms of fish length, as in: "Stay two shovelnose sturgeon away from each other." A Chopping Dance meme explains an invasive-clam removal project on Lake Elmo. And a viral video depicts a biologist singing his own version of Tai Verdes's song "AOK" while being "KOK" counting kokanee salmon redds.

These creations and more of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Fisheries Division are part of the weekly #FisheriesFriday feature on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The award-winning social media postings began in early 2019, and not a single Friday has gone fishless since, adding up to roughly 300 posts.

"We fish people are inherently weird and creative," says Zach Shattuck, an FWP fisheries biologist. "We're always looking for new and creative ways of looking at fish."

#Fisheries Friday is only one part of FWP's social media presence. The agency shares information with 60,000 followers on Facebook, 62,400 followers on Instagram, and 22,800 followers on Twitter. "#FisheriesFridays are definitely some of our most popular posts on social media," says Missy Erving, FWP web content manager.

The #FisheriesFriday crew started the campaign to build stronger connections with the public. "Science is facing a big challenge across the globe," says David Schmetterling, a #FisheriesFriday founder. "These days, anyone with an opinion is given the same credibility as scientists and others who have factual knowledge and years of experience."

Schmetterling says one #FisheriesFriday goal was to show the human side of FWP. "We wanted people to see who we are. If people know and trust you, they're more likely to accept the scientific information you provide" he says.

The features have evolved over time. Early posts were long and heavy on science.

But somewhere along the way, the crew hit the perfect balance of humor and education. Their "The crAy Team" series, a parody of the 1980s television series *The A-Team* featuring an underground team of fisheries biologists, won first place for social media campaigns in the 2022 national Association for Conservation Information awards competition. Their post for the Lake Elmo invasive clam removal project took second place.

"It's a challenge," says fisheries biologist Adam Strainer. "Fun has always been at the basis of all our posts. We want to be cheesy and goofy but also educational. Plus, we had to learn to say what we needed to say in a video that's three minutes or shorter."

Currently, the #FisheriesFriday creators are Schmetterling, Strainer, Shattuck, Erving, fisheries biologists Bryan Giordano and Shannon Blackburn, and regional Information and Education Program manager Chrissy Webb. The crew promises more fun, irreverent posts in the future. ■

To view future #FisheriesFriday posts, follow FWP on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.



CONSERVATION

New Montana Outdoor Hall-of-Famers

This past winter, the Montana Outdoor Hall of Fame announced its 2022 inductees at a ceremony in Helena.

The Hall of Fame was created in 2013 to honor individuals, both living and deceased, who made significant and lasting contributions to the restoration and conservation of Montana's wildlife and wild places. The awards recognize Montana's historical and contemporary conservation leaders while capturing the stories of these individuals as a way to raise public awareness of conservation in Montana.

"It is important to recognize the contributions of people who continue to make Montana such a special place," Patrick Graham, former FWP director and retired executive director of The Nature Conservancy in Arizona, said at the banquet honoring the inductees. "None of it gets done by one person. It is a network of people often working over many years."

To read more about the 14 inductees listed here and other conservation heroes honored in 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020, visit mtoutdoorhalloffame.org.

1. Stan Bradshaw, Helena. *Stream and river public access protection.*
2. Bruce Bugbee, Missoula. *Public land protection.*
3. Harrison G. Fagg, Billings. *Hard rock mining and other environmental standards.*
4. John G. Gatchell, Helena. *Wilderness protection.*
5. Kathleen Hadley, Deer Lodge. *River protection, fish and wildlife conservation.*
6. Land M. Lindbergh, Greenough. *Private land conservation and public access.*
7. Robert "Bob" Marshall (1901-1939). *Wilderness protection.*
8. John R. Murray, Browning. *Badger-Two Medicine designation as a Traditional Cultural District.*
9. Christine Torgimson (British Columbia) and 10. Barbara Rusmore (Bozeman). *Private ag land and public river protection.*
11. Bradley B. Shepard (1952-2021). *Cutthroat trout conservation.*
- 12, 13, and 14. The Three Yayas: Annie Pierre (1900-1975), Louise McDonald (1904-1994), and Christine Woodcock (1910-1986). *Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness protection.*



FWP VIDEO SHOWCASE

Recent videos produced by FWP staff for social media and television



Spring nest box cleanup

Corie Bowditch (Rice) and a team of volunteers explain why cleaning nesting boxes of feathers and nesting material each spring helps cavity nesters such as bluebirds and swallows.



Cold-blooded in cold weather

Reptile and amphibian expert Matt Bell explains why we don't see snakes, toads, turtles, and other cold-blooded species in winter and how they survive the cold weather.



Catchy habitat song

Corie Bowditch and Matt Ferrell sing "Habitat," written by Bill Oliver and popularized by Walkin' Jim Stoltz. Great singalong for kids and adults. Warning: It's an earworm.



LOOKALIKES

Tips for differentiating similar-looking species

Grizzly bears and cinnamon-phase (brown-colored) black bears can be hard to tell apart. Size is not always an indicator, because some grizzlies are smaller than black bears, and both species can be brown. Look for a combination of characteristics. ■



American black bear • *Ursus americanus*

Grizzly bear • *Ursus arctos horribilis*