

Monthly Bird Happenings at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge
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One of the most frequently asked questions by visitors to the Refuge is, “When is the best time to come to the Refuge to see the birds?” And the answer is, “Well it depends on what bird species you want to see!” Below is a month-by-month account of bird abundance and use of the Refuge.

January-February-December

These three months, have the lowest average Refuge bird populations at less than 24,000. Throughout the winter months, Refuge wetlands go through an almost constant cycle of freezing and thawing. The freeze usually encourages many of the Refuge’s waterfowl species to migrate further south such as the northern shoveler, northern pintail, gadwall, and tundra swan. If a solid freeze occurs, most of the tundra swans will leave the Great Salt Valley and finish the winter on the delta of the San Joaquin and Sacramento Rivers in California.

Small numbers of waterfowl will remain on the Refuge during these months (11,000 – 20,000) and include such species as tundra swan, mallard, northern pintail, and common goldeneye. A contingent of raptors; bald eagle, rough-legged hawk, prairie and peregrine falcons, are also present during the winter.

March

In the spring, March is usually the first month to welcome returning cinnamon teal, double-crested cormorant, American white pelican, killdeer, American avocet, black-necked stilt, long-billed curlew, snowy plover, California gull, sandhill crane, eared grebe, and western and Clark’s grebes. March is time to say good-bye to the hardy rough-legged hawk that spent the winter here hunting small mammals. March is also the time of year when the bald eagle numbers peak. The average high peak for bald eagles is 77 for the first week of March. The all time Refuge high count of bald eagles was on March 8, 1992 of 181. The spring peak waterfowl migration usually occurs the last week of March and can be as high as 440,000 ducks.

April

April sees the arrival of many of the colonial waterbirds such as great blue heron, snowy egret, cattle egret, black-crowned night heron, and white-faced ibis. Shorebirds like greater and lesser yellowlegs, willet, marbled godwit and dowitchers start to amass. These shorebirds are only “re-fueling” for their northward trek to the breeding grounds. Marsh birds like Caspian and Forster’s Terns start to turn up. The big flocks of tundra swans have departed the Refuge by the second week of April for their Alaskan breeding grounds as well as many of the diving ducks; canvasback, common goldeneye, lesser scaup, and bufflehead. The first of many Canada goose broods can be seen in mid to late April.

The shorebirds that stay to nest like the American avocet, snowy plover, and long-billed curlew establish nesting territories, construct nests and begin egg-laying and incubation.

May

May heralds the chorus of “Hail, Hail, the gang’s all here”.... By May virtually all of the breeding bird species are present and accounted for. Many, are well into nesting and incubation such as the cormorants, mallard, white-faced ibis, and California gull. The majority of northbound migrant waterfowl, shorebirds and songbirds have departed. A lucky visitor may be treated to the sight of western and Clark’s grebe pairs running across the water as part of their courtship ritual.

In mid-May the first fuzzy duck broods of gadwall and mallard can be seen and are quickly joined by the earliest hatched American avocets.

June

By now, many of the young Canada geese have grown so large they are difficult to distinguish from their parents. Canada geese undergo a wing molt and are flightless while their new feathers are growing in. They concentrate on the large open water wetlands of the Refuge during this time as they are highly vulnerable to ground predators. Young black-crowned night heron, great blue heron, and snowy egret have hatched and are being fed by their attentive parents within the nesting colonies. The first black-necked stilt and ruddy duck broods can be seen around mid-June. The first southbound migrant shorebirds like marbled godwit, lesser yellowlegs and Baird’s sandpiper begin to arrive. American white pelicans are readily seen in feeding flocks gorging on fish to take back to their young and mate waiting on Gunnison Island.

July

This is the peak month to view young. The ducklings can be seen feeding in the shallows with the hen. She is flightless at this time as she undergoes a wing molt. Young avocet and stilt chicks can be seen dashing about the shallows in search of such morsels as water-striders and midge larvae. Numbers of drakes or males, of several duck species like mallard, northern shoveler and northern pintail increase as they also come to the Refuge while they undergo the molt process. Be sure to check the tops of piled vegetation in the wetlands for nesting western, Clark’s, pied-billed, and eared grebes. Adult grebes with chicks riding on their backs start to appear towards the end of the month. Shorebird migration is in full swing with large flocks of western sandpipers and Wilson’s phalaropes numbering in the 10s of thousands.

August

The second week of August is the peak of the shorebird migration on the Refuge with an average population around 70,000. Avocets and stilts and their young of the year from all over the intermountain west have congregated at the Great Salt Lake and Bear River Refuge. Numbers of these species swell to more than 20,000 each. Populations of dabbling ducks like cinnamon teal, green-winged teal and northern shoveler start to increase. The young of the year gulls, ibis and terns are capable of flight. Large flocks

of snowy egret and white-faced ibis can be seen feeding in the shallows and along the shorelines.

September

The vibrant greens of alkali and hardstem bulrush in the marsh during the spring and summer months has now given way to the muted browns of fall. The fall waterfowl migration peaks in late September around 200,000. Northern harriers are welcomed back in large numbers to the Refuge from their breeding grounds. It is time to say goodbye to special bird friends like the American avocet, black-necked stilt, snowy plover, long-billed curlew, Franklin's gull and white-faced ibis as they depart for their more southerly wintering areas. The numbers of California gull decline while the ring-billed gull population swells.

October

The majority of shorebirds have left the Refuge. Only American avocet, marbled godwit and long-billed dowitcher remain. Late October heralds the arrival of tundra swans from their Alaskan breeding grounds as well as many of the diving duck species that frequent the Great Salt Lake Valley such as canvasback, common goldeneye and lesser scaup. Cinnamon teal head to warmer climes.

November

This month usually brings the first freeze of the season, triggering the first exodus by migrant waterfowl. Bald eagles begin to pepper the edges of pockets of open water in an otherwise frozen landscape, where waterfowl have concentrated. Rough-legged hawks pushed from their northern breeding grounds can now be seen cruising the edge of the marshes for a meal.

There's something new to see each month of the year at Bear River Refuge. Come enjoy!