# Update from the Madison River Important Bird Area; Surveys along the O'dell Creek Restoration Project June & July, 2018

**For years, Montana Audubon has supported the release of Trumpeter Swans** in the Madison Valley Important Bird Area. In the shadow of Sphinx Mountain, the Granger Ranches is over a decade into a long process restoring valuable wetland habitat east of the Madison River along O'Dell creek. Restoration within this working ranch has created hidden wetlands, revived emergent wetland vegetation, and re-introduced curves and sinuous bends along a once-channelized waterway.

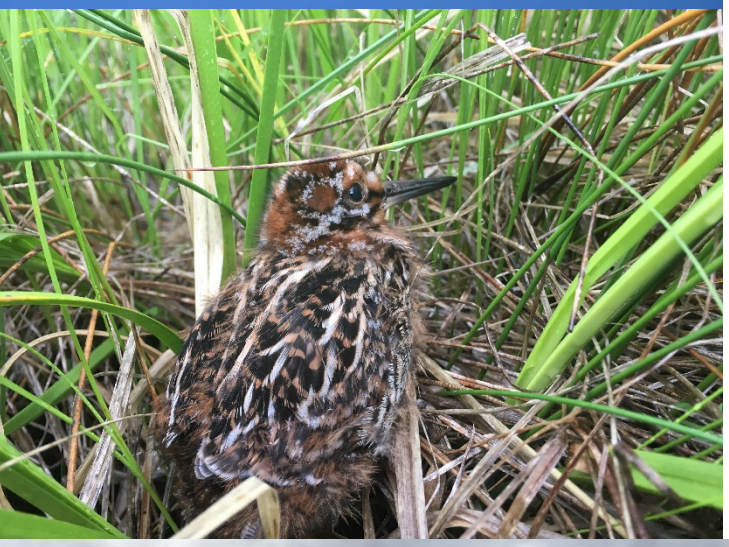
Owner Jeff Laszlo has watched the landscape transform, saying he is the proud producer of both high-quality Montana beef cattle and hay, *and* spectacular wildlife habitat, while also supplying cool fresh water to the Madison River fishery. In 2018, as the restoration continues downstream, Trumpeter Swans have become permanent residents of the valley, and over 115 bird species have been recorded.

(Above) Restoration of small isolated wetlands connected to O'dell creek renewed the vigor of wetland vegetation, creating habitat for birds like the Marsh Wren; (Below) At least one pair of Trumpeter Swans is regularly seen within the restored valley. During the survey, up to six Trumpeters were seen at once.

(Below) Surveying a section of state land south of the restoration site will allow us to see how downstream restoration affects adjacent habitat. This section contains many tall willows but very little wetland vegetation.

(Below) Some surveys at O'dell creek require waders to traverse the unpredictable wetland vegetation. Uneven footing and grassy hummocks keep you on your feet. The tall grass makes identification by song imperative.

(Below) It's hard to capture an image of the diversity of tall grasses thriving in the restored wetland.



The University of Montana Bird Ecology Lab (UMBEL) has helped keep a close watch on restoration progress. This year we continued our partnership with UMBEL to conduct 83 point-count surveys within the site. In addition, we conducted “call-back” surveys to increase our likelihood of detecting secretive marsh birds like Sora, Virginia Rail, American Bittern, and Pied-billed Grebe.

Our surveys detected 57 bird species included two Virginia Rails and one Sora that responded to calls. Beyond the traditional methods of identifying birds by sight and sound, we also took to the skies with the help of Prop Whisperer owner and developer, Trevor Mack.

(Top Left) Short-eared Owls have taken to the newly provided tall-grass habitat; (Middle left) A Northern Harrier male displays overhead as I approach it’s territory; (Left) A fledgling Wilson’s Snipe haphazardly under foot; (Below) Restoration at O’dell now allows the once-channelized creek to meander, reconnecting the grassland to the water’s flow. This creates new habitat for birds, and spawning fish.

Part of our research is attempting to compare the success of human versus computer observations of distant ponds, and to test the functionality of surveys via drone. As we experiment with drones on site, we are seeking to understand their effects on different types of species and their limits. We already know to be extremely careful, and stay high above, any Trumpeter Swans.

Needless to say, the high-powered camera and ability to hover over ponds, far exceeded my ability to count ducklings from the .5 mile vantage! And this is just the beginning. Our work here will continue, as we watch the restoration proceed and keep our fingers crossed the swans will continue to use O'Dell Creek.

(Top Right) Trevor Mack guides the drone over the wetlands using a hand-held controller and ipad to navigate and count birds; (Bottom Right) Trevor brings the drone (top right corner) in for a landing; (Below) The ultra quiet survey drone.

For more information about this project and partnership, please contact Amy Seaman, Conservation Program Manager; aseaman@mtaudubon.org