
MONTANA'S COLONIAL NESTING WATERBIRD SURVEY

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Wetlands are a dispersed but declining resource in Montana. They are considered a Tier 1 community (greatest conservation need) in Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy and are of critical importance to breeding waterbirds. Of the 17 colonially-nesting waterbirds in the state, 12 are Montana Species of Concern. Despite the conservation ranking of waterbirds and their habitats, information on the distribution and abundance of these wetland obligates is limited. The Montana Bird Conservation Partnership is participating in the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service west-wide colonial nesting waterbird inventory to contribute to regional population estimates and meet state information needs. We are focusing on Species of Concern. We counted nests at 123 wetland sites across the state in 2009 and at 133 sites in 2010. Colony size ranged from 1-4833 pairs. Most colonies were relatively small (1-195 pairs), except Franklin's Gulls and American White Pelicans. High water levels likely affected reproductive success in spring 2010. Additional survey work will be conducted in 2011. In addition to calculating estimates of population size, we plan to use these data, in conjunction with other work, to link waterbird populations to wetland condition for use in future conservation decisions and planning. Our work has particular relevance to predicted changes in timing and amount of precipitation associated with climate change, which will likely change wetland condition and distribution throughout the state.