

Audubon Conservation Ranching Update

By Peter Dudley



Photo by Peter Dudley

As part of our Audubon Conservation Ranching (ACR) program, the Bird Conservation team has been working with ranchers and doing outreach across the state from Broadus to East Glacier! Needless to say we have been busy. Starting in June with a whirlwind of bird surveys, we then tabled at the Blackfeet Nation's People's Market, in Glacier County, presented to a relatively new group, RanchMT, and finally had in-person visits with some of our National Audubon ACR staff partners. RanchMT started this year to provide education and resources to new ranchers. Just a few weeks ago, we attended a Ranching-For-Profit workshop organized by the Audubon Conservation Ranching Initiative, and led by Ranch Management Consultants, way out in Broadus! These workshops, which we hope to host more of in the future, connects ranchers with resources for running a resilient, habitat-friendly, grass-fed operation.

As part of the ACR certification, all participating ranches host bird surveys to establish a baseline of bird population data to help us understand how management practices improve bird habitat and species composition.

During our preliminary surveys we had some exciting observations! On the five ranches surveyed this year, we found over 20 Montana species-of-concern, potential species of concern, and special status species. These include notable grassland species like Sharp-tailed Grouse, Loggerhead Shrike, Sprague's Pipit, Golden Eagle, Long-billed Curlew, and Common Loon. Needless to say, we've seen an incredible amount of diversity in the landscapes and ecosystems present on ACR Ranches. Pictured here is one of our Panorama ranching partners, Pete Wade, whose property neighbors a Waterfowl Production Area, Smith Lake WPA.

Overall, the future looks bright as we take the momentum from a successful field season into the fall. Food Alliance will be making their way out to Montana soon to certify oncoming ranches, and our partners will have time to work with us on implementing bird conservation practices on their land. As of this article we have helped certify our first two ranches and we expect another handful to cross the finish line later this year. With solid partnerships developing across the state and evidence that critical grassland bird species will benefit from the program, the Montana Audubon Conservation Ranching program has a solid foundation to bolster grassland bird conservation efforts. We look forward to sharing more about these special ranches as we move forward.

(Top Right) Pete Wade in a really wet field in early July, one of the few wet spots in the state in 2021. (Bottom Right) Long-billed Curlews are always a delight to see, especially on an Audubon Certified Ranch!

