

spring

2026



2025  
ANNUAL  
REPORT  
page 18



**HALF A CENTURY OF  
BIRDS, CONSERVATION,  
AND COMMUNITY**

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**THE VIEW FROM ABOVE**

We are so excited to celebrate our golden anniversary as we highlight 50 years of conservation in the land of shining mountains and pristine grasslands. People often get confused when I tell them I work for Montana Audubon. “Is that part of National Audubon?” or “I’m a member of my local Audubon Chapter – is that the same thing?” This is what we often refer to as the three levels of Audubon – National Audubon, Montana Audubon and local Audubon Chapters. Regardless of the organization, the Audubon “movement” was started by Harriet Hemenway and Minna B. Hall in Massachusetts and George Bird Grinnell in New York. Grinnell was also an influential force in establishing Glacier National Park, so I feel he has an even greater connection to Montana!

In 1976, the local Audubon chapters in Montana came together to establish an independent organization that could deal directly with important conservation issues across Big Sky Country. Thus, Montana Audubon, an independent entity from both National Audubon and its local chapters, was born. While each “Audubon,” national, state, and local, shares nearly identical mission statements, they play different roles on the broader conservation stage.

National Audubon works on a national scale as they carry the heavy political clout one would expect from a big, more than century-old organization. Audubon chapters are often characterized as local “birding clubs” that are, for the most part, volunteer-run and engage in community conservation projects as well as helping to spread the joy of birding by offering local and regional field trips. Our niche in the “Audubon family” is to protect the wildlife and landscape qualities that we cherish throughout our magnificent state through our conservation policy, avian research, citizen science, conservation ranching and education programs at our Montana Audubon Center in Billings.

So, I hope you enjoy this look back at our greatest milestones and I hope it inspires you to get more involved in our work. Volunteering for one of our citizen science projects in your area, joining us at our *Wings Across the Big Sky* bird festival, taking part in a program at our center, supporting our upcoming Birdathon, or perhaps even consider joining our board. Together, we can ensure that birds, and the habitats they depend on, will thrive for the next 50 years in Big Sky Country!

Yours in Conservation,

Larry Berrin, Executive Director



*Our niche is to protect wildlife and landscape qualities through our conservation policy, avian research, citizen science, conservation ranching, and education programs.*

**OUR MISSION** is to promote appreciation, knowledge and conservation of Montana’s native birds, other wildlife, and natural ecosystems to safeguard biological diversity for current and future generations.

Founded in 1976, Montana Audubon seeks to create an environment in which all of Montana’s native bird species have healthy, sustainable populations, ensured by long-term habitat security. Montana Audubon uses science, conservation education, and public policy work to protect our state’s incomparable wildlife and landscapes.

*spring 2026*

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- 18 2025 Annual Report

On the cover:  
 American Avocet

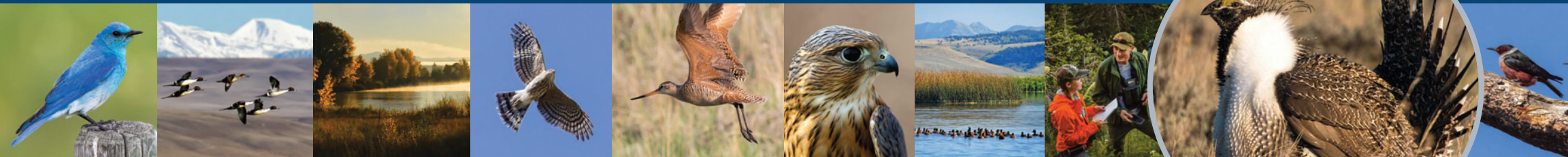
# MONTANA AUDUBON AT 50

## HALF A CENTURY OF BIRDS, CONSERVATION, AND COMMUNITY

What does 50 years of conservation look like?

- *A thriving nature education center that reaches every 4th-grader in Billings*
- *Over a half-million acres of certified bird-friendly grasslands*
- *An annual birding festival that brings together birders from around the state and country*
- *Important contributions to knowledge of bird populations in the state*
- *Five decades of advocacy and lobbying for conservation*

Since its founding in 1976, Montana Audubon has done all of that, and more.



### CONSERVATION POLICY

Since the beginning, Montana Audubon has advocated for Montana's native birds, other wildlife, and general biodiversity by building strong relationships based on common values across political parties and county lines. In the fall of 1976, three Audubon Chapters: Last Chance (Helena), Sacajawea (Bozeman), and Yellowstone Valley (Billings) came together and created Montana Audubon. In 1981, the first state lobbyist and intern were hired, starting a tradition that continues to this day.

An early success came in 1983, when Montana Audubon helped pass the **nongame wildlife checkoff option**, which allows state taxpayers to easily donate some of their tax refund to support the research, management, and conservation of nongame species. To date, the program has generated over one million dollars for Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks. Perhaps most importantly, it cemented consistent agency and programmatic funding as a core tenet of conservation policy in Montana.

We built on this effort by supporting **the passage of Habitat Montana** in 1987 and securing and protecting consistent funding for the program in three concurrent sessions. This effort culminated with the passage of House Bill 932 during the 2025 session, which directed \$32 million annually to Habitat Montana, the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program, non-game wildlife conservation, and wildlife crossings.

In 2015, Montana Audubon helped craft and pass **the Montana Sage-Grouse Stewardship Act** during the 64th Legislative Session, protecting one of the state's most iconic and imperiled species through state law. When federal protections for the Greater Sage-Grouse came under threat, Montana Audubon joined other conservation organizations in litigation against the federal

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Through it all, Montana Audubon has built coalitions with other conservation organizations, sportsmen’s groups, agricultural organizations, and partners across the aisle, driven by the conviction that the future of Montana’s birds is ultimately a cause that transcends politics.

