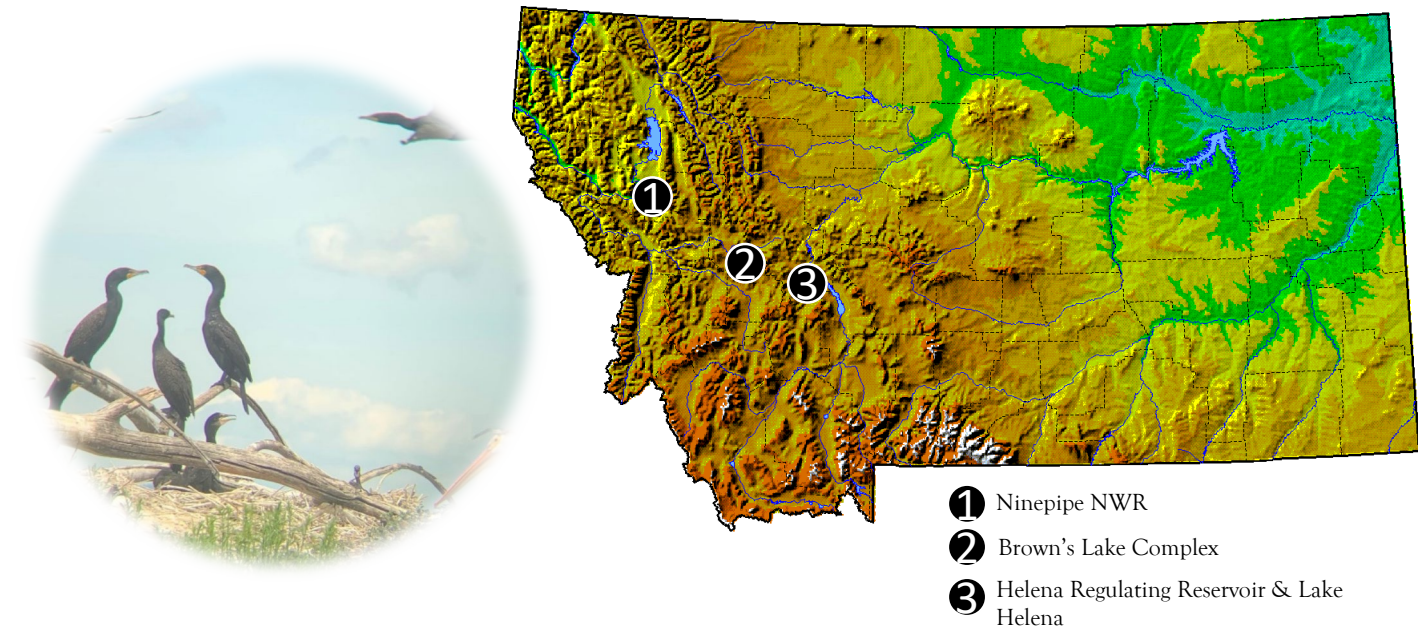


Colonial Waterbird Surveys 2019

By Caroline Provost



Janice Miller. Photo.



- ① Ninepipe NWR
- ② Brown's Lake Complex
- ③ Helena Regulating Reservoir & Lake Helena

Summer is here and breeding season is coming to an end. Take some time to look around and you may see young wildlife wandering around. During the first few of weeks of summer 2019, I surveyed three Important Bird Areas (IBA's), **Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge**, **Brown's Lake Complex**, and **Lake Helena** for colonial waterbird nests. I also surveyed the **Helena Valley Regulating Reservoir**, a beautiful body of water containing a Great Blue Heron rookery at its center. Throughout all four survey areas we counted species of conservation concern, the Great Blue Heron, American White Pelican, Caspian Tern, Forster's Tern, and Black Tern, along with other breeding waterbirds, the Double-crested Cormorant, California Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Western Grebe, Red-necked Grebe, and Eared Grebe.



Nine-pipe NWR contained the most outstanding array of breeding colonies, providing enough proof for me to say that wildlife conservation efforts there are really paying off. Especially after spotting **11 American White Pelican** nests within the refuge. From records going back to 2009, American White Pelicans have been known to rest within Nine-pipe, but this summer Fred Tilly and I were able to document them nesting in the refuge for the first time.



The photo above captures one of the islands within Ninepipe NWR. On this island and others scattered throughout the lake, we counted several Ring-billed Gull, California Gull, American White Pelican, and Double-crested Cormorant nests, along with one Caspian Tern nest.

The image on the right captures two young American White Pelicans. One is slightly bigger than the other because the eggs are laid two days apart. All of the young observed were in their nests, some slightly hidden under adults. Chicks are known to be covered with white down by day 10 and they leave the nest when they are 17-28 days old, suggesting that these two chicks captured in the picture are somewhere in between 10-17 days old.



I observed some of the adults fluttering their bill pouches. Their bill pouches are heavily concentrated with blood vessels, so by doing this they allow body heat to escape.





At the beginning of our survey at **Brown's Lake** the sun was shining and the **Black Terns** were active. Something or someone spooked them and flushed them from their nests, allowing Fred and I to get a quick head count. One nest was so close to the edge of the bulrush, we could see it and the two young black terns resting inside, although they were brown at that age. The same area was occupied by several Yellow-headed Blackbirds.



In between the afternoon rain/hail storms we were able to observe several Western Grebes and Red-necked Grebes.

On July 1st, 2019, I surveyed the **Helena Valley Regulating Reservoir** with Janice Miller. The reservoir is not an IBA and its principal purposes are irrigation and municipal water, however it is home to a **Great Blue Heron rookery**, containing a total of 32 nests scattered throughout several willow trees.

As Janice and I drifted past several American White Pelicans and a few Red-necked Grebes, we observed Great Blue Herons peacefully sun bathing while some aggressively fed their young.



Janice Miller. Photo.

On the way back to town from the Helena Reservoir, Janice and I stopped by **Lake Helena** to survey from the mainland. We spotted California Gulls, Red-necked Grebes, American White Pelicans, a Great Blue Heron, and **180 Avocets**. No nests were spotted from shore.



Janice Miller. Photo.