Montana is home to 18 species of colonial waterbirds from six families and include American White Pelicans, Franklin’s Gulls, and Great Blue Herons.

These birds use Montana’s marsh vegetation, lusher river habitats, trees, islands, and sandbars to nest communally in groupings of a few to a few thousand nests.

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**American White Pelican**

- **Key sites:** 1, 2, 6, 7
- **Nest is:** a shallow, twig platform in shallow water or on the ground
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Threatened –**

**Franklin’s Gull**

- **Key sites:** 2, 4, 7, 11
- **Nest is:** stick or reed platform in shallow water or on the ground
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Black-crowned Night Heron**

- **Key sites:** 2, 4, 7, 11
- **Nest is:** a stick or reed platform in shallow water or on the ground
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Forster’s Tern**

- **Key sites:** 4, 6, 7, 9
- **Nest is:** a scrape or ground scrape
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Black Tern**

- **Key sites:** 4, 6, 7, 9
- **Nest is:** a scrape or ground scrape
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Threatened –**

**Caspian Tern**

- **Key sites:** 4, 6, 7, 9
- **Nest is:** a scrape or ground scrape
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Common Tern**

- **Key sites:** 4, 8
- **Nest is:** floating raft
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Clark’s Grebe**

- **Key sites:** 6, 9
- **Nest is:** floating platform
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**White-faced Ibis**

- **Key sites:** 2, 4, 6
- **Nest is:** a cupped platform
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Threatened –**

**Great Blue Heron**

- **Key sites:** 1, 2, 4, 10
- **Nest is:** a platform on sand, gravel or cattail
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Gull**

- **Key sites:** 4, 6, 7, 8, 12
- **Nest is:** a scrape
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Great Black-backed Gull**

- **Key sites:** 4, 6, 7
- **Nest is:** platform on sand or gravel bars
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Gull**

- **Key sites:** 4, 6, 7
- **Nest is:** a cupped platform
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Black-footed Gull**

- **Key sites:** 4, 6, 7
- **Nest is:** a scrape
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Great Cormorant**

- **Key sites:** 4, 6, 7
- **Nest is:** a scrape or ground scrape
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**White Pelican**

- **Key sites:** 1, 2, 6, 7
- **Nest is:** a floating raft
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Brown Pelican**

- **Key sites:** 1, 2, 6, 7
- **Nest is:** a floating raft
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**Black-necked Stilt**

- **Key sites:** 4, 6, 7
- **Nest is:** a floating raft
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**American Avocet**

- **Key sites:** 4, 6, 7
- **Nest is:** a floating raft
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**

**American Bittern**

- **Key sites:** 4, 6, 7
- **Nest is:** a floating raft
- **Breeding range:** is stable
- **Climatic Endangered –**
Colonial Waterbirds’ Conservation Status

Of the 18 waterbird species found in Montana, 10 are state species of concern: American White Pelican, Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron, Forster’s Tern, Franklin’s Gull, Black Tern, Caspian Tern, Common Tern, Clark’s Grebe, and White-faced Ibis.

Montana Audubon has been involved with colonial waterbird surveys since 2009 when a statewide effort to determine these species’ population numbers began. This effort involved eight states and lasted until 2012. It was led by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to determine the conservation status and distribution of waterbirds. Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks provided coordination for this effort. The goal was to enhance resource biologists’ ability to manage these unique species.

The total effort resulted in the publication of the Interior West Breeding Colonial Waterbird Atlas. During the time of these surveys, 265 separate colonies were located in Montana, though many more sites surely exist on private land and isolated or small wetlands.

Since 2009, 294 sites have been surveyed in Montana, of which half supported at least one colonial species. Eleven of these sites are home to an especially diverse and abundant array of waterbirds and are currently Important Bird Areas. Three of these IBAs are globally recognized for supporting large colonies of American White Pelican. One of these areas, Bowman NWR, supports more than 1,000 nesting pairs of 14 species.

Colonial Waterbirds and Climate Change

Waterbird populations respond rapidly to seasonal fluctuations in precipitation and entire colonies may respond by altering breeding locations or abandoning sites altogether as environmental conditions change. Evidence of these patterns comes from surveys at a given site over time that have shown large annual fluctuations in waterbird numbers. Predicted changes in precipitation and temperature due to climate change indicate that wetland habitats colonial nesting birds rely upon will be reduced in area. Wetlands will likely become less capable of controlling flood waters, capturing sediments, and replenishing groundwater resources, which are ecosystem services they naturally provide.

The prairie pothole region, which includes many shallow wetlands in eastern Montana, is expected to undergo more frequent drought conditions, with a potentially dramatic loss of wetlands. Further, many wetland systems are seasonal or semi-permanent, so increased rates of evaporation alone can cause these wetlands to decline. Birds dependent on these shallow water sites are particularly vulnerable, such as the White-faced Ibis and Black-crowned Night Heron, and Clark’s Grebe.

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In 2014 the National Audubon Society concluded a study that revealed 314 North American bird species were “threatened” or “endangered” by climate change, including 16 of Montana’s 18 waterbird species. Only two, Great Blue Heron and Snowy Egret could not be categorized because of a lack of specific data.

A “climate threatened” designation means that the species is expected to lose 50% of their range by 2080. “Climate endangered” translates into a 10% loss that could occur as soon as 2050. Six of Montana’s colonial waterbirds are threatened, while 10 are endangered by climate change.

Montana Audubon’s Survey Effort

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Of the 18 species surveyed, Franklin’s Gulls were the most abundant and Great Blue Herons were the most frequently occurring. The largest individual Franklin’s Gull colony was over 4,800 nests.

Montana Audubon has continued to prioritize waterbird monitoring due to the complex management challenges these species face and has led efforts since 2012 to survey for focal species every year at key sites and Important Bird Areas.

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