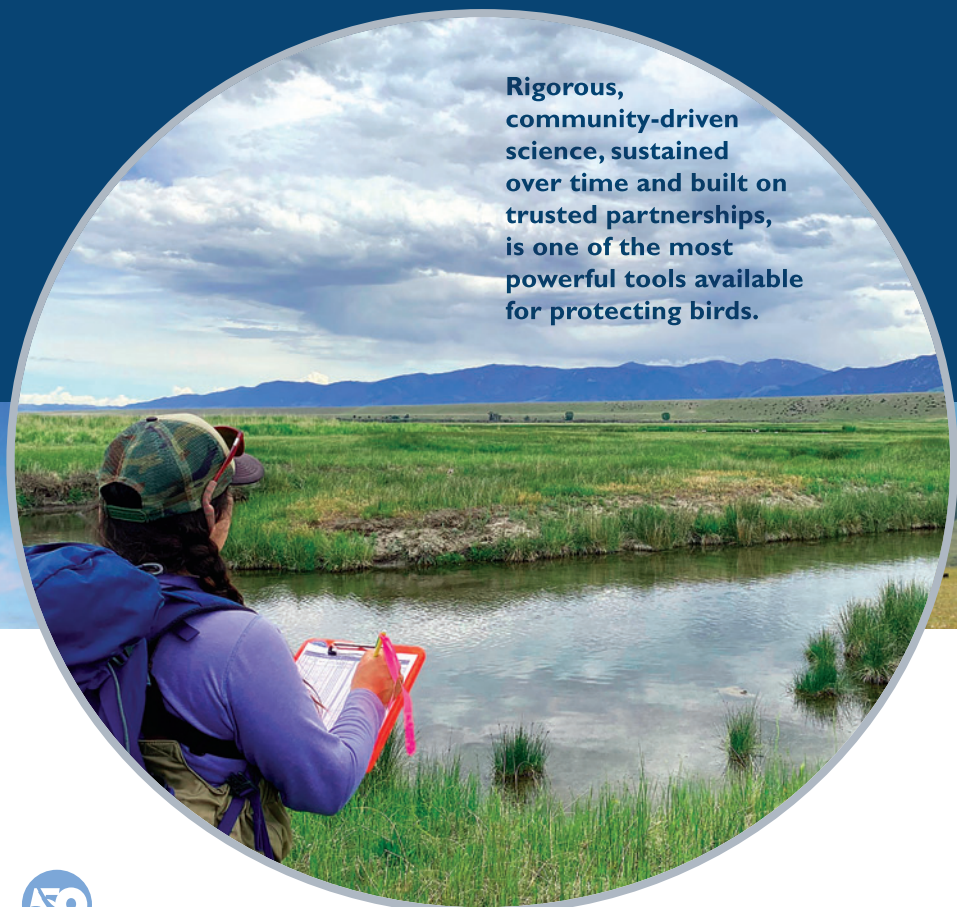


government; in 2020, a U.S. District Court judge nullified oil and gas leases covering 336,000 acres of sage-grouse habitat on public lands. That same year, Montana Audubon’s persistent advocacy in support of the Land and Water Conservation Fund helped contribute to the passage of **the Great American Outdoors Act**, which secured permanent federal funding for land conservation and outdoor recreation infrastructure across the country. Through it all, Montana Audubon has built coalitions with other conservation organizations, sportsmen’s groups, agricultural organizations, and partners across the aisle, driven by the conviction that the future of Montana’s birds is ultimately a cause that transcends politics.

Montana Audubon’s policy work grew in scope and ambition and we leveraged our expertise to inform projects outside of the Capitol. In 2012, for example, Montana Audubon raised concerns over a wind farm project in the Kevin Rim Important Bird Area. By engaging directly with the developer, we were able to double the wind turbine setbacks and establish a framework for long-term raptor monitoring to protect critical nesting habitat. This and many of our other efforts hinged upon decades of

data collected by local chapters, members, and partners. As Montana Audubon evolved over the years, it became clear that **high-quality avian monitoring** would be essential to safeguarding Montana’s wildlife and passing informed conservation policy.

The synergistic relationship between science, policy, and collaboration with Audubon chapters may be best exemplified in the immense lift to protect **the Owen Sowerwine Natural Area**. First nominated for protection in 1974, the 405-acre parcel of State School Trust Land along the Stillwater and Flathead Rivers near Kalispell was placed under a permanent conservation easement in late 2023. Montana Audubon first joined with the local chapter to support management of the property in 1999, followed by its designation as an Important Bird Area in 2010. Typically, state law does not allow for School Trust Land to be placed in conservation easements, but in 2001 Montana Audubon passed legislation to allow a nonprofit to hold a conservation easement specifically on the Owen Sowerwine property. In 2023, the State Land Board granted unanimous approval for a purchased conservation easement on the property.



Rigorous, community-driven science, sustained over time and built on trusted partnerships, is one of the most powerful tools available for protecting birds.



## BIRDS & SCIENCE

At the heart of Montana Audubon’s mission is a commitment to ensuring the long-term survival of the state’s native birds, other wildlife, and the habitats they depend on. Our research efforts often focus on Species of Concern, ensuring that limited resources are directed toward the birds most in need of attention, like the Black Swift. Since 2012, **the Black Swift survey project** has grown into one of Montana Audubon’s most celebrated scientific endeavors, with more than 600 surveys completed at potential nesting sites across Western Montana. That sustained commitment paid off in 2025, when the Black Swift was removed from the Species of Greatest Information Need list – a significant conservation milestone.

Our research also focuses on protecting at-risk habitats, such as the state’s diminishing grasslands. In 2019,

Montana Audubon committed to leading the **Audubon Conservation Ranching program** in the state, partnering with working ranches to protect grassland bird populations through bird-friendly land management practices. In just seven years, the program has grown to 28 enrolled ranches encompassing more than half a million acres across the state.

Montana Audubon’s **citizen science programs** have expanded in parallel, now engaging hundreds of volunteers across the state in monitoring species ranging from screech-owls to Common Nighthawks. These projects illustrate what Montana Audubon has demonstrated repeatedly over fifty years: that rigorous, community-driven science, sustained over time and built on trusted partnerships, is one of the most powerful tools available for protecting birds.

*continued...*



All of the Center's programs reflect a vision of conservation that extends well beyond the field – one rooted in the belief that lasting change begins with people who understand, value, and feel connected to the natural world around them.



## HELP SHAPE THE NEXT 50 YEARS OF CONSERVATION!

### Serve on the Montana Audubon Board of Directors

Montana Audubon has grown its programs substantially in the past few years and is in search of additional volunteer Board members. This is a great opportunity for young professionals to advance their careers or for seasoned experts to bring their knowledge to Montana Audubon leadership. In particular, Montana Audubon would like to enlist a diverse cohort of Board members who have a passion for birds, an interest in protecting the habitats they rely on, and a deep commitment to our mission.

This year, of particular interest are new Board members with financial expertise; experience in fundraising; and those with connections to businesses and foundations. Although our offices are based in both Helena and Billings, we are eager to have representation throughout Montana. We conduct the majority of our Board meetings via Zoom and/or teleconference. It is not a requirement that Board members be residents of Montana although that is preferable.

If you would like to be considered for Board service, please contact Bernie McHugh, Board President at [info@mtaudubon.org](mailto:info@mtaudubon.org) or call 406-443-3949.

Help us shape the next 50 years of conservation in Big Sky Country!



## CONSERVATION EDUCATION: THE MONTANA AUDUBON CENTER

The Montana Audubon Center in Billings stands today as a tangible expression of our educational mission. Mirroring Montana Audubon's founding, in 2003 three organizations: Montana Audubon, Yellowstone Valley Audubon, and the Yellowstone River Parks Association, joined forces to expand conservation education programming in Montana's largest city. By 2008, the **Audubon Naturalists in the Schools** program had taken shape, bringing bird and wildlife education directly into classrooms across the region. Construction on

the Center building began that same year, and when it opened in 2009, it was celebrated with the first of what would become an annual Earth Day gathering, a community tradition that continues to this day.

