

Long-billed Curlew Surveys in the Mission Valley Report for 2014 surveys

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Amy Cilimburg and Janene Lichtenberg lead field trips in the Mission Valley

This report summarizes the efforts of Montana Audubon, Salish Kootenai College (SKC), Audubon Chapters and other partners to make progress on the Mission Valley Long-billed Curlew Initiative by engaging volunteers and SKC students in monitoring of curlews in the Valley.

Project Objectives and Need.

Over the past few years, avian conservationists, biologists and managers have been interested in advancing grassland and open lands conservation opportunities

A few years ago, Montana Audubon attended a retreat with many of the best avian conservationist around—members of “Montana Bird Conservation Partnership”—to figure out how we could all work together to “move the needle” on grassland habitat conservation. After much brain-wrangling, we decided we needed a mascot—a bird that lives throughout the State, is charismatic and recognizable, and of course, needs grasslands.

No, not a “little brown job” like the Grasshopper Sparrow, but someone loud and flashy. We landed on the Long-billed Curlew. Then we began making plans for a collaborative effort to use this bird, North America’s largest shorebird, to conserve specific grasslands.

Fast forward to spring 2014. Bird Conservation Director Amy Cilimburg has just returned from a meeting that she, with the help of partners, organized in the Mission Valley. It’s a long story how this project landed in Mission Valley, but suffice it to say that there are grasslands urgently in need of our help in western Montana and opportunities abound.

Our work is bringing together those who live, work, and bird in this valley, from folks who write grazing plans for landowners, to biologists from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, to friends from Audubon and local Land Trusts. We’ve poured over maps and data to draw circles around the best areas, created curlew brochures and Best Management Practices to help landowners who want to improve habitat, all the time creating ways to build enthusiasm for our mascot, the *cool* Curlew.

In 2014 we also created and passed out postcards so if people find a Mission Valley curlew, they can let us know.

We developed an on-line mapping tool as a pilot but this proved less than intuitive and volunteers preferred postcards or phone calls.

Why all these efforts?

- *Montana holds the most extensive grasslands in the Northern Great Plains, comprising 26% of our state.*
- *Grassland birds show the most declines of any suit of birds monitored by Breeding Bird Surveys, with 70% of the species showing declines.*

Our specific objectives were to:

1. Prioritize key parcels and assess information needs for potential easements or tribal land protection measures.
2. Empower and leverage the actions of land trusts, community members, Audubon Chapters, etc., to engage landowners in habitat conservation decisions

Project Activities and Accomplishments.

Our primary activities consisted of a series of meetings and events that brought partners together, informing them of the opportunities for enhanced bird conservation and exploring ways to work collaboratively. We have compiled biological information, conducted mapping efforts, and discussed opportunities and threats for the Mission Valley. Importantly we have built trust and enthusiasm for working collaboratively with the various entities listed above.

1. Prioritized key area and sites. For grasslands/ranchlands, we have modeled suitable habitat and located five primary focal areas in the Mission Valley. Based on new curlew sighting data, together with on-the-ground knowledge, we are creating maps with updated priority areas.
2. Organized Five Valleys Audubon and Mission Mountain Audubon Society members, biologists and other volunteers to collect Long-billed Curlew data in order to refine focal areas.
3. Developed materials and websites. The website, maps, and brochures Long-billed Curlew brochure, Best Management Practices guide, postcards, are being utilized presently:
<http://www.mtaudubon.org/issues/grasslands/curlew.html>.
4. Presented talks National Bison Range Complex (NBRC), the Montana Bird Conservation Partnership.
5. Shared information on this partnership project at SKC-CSKT Bird Festival and at NRCS's summer Pasture Walk.
6. Hosted a field trip for local residents, Audubon members and Montana Audubon Board and Staff.
7. Article re curlew efforts published in Char-Koosta News (official news publication of Flathead Indian Nation).

RESULTS:

Our outreach to Chapters and spreading the word, via SKC and CSKT, resulted in great enthusiasm to participate in volunteer, road-based surveys. In sum, we had 21 individuals complete at least one route. Some were done solo, some with a small team.

Total numbers of routes run = for a total of xx points.

Long-billed Curlews =

The grassland efforts are designed to keep grass from being converted to agriculture and to improve rangeland health; both will benefit Long-billed Curlew. With the overlapping effort to develop a grassland focused "Curlew Initiative" in this valley, we have blended the two habitat types into one effort, and this makes sense given the mosaic nature of the valley. We have been surprised by the very strong interest, both locally and regionally, in additional monitoring to better understand priority areas and utilize birds as a metric of success, and this work will be ongoing by multiple partners. Grazing plans are being developed by NRCS in order to benefit Long-billed Curlews and other grassland species.

Next steps: We are actively working this winter and spring. In particular, we have survey efforts planned for spring and summer 2015, will attend the SKC-CSKT annual festival, and join NRCS pasture walks.

As mentioned above, groups and individuals working in overlapping geographic areas and on overlapping science and conservation issues benefit immensely from getting to know each other, sharing information and strategies and finding projects where a partnership is added value. Bringing a focused “avian lens” to more general habitat conservation is working really well, and we believe this translates to other areas across Montana and beyond. For example, Lake County District Conservationist for NRCS, mentioned how it was great the he himself was now more educated about birds as it gave him more options in his conversations with landowners about grazing plans. And he then encouraged other NRCS staff to join in both this effort and in a similar (albeit smaller scale) effort in the Helena Valley. We are presently using lessons learned herein in the Helena Valley, hosting a meeting of potential partners in December 2014 with follow up this spring.