In the years since, the Center has grown into a hub for conservation learning. The 2015 launch of **Fledglings Preschool** brought nature-based education to the youngest Montanans, planting seeds of environmental curiosity long before a child ever sets foot in a science classroom. The following year, the first **Native Plant Symposium** connected gardeners, landscapers, and community members to the broader work of habitat restoration. Together, these and all of the Center's other community and school programs reflect a vision of conservation that extends well beyond the field – one rooted in the belief that lasting change begins with people who understand, value, and feel connected to the natural world around them.

## LOOKING FORWARD

As Montana Audubon enters its next half-century, we are reflecting on the immense contributions to our work from partners, volunteers, and supporters.

None of this work would be possible without the people who have stood alongside us every step of the way. Your commitment to Montana's birds, other wildlife and wild places is the foundation everything else is built on.

Thank you for joining us, and we look forward to the next fifty years!



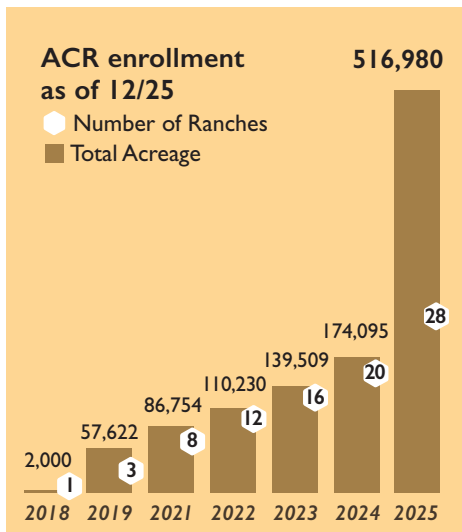


## Audubon Conservation Ranching in Montana – Over a Half-million Bird-friendly Acres!

In 2019, Montana Audubon committed to leading the Audubon Conservation Ranching (ACR) in Montana – a National Audubon Society Initiative that partners with ranchers to restore declining grassland bird populations by implementing “bird-friendly” land management. In seven years we’ve grown the program to certify 28 ACR ranches totaling over a half-million acres (516,980) statewide! Our work contributes to the National ACR initiative which reaches across 22 grassland and rangeland states west of the Mississippi River. To date, the National ACR program has certified 144 ranches, encompassing 4.2 million acres across North America.

The scope of our work includes partnering with landowners to develop ranch-specific habitat management plans (HMP); delivering grazing system projects; connecting producers to consumer markets, carbon markets, and ecotourism opportunities; and providing education, including promoting a deeper understanding of the birds living on their land.

Let’s take a broad look at our accomplishments!



See page 20 for ranch locations

### Developing Habitat Management Plans

The ACR program requires participating ranches to develop and implement a site-specific Habitat Management Plan (HMP) to earn “bird-friendly” certification. These plans focus on regenerative grazing, restoring native plant communities, and enhancing biodiversity, particularly for grassland birds, through 3rd-party verified practices. We’ve partnered with 28 ranches in Montana to write HMPs, to highlight each ranch’s stewardship practice, and to identify goals to improve ranch productivity and bird habitat into the future.

### Delivering Grazing System Projects

We learn a lot about ranch goals when we write HMPs, which allow us to seek grant funding to deliver grazing systems projects. These projects build soil and forage via grazing management, protect and retain water on the landscape, and promote biodiversity. Since 2019, we’ve delivered grant funding to 10 Montana ranches for grazing system projects, including stock water delivery/tanks/culverts, native re-seeding, riparian restoration, conifer removal and wildlife-friendly fencing.

### Building Market Connections

The ACR Green Seal is inherently a marketing tool. Featured on a website, a farmer’s market table, or on a package of meat, it communicates to consumers a producer’s commitment to regenerative land stewardship and bird conservation. Since 2019, we’ve sponsored well over 50 ranchers to attend community and educational events including the Western Sustainability Expanding Markets Conference, the Montana Grazing Lands Coalition Grazing Expo, Ranching for Profit Workshops, and the Old Salt Co-Op Festival. We’ve also sponsored ads in the Abundant Montana Local Food Guide featuring ACR ranchers that sell direct-to-consumer.

### Promoting a Deeper Appreciation for Grassland Birds

Montana Audubon’s dedicated ACR staff promote the appreciation, knowledge, and conservation of our native birds. We have a talented staff that has the skill and experience to conduct bird and habitat surveys on all participating ranches. We generate data on bird density, occupancy and distribution that contributes to information on breeding birds via the Montana Natural Heritage database, the Integrated Monitoring in Bird Conservation Regions program, and National Audubon’s ranch-specific Bird Friendliness Index (BFI). We provide bird lists to each ACR rancher that are valued and shared with family, friends, and ecotourism clients.

But perhaps the highest benefits of having our boots on the ground is when we sit on a porch and swap bird stories with the ranchers. There is a shared sense of excitement when we confirm a rancher’s knowledge of “their” birds after they’ve proudly shown us a Sharp-tailed Grouse lek or a Bald Eagle’s nest that have been on the property for generations. Sometimes, we surprise a rancher by identifying a handful of bird species that they’ve lived with their entire life but never noticed: that the soft insect-like buzz is a Grasshopper Sparrow; or that there

are male Thick-billed Longspurs singing and performing parachuting displays over seemingly barren areas of short grasses and patches of open ground. Occasionally, both ranchers and researchers are surprised by what we find, as was the case when we detected multiple Black-billed Cuckoos on

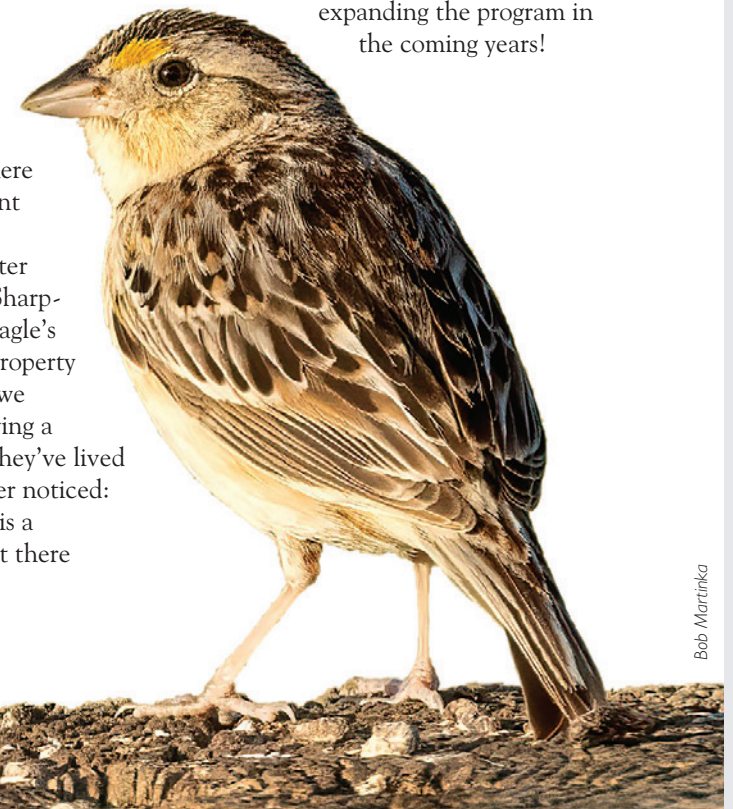
*The ACR program lets us introduce some of Montana’s best land stewards to an unanticipated value of their life’s work by sharing with them the rich bird life on their properties.*

one property. This rare and cryptic species is a Species of Concern in Montana, and these detections triggered further academic research.

Birds resonate with people, and at its best, the ACR program

lets us introduce some of Montana’s best land stewards to an unanticipated value of their life’s work by sharing with them the rich bird life on their properties.

We value these connections with ranchers, and we look forward to expanding the program in the coming years!



Grasshopper Sparrow

Bob Martinka

**Celebrating 50 Years of Bird Research**

**As Montana Audubon celebrates**

50 years of bird advocacy and conservation, we want to highlight some of the many avian research projects the organization has spearheaded or collaborated on through the years. While some of the projects relied largely on trained avian technicians from our science team, most would not have been possible without the help of hundreds of dedicated citizen scientists and volunteers.

**Black Swift Surveys**

Montana Audubon's focus on finding and monitoring nesting colonies of rare and elusive Black Swifts has been one of our flagship projects. With significant help from the National Park Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP), and dozens of volunteers, Montana Audubon has been involved in more than 600 surveys of potential Black Swift nesting sites since 2012. Most of these surveys have taken place in rugged, remote mountain landscapes, in the pre-dawn hours and well after dark.

This research has dramatically increased our understanding of Black Swift distribution and population size in Western Montana. We now know of at least 73 nesting colonies in the state, and our surveys have resulted in the first statewide Black Swift abundance estimate of 454 individuals, second only to Colorado! Our efforts have helped MFWP remove the Black Swift from the Species of Greatest Information Need list in 2025, and while we're taking a break from swift surveys in 2026, it is very likely we will continue to work with this incredible species in the future.

*Colonial waterbird surveys will target vulnerable species such as the Black Tern.*



Bob Martinka

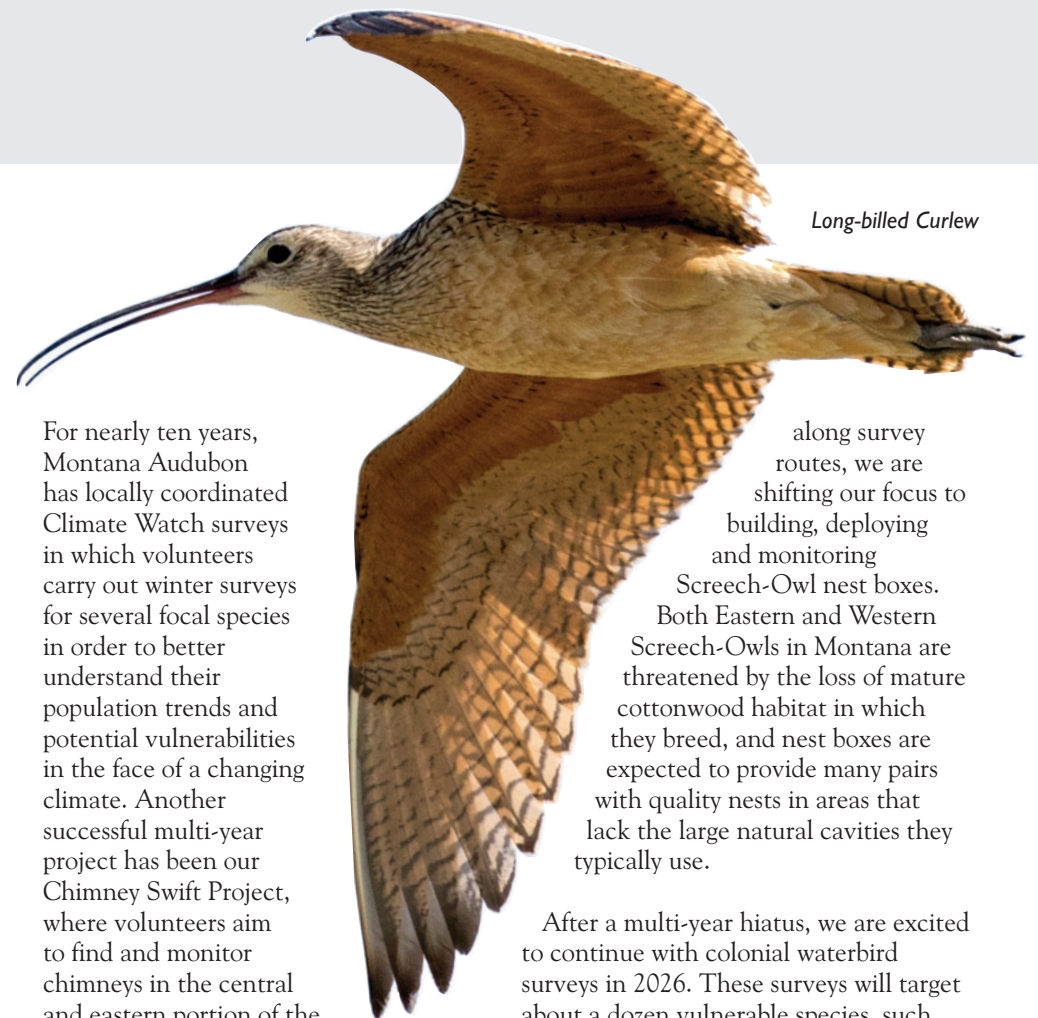
**Long-billed Curlew Surveys**

This popular citizen science project was launched in the Mission Valley in 2014 and was spearheaded by Montana Audubon for 12 years before pausing in 2026. During this time, hundreds of volunteers have surveyed more than 54 routes in the Mission, Blackfoot and Helena Valleys. Although Montana Audubon is no longer coordinating survey efforts, we are still supporting individuals and entities who wish to continue with these surveys and are thrilled to see passionate citizen scientists continuing to monitor this charismatic species using the survey framework we developed.

**Citizen Science Projects**

In addition to these two long-term projects, in the past 10 years Montana Audubon has implemented and coordinated a multitude of citizen science avian monitoring projects throughout the state. These efforts have produced thousands of observations of some of our most vulnerable species, and have greatly contributed to bird conservation efforts in Montana.

Some of our previous citizen science projects include the Great Blue Heron rookery survey project during which 74 different rookeries were monitored, and wintering Rosy-Finches feeder surveys which yielded hundreds of useful observations from dozens of volunteers.



Long-billed Curlew

For nearly ten years, Montana Audubon has locally coordinated Climate Watch surveys in which volunteers carry out winter surveys for several focal species in order to better understand their population trends and potential vulnerabilities in the face of a changing climate. Another successful multi-year project has been our Chimney Swift Project, where volunteers aim to find and monitor chimneys in the central and eastern portion of the state. This project has contributed much to our understanding of Chimney Swift distribution in Montana and resulted in significant expansion of the species' range boundary to encompass new areas where nesting and roosting were not known to occur before. Most of the known occupied chimneys in the state were first reported by project participants.

Our ongoing citizen science projects include the Nightjar Survey Project which was launched in 2024 and has seen great participation from dozens of volunteers eager to search for and document Common Nighthawks and Common Poorwills throughout the state. This year we will forgo the Common Poorwill surveys and focus only on the Common Nighthawk.

We are also continuing with our Screech-Owl monitoring efforts which also began in 2024, but instead of listening for owls

along survey routes, we are shifting our focus to building, deploying and monitoring Screech-Owl nest boxes. Both Eastern and Western Screech-Owls in Montana are threatened by the loss of mature cottonwood habitat in which they breed, and nest boxes are expected to provide many pairs with quality nests in areas that lack the large natural cavities they typically use.

After a multi-year hiatus, we are excited to continue with colonial waterbird surveys in 2026. These surveys will target about a dozen vulnerable species, such as the American White Pelican and Black Tern, which breed in some of our National Wildlife Refuges and Wildlife Management Areas.

The newest project in Montana Audubon's long list of bird monitoring efforts will be our upcoming Alpine Bird Surveys project in Glacier National Park, which will take place in July and August instead of the Black Swift Project.

As always, we are excited to move forward with projects that inform and educate Montanans on the status and trends of some of our most vulnerable bird species. This important work would not be possible without the support and dedication of hundreds of citizen scientists, dozens of wildlife professionals, and invaluable partnerships with multiple state and federal agencies which care about the future of our feathered friends as much as we do.

**Building on a Legacy of Restoration and Conservation**

This year marks many meaningful milestones, including the 10th anniversary of the Native Plant Symposium at the Montana Audubon Center. This moment reflects more than a decade of shared learning – it represents a growing commitment to understanding, restoring, and stewarding the landscapes we call home.

In many ways, the Symposium mirrors what happens every day at the Audubon Center: individuals coming together to make a difference, then sharing that knowledge to educate and empower others. Each effort builds on the work of those who came before, creating something stronger, more resilient, and more connected over time.

*“Each effort builds on the last – growing something stronger, more resilient, and more connected.”*

Nearly three decades ago, the land that now hosts the Montana Audubon Center was a barren gravel pit, stripped of life and shaped by extraction. Today, it tells a very different story. Birds (including Osprey, American Widgeon, Northern Shoveler, and teal) are regular visitors to the ponds, native plants bloom in abundance, and students move through the landscape with curiosity and purpose. What was once empty has become alive again – not just with wildlife, but with people connected to a place.

That transformation began in 1998 with an ambitious vision to restore both habitat and community connection. Early efforts focused on reshaping the land, reintroducing native vegetation, and restoring water systems. With the help of dedicated supporters and volunteers, the site gradually evolved into a thriving ecosystem. Today, it supports migrating waterfowl, year-round resident birds, pollinators, and a wide range of mammals, amphibians, and reptiles.

*“What was once empty has become alive again.”*

But restoration is not an endpoint – it is an ongoing relationship. At the Montana Audubon Center, the work has grown into something deeper: reciprocity – a shared exchange in which people care for the land, and in return, the land sustains both wildlife and community. The focus has shifted from simply repairing the land to actively participating in its long-term health through thoughtful stewardship.

We are currently focused on:

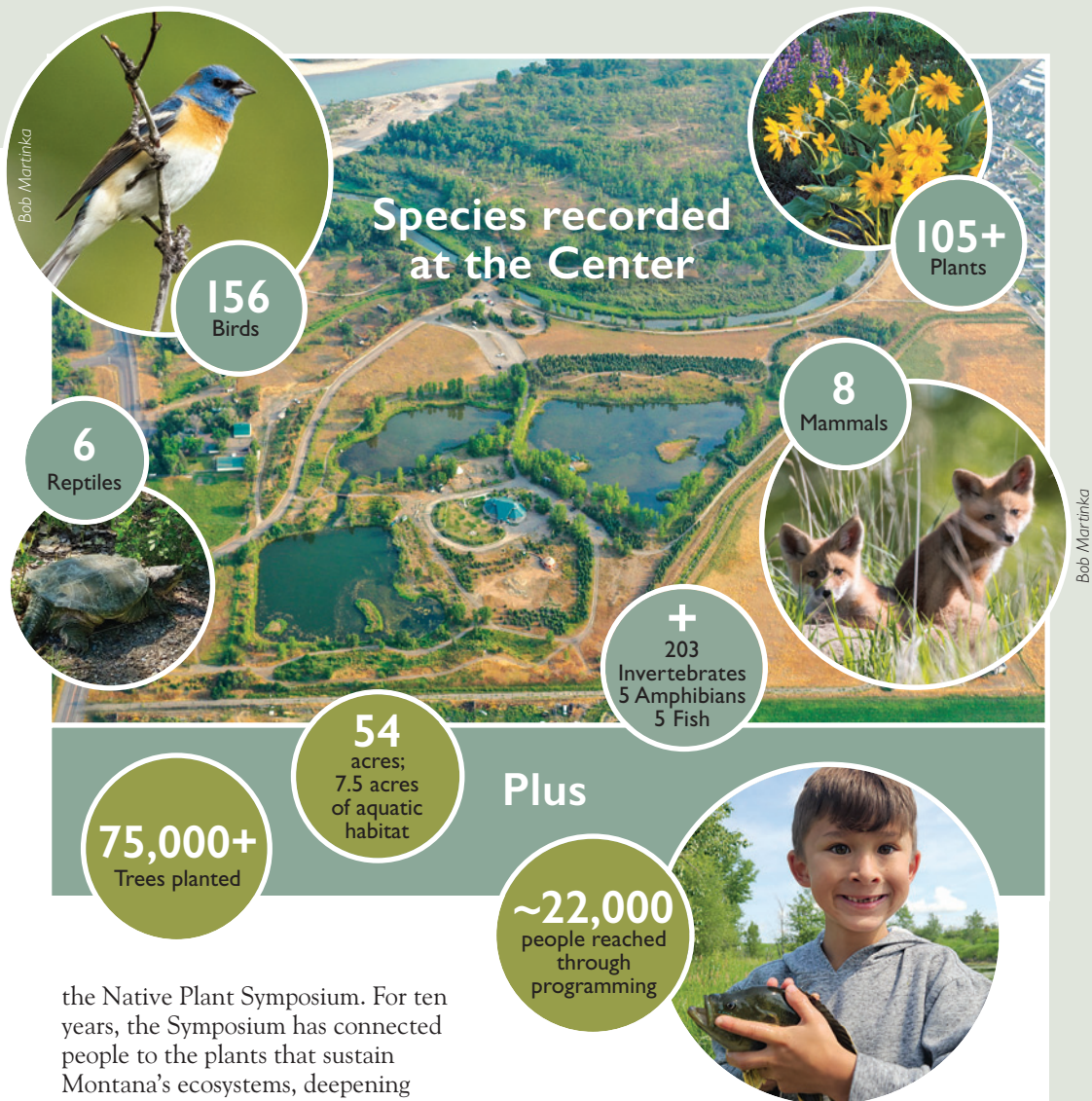
**Improving Pond Health**  
Enhancing aquatic habitats to support native species and improve water quality through the installation of a wind-powered aerator to increase oxygenation, alongside developing water quality monitoring protocols and fish surveys to guide future management decisions

**Increasing Diversity**  
Planting native species to strengthen ecosystem resilience and support local pollinators, including the cultivation of 900 native plants to expand habitat resources, as well as conducting tree surveys to assess and support long-term tree health

**Monitoring Migrations**  
Supporting the seasonal arrival of waterfowl and the year-round presence of songbirds and mammals through community science efforts such as the Montana Bumble Bee Survey, iNaturalist observations, and eBird tracking

Together, these efforts help ensure the vitality of this shared space for generations to come.

Across the landscape, habitat enhancement efforts continue to increase plant diversity and strengthen ecological resilience. Native species are carefully reintroduced to support birds and pollinators, creating a system that can adapt and thrive over time. This commitment to native plants is not only visible on the landscape, but is carried into the community through programs like



the Native Plant Symposium. For ten years, the Symposium has connected people to the plants that sustain Montana’s ecosystems, deepening knowledge and inspiring action.

*“Restoration is not an endpoint – it is an ongoing relationship.”*

Equally important is the role of education in shaping the future of this work. Through programs like Audubon Naturalist in the Schools (ANTS) and Conservation and Research Experiences (CARES), students actively participate in conservation by collecting data, conducting fieldwork, and engaging in hands-on science. These experiences go beyond learning; they foster stewardship and empower young people to see themselves as part of the solution.

The Montana Audubon Center is more than a restored landscape: it is a living example of what happens when community and conservation grow together. Through citizen science, volunteerism, and events like the Native Plant Symposium, people are not just visitors, but active participants. What began as a restoration project has become something larger: a place where land and community sustain one another. And as that relationship continues to grow, so does its impact – for today, and for the future.

*“What we restore, restores us.”*

*Special thanks to the Mary Alice Fortin Foundation for their continued support of the Montana Audubon Center.*



# The Land and Water Conservation Fund: An Investment in Montana Conservation

**As an organization** that has spent 50 years conserving Montana's natural heritage, we are continuing to fight for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and to protect it from damaging changes. The federal government has proposed diverting 43% of this fund from land, water and wildlife to funding roads and infrastructure on public lands. We look forward to working with our federal congressional delegation to push back on this effort and to save the legacy of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) and ensure that LWCF remains a successful program. From the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem to the Swan Valley and the Rocky Mountain Front, from Bighorn Canyon to Meeteetse Spires, LWCF funding has helped ensure some of Montana's most unique public landscapes remain intact.

Thanks in part to our efforts, enactment of GAOA in 2020 finally unleashed the true strength of this incredibly successful bipartisan program through permanent, dedicated funding of LWCF. The signing of the GAOA jumpstarted conservation investment in Montana, expanding critical recreation access in places like Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge, Beavertooth to Bearmouth in the Lolo National Forest, the Blackfoot River Watershed and along the High Divide. LWCF funding has also been critical to keeping our private forests working and accessible for outdoor recreation through the Forest Legacy Program. No state has received more Forest Legacy funding than Montana over the history of the program.

Our communities enjoy innumerable benefits from proximity to forests,

parks, refuges, trails and other areas for hiking, hunting, fishing, mountain biking, camping, paddling, mountain climbing, and, of course, birdwatching! Continued LWCF investment for public land protection and outdoor recreation in Montana is crucial to

*Continued LWCF investment is crucial to ensuring our legacy of hiking, hunting, fishing, mountain biking, camping, paddling, mountain climbing, and, of course, birdwatching!*

ensuring this legacy and important driver of our economy. Today, outdoor recreation activities generate \$3.4 billion in annual revenue to Montana, supporting nearly 31,000 sustainable jobs. More than 950,000 people in Montana each year spend over \$1.1 billion on wildlife-related recreation alone.

Despite the incredible success of GAOA, we remain vigilant to pressing threats to LWCF. As Congress works to reauthorize the Legacy Restoration Fund, it must ensure the future of LWCF remains strong by defending against proposals to weaken this incredibly successful program. The 2026 Voter Survey on Public Lands shows strong bipartisan support for public lands. Sixty-seven percent of Montanans surveyed support the original purpose of the LWCF, and don't want funds diverted for infrastructure. Eighty-five percent support finding new federal funding sources to support infrastructure projects on public lands.

Given the attempts to constrain implementation of LWCF and divert funding to non-LWCF purposes, we stand with the majority of Montanans and strongly urge our U.S. congressional delegation to vigorously oppose all attempts to limit LWCF and the conservation and public access successes it has provided and can continue to provide in Montana.

John Lambing

North Fork Blackfoot River

## 2026 Audubon Wildlife Fund Grant Awardees

Since 1996, Montana Audubon has awarded grants in support of research and education projects directed toward wildlife and habitat conservation. Funds are awarded from earnings generated by the Audubon Wildlife Fund of Montana, a permanent endowment.

In 2026, six grants were awarded:

- **Adam Potts**, to help support the Hoot Owl Project
- **Gallatin Watershed Council**, to support the Riparian Walks Program
- **Flathead Audubon**, to support the Jewel Basin Hawk Watch, a long-term annual raptor monitoring effort of a key migration monitoring site in the Flathead National Forest
- **Last Chance Audubon**, to help install a MOTUS tower in the Helena Valley



Barred Owl

Adam Potts

- **Jack Creek Preserve Foundation**, to support Conservation Field School for Educators: Birds of a Feather, a project providing Montana educators with curriculum on Montana's Birds
- **Montana Wild Wings Recovery Center**, to support their work documenting and tracking raptor rescue locations, injuries, and admission causes

We are looking forward to following the important research and work of these grant recipients, and will have updates to share later this fall.

### Celebrate 50 years of conservation with limited-edition Montana Audubon Golden Anniversary merchandise!

Mark this milestone with a striking Golden Eagle shirt featuring original artwork by our Avian Specialist, Bo Crees – available in both unisex and women's fits.

Top it off with our commemorative 50th anniversary logo hat, beautifully embroidered and ready for the field. Commemorate this milestone and carry Montana Audubon's conservation legacy with you wherever you go!

Only available for order with festival registration. See festival website for pricing and more information.



Front

Back

## EXPANDING OUR FLOCK

### Jessica French

#### Audubon Conservation Ranching Manager

Jessica grew up in Colorado, but after spending countless days exploring the Big Sky state with her Montana City-based grandmother, she moved to Montana as soon as she graduated high school. Jessica graduated from Montana State University with a BS in Animal Science and a minor in Natural Resource and Rangeland Ecology. A college internship with the Forest Service in New Mexico pointed her in the direction of federal service, and she spent the past 14 years working for the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management as a Wildlife Technician and Rangeland Management Specialist, with botany, grazing and wildlife work that has spanned from the Raft River Mountains in Utah to the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho to the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument in Montana. She has a passion for public lands and wild places and is an avid hunter, angler and wild game cook.



### Lizzie Weinreb

#### Big Sky Watershed Corps – Montana Audubon Center

Lizzie was raised along the East Coast (PA, NJ, NY), where her love for bugs and the outdoors began early. She moved to Colorado in 2019 to earn a degree in Environmental Studies from the University of Colorado Boulder, with minors in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and Communications. After graduating, she spent six months solo backpacking through Southeast Asia before returning to Boulder to work on a nonprofit farm as an assistant and educator. Drawn to the Mountain West, she will be serving with the Big Sky Watershed Corps and Montana Audubon for the 2026 season, focusing on land stewardship, outreach, and education. She is most excited to assist in conservation projects at the center and further her outdoor ed skills (and learn about birds!). In her free time, Lizzie enjoys recreating outdoors, reading, baking for friends, and going to the movies.



### Casey Zacney

#### Big Sky Watershed Corps – Citizen Science and Communications

Casey was born and raised in the Greater Philadelphia area and moved to Helena in 2025. She earned a degree in Environmental Studies from Gettysburg College and worked for Philadelphia Parks and Rec, as well as trail crews along the Appalachians and coast of North Carolina. She is super excited to become a certified bird nerd and hopes to learn as much as possible during her Big Sky Watershed term this year. Outside of work, she enjoys reading, writing, cooking, and spending time with her beloved cat, Buttercup.



### MOBILIZE YOUR PASSION FOR BIRDS

Make a meaningful impact for the birds of Montana by choosing the Bird Habitat License plate, which features an American Avocet, Ruddy Duck, Lewis's Woodpecker, and a trio of Black-billed Magpies – on a Rocky Mountain Front backdrop. For an affordable price, you can support Montana Audubon and our bird conservation work while cruising under the Big Sky.

For more details visit [mtaudubon.org](http://mtaudubon.org)



## Birding in Ecuador and India

### With Merlin Birding & Nature Tours

Diane Gresham



Wire-tailed Manakin

#### Ecuador: Birding the Chocó-Andes Region • February 12–21 2027 • From \$4,175

Join a 10-day birding adventure through Ecuador's cloud forests and high-elevation landscapes. Accompanied by an expert local guide, you'll explore incredible reserves including Alambi Cloud Forest, Milpe Bird Sanctuary, and Antisana Ecological Reserve while seeking out remarkable species including the Andean Condor, Long-wattled Umbrellabird, Andean Cock-of-the-Rock, an incredible array of hummingbirds, and rare finds like the Moss-backed Tanager – all set against one of the most biodiverse birding destinations on the planet.

#### Ecuador: Birding the Amazon Rainforest • February 19–26, 2027 • from \$5,395

Starting in the eastern Andean foothills at Wild Sumaco Wildlife Sanctuary before descending into the Amazon Basin along the Napo River, this immersive rainforest birding adventure pairs canopy walks, forest hikes, and canoe excursions with extraordinary wildlife encounters – from Scarlet Macaws and Hoatzins to monkeys, sloths, caimans, and river otters. We'll look for Many-banded Aracari, Magpie Tanager, Gilded Barbet and so much more! Pair it with the Chocó-Andes trip above for the ultimate Ecuador birding experience.



#### National Parks of Central India

February 8–24, 2027 • from \$9,900

Join Roaming Naturalists on this epic 17-day journey through Central India, beginning with a sensory-rich day exploring Delhi before heading into the heart of the country's legendary wildlife reserves. Safari drives across three iconic national parks – Bandhavgarh, Kanha, and Pench – offer extraordinary chances to spot Bengal tigers, leopards, Asian elephants, sloth bears, and the endangered Barasingha, all set within the Sal and teak forests that inspired Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, and complemented throughout by vibrant birdlife including White-throated Kingfisher, Crested Serpent-Eagle, and the brilliantly colored Indian Roller, among many others.

For more information on these and other tours, visit the Merlin Birding Tours website ([merlinbirding.com](http://merlinbirding.com)) or contact Steve Hoffman at 406-461-5741.



# 2025 Accomplishments

**2025 WAS A YEAR TO CELEBRATE** – and celebrate we did, alongside the extraordinary community of people who make this work possible.

From a major milestone in our Audubon Conservation Ranching program, with over a half million acres of grasslands protected, to 221 dedicated citizen science volunteers contributing their time and passion across three projects, the breadth of this community's impact is nothing short of remarkable.

Perhaps most joyfully, we marked a full decade of Fledglings Nature Preschool: ten years of connecting the youngest members of our community to the wonders of the natural world.



**THESE HIGHLIGHTS** reflect not just what was accomplished, but who accomplished it: neighbors, ranchers, volunteers, families, and friends united by a shared love of birds and the places they call home.



*Barrow's Goldeneye*

Bob Martinka

## Education & Outreach

### MONTANA AUDUBON CENTER

- **Celebrated 10 years** of Fledging Preschool!
- **269 volunteers** contributed 1,573 hours
- **Launched a new project:** Conservation And Research Experience (CAREs) program, with 96 participating high school students
- **900 plants were grown**, many from seed collected from the Center grounds
- **A record high 73 classes** participated in the Audubon Naturalists in the Schools (ANTS) program
- **Collaborated with** the Flathead Biological Station on a Water Quality Program

### OTHER OUTREACH

- **Brought together 188 attendees** at the 24th annual *Wings Across the Big Sky* Birding Festival in Missoula
- **Sponsored and attended** the Old Salt Festival at the Mannix Ranch in Helmsville
- **Sponsored** the Western Sustainability Exchange's Expanding Markets Conference and the Montana Grazing Lands Coalition Grazing Expo
- **Sponsored** the Montana Environmental Education Association Conference in Helena

*Weeding Day at Service Learning Camp*



# 2025 Accomplishments

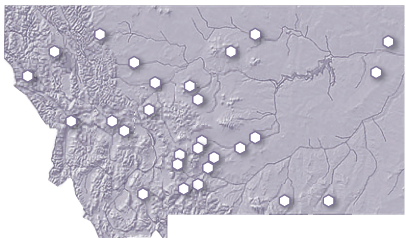


Bo Crees

Black-billed Cuckoo

## Conservation Ranching

- **A major milestone** for the ACR program: 8 ranches were certified in 2025, bringing the total to 28 – encompassing 516,980 acres!
- **Conducted 30** bird monitoring surveys on 13 ACR ranches, detecting a total of 162 species and 17 priority grassland species
- **Detected a Black-billed Cuckoo**, a rare species in Montana, on an ACR ranch



Certified ACR ranches in Montana  
See full story on page 8

## Policy & Advocacy

- **Worked on 51 bills** and tracked over 100 bills during the 69th Legislative Session
- **Secured roughly \$32 million** in funding for habitat restoration, land protection, non-game wildlife, and wildlife crossings through HB 932
- **Sent letters to Congress** advocating for increased protections and sustained funding for Greater Sage-grouse in FY26 and FY27



Wolverine, a Montana Species of Concern

- **Supported Montana's 2025/2026** Non-game Work Plan which implements the State Wildlife Action Plan 2025 renewal and funds Species of Concern research and conservation

## Citizen Science & Bird Research

- **221 volunteers** participated in three citizen science projects: surveys for screech-owls, Long-billed Curlews, and a new pilot survey for nightjars
- **Volunteers covered 167** survey routes, detecting 1,713 target species across the three projects
- **Surveyed 34** potential Black Swift nesting sites a total of 82 times, detecting Black Swifts at half of the sites

Bo Crees



Black Swift nesting site surveys included Glacier National Park

**AT OUR 50-YEAR MARK,** Montana Audubon is in a strong financial position which empowers us to continue our work on native birds, other wildlife and their habitats across Montana. You make this possible through your much-appreciated support of our vital conservation work. Thank you!

### Statement of Financial Position

Unrestricted Net Assets	\$ 1,241,630
Board Designated Net Assets	\$ 2,833,141
Restricted Net Assets	\$ 54,227
<b>Total Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 4,128,998</b>

12-month Fiscal Year Ending 9-30-25

### Revenue

Grants & Contracts	\$ 612,847
Earned Income	\$ 411,229
Contributions	\$ 248,970
Investment Income	\$ 138,495
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 1,411,541</b>

### Expenses

Programs	\$ 1,085,917
Administrative	\$ 233,790
Fundraising	\$ 125,887
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 1,445,594</b>

Montana Audubon is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization under 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Code. Financials are being audited by the accounting firm Amatics CPA Group. The above financials were not audited in time for this publication.

# Thank You for Supporting Montana Audubon

Thanks to generous donors – like you! – we are able to continue to achieve our mission to promote appreciation, knowledge, and conservation of Montana's native birds, other wildlife, and natural ecosystems for current and future generations. Without you, our work would not be possible.

The following people generously contributed \$100 or more between March 2025 and February 2026. Special thanks to those who made gifts in honor or in memory of friends and loved ones.

#### \$2,500 & Up

Dana & Frans Andersson  
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& William Bevis  
Shari & Robert Dayton

**Please note:** Due to space constraints, we are only able to list donors who gave \$100 or more. We want to express our sincere gratitude and appreciation to all of our donors, as every donation makes a difference. Also, this list does not include event registration fees, auction purchases below fair market value, or endowment gifts. If you notice any inaccuracies, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Kristie Decker & William Morgan  
Terry & Dennis Divoky  
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& Bert Lindler  
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Hugh & Karen Zackheim  
Gary & Donna Zinn  
Hans & Barbara Zuuring

#### IN HONOR

We are grateful to donors who recognize the following individuals through gifts made in their honor:

Michael Becker  
Stephanie Becker  
Rebecca and Jo Bannon

#### IN MEMORY

We are grateful to donors who have made generous gifts to honor the legacy of the following individuals:

Timothy Garcia  
Beverly Siddoway  
Robin Gaetano



Black-capped Chickadee

Bob Martinka

## Special Thanks

We extend our deep appreciation to the following foundations, agencies, corporations, and organizations – through your financial support, our work and impact are made possible and amplified.

### Foundations

Bert Family Charitable Fund  
Billings Community Foundation  
Centennial Youth Foundation  
Cinnabar Foundation  
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Indian Education for All  
Montana Department of Environmental Quality  
Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks  
U.S. Bureau of Land Management

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Science Street Labs Inc  
Western Sustainability Exchange  
Wild Birds Unlimited, Billings

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Bitterroot Bird Alliance  
Five Valleys Audubon Society  
Flathead Audubon Society  
Friends of Tracy Aviary  
Glacier National Park Conservancy

Last Chance Audubon Society  
Missoula Butterfly House and Insectarium  
Montana Native Plant Society  
Montana Outdoor Legacy Foundation  
National Audubon Society  
University of Montana Bird Ecology Lab  
Upper Missouri Breaks Audubon Society  
Raptor View Research Institute  
Yellowstone River Parks Association

## Thank you to our dedicated volunteers!

Thank you for your incredible generosity and dedication. Your time, energy, and expertise have been essential in helping us achieve our mission.

### Citizen Science Volunteers

Kristen Bontadelli  
Lucy Atwell  
Harrison Aubrey  
Rebecca Barkley  
Steve Barkley  
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Susan Beale-Spencer  
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Samantha Yonan  
Willa Zhang  
Casey Zacney

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Jacob Barnes  
Ella Engelhard  
Amanda Hall  
Dana Harty  
Scott Hemmer  
Nicole Hussey  
Daniel Johnson  
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Eliza Brekke  
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Barefoot University  
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JustServe  
Riverside Builders Club  
Scouting America Troop 52  
Service Learning Camp  
Skyview Life Skills  
West High Life Skills  
YRPA

## We count birds because birds count on us!



It's time once again for our annual Birdathon, Montana Audubon's largest fundraiser of the year.

### What is Birdathon?

For a 24 hour period in June, Montana Audubon staff will spread out across the state to count and record as many bird species as possible. We're hoping to spot over 100 bird species this year!



Giving to the Birdathon is easy. You can choose to donate on a per-bird species basis, or a lump-sum gift. See the enclosed Birdathon return envelope, or make a donation online. To make a pledge per bird, return your donation envelope to us in the mail, or email your pledge information to [info@mtaudubon.org](mailto:info@mtaudubon.org).



However you choose to give, your support will directly benefit Montana's native birds and their habitats.

### Double your conservation impact!

The best part? Thanks to a generous donor, your gift will be matched dollar for dollar up to \$10,000. This means that your donation to Birdathon will have double the impact! Whether you give \$25 or \$250, every donation will be doubled to help support our conservation programs across Montana.



Individual donors are the financial backbone of Montana Audubon. Please help sustain our conservation efforts with a contribution to our 2026 Birdathon!

And, anyone who donates a lump sum of \$100 or more, or pledges \$1 or more per bird, will receive their choice of the laminated Montana Audubon Bird Guide or Wildlife Guide. Donate \$200 or pledge \$2 per bird and get both!



[mtaudubon.org/events/birdathon](http://mtaudubon.org/events/birdathon)

25<sup>TH</sup> Annual

# wings across the big sky

Montana's Premier Birding Festival

JUNE 12-14, 2026  
RED LION HOTEL,  
KALISPELL



## CELEBRATE 50 YEARS

of Montana Audubon and 25 years of *Wings Across the Big Sky* birding festival! Montana Audubon is partnering with Flathead Audubon Society to present this long-standing community event, dedicated to celebrating Montana's native bird species, wildlife, and stunning landscapes.

Join us in Kalispell for a weekend filled with field trips, a keynote by Hawkwatch International founder and former Montana Audubon executive director Steve Hoffman, exciting auction items, and more!

Scholarships are available from both Flathead Audubon and Five Valleys Audubon – visit the festival website for more information.

Field trips are filling up fast, but we still have spots available – register today! Learn more and register on the festival website:  
[mtaudubon.org/events/wings-across-the-big-sky](http://mtaudubon.org/events/wings-across-the-big-sky)

Register  
today!



John Lambing

  
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Helena MT