

Mountain-Prairie Region

Year in Review 2009



The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

From the Regional Director



USDOJ

Stephen Guertin, Regional Director

IT IS A DISTINCT PRIVILEGE to serve as Regional Director for the Mountain-Prairie Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Region includes eight states across three distinct landscapes — North and South Dakota; Montana and Wyoming; and Utah, Colorado, Nebraska, and Kansas. The eastern portion of the region is comprised of the Great Plains,

primarily the short- and mixed-grass prairies. To the west rise the great Rocky Mountains and the intermountain area beyond the Continental Divide, including parts of the sprawling Colorado plateau and the Great Basin. In the Region's northeast lie the prairie potholes, which contain some of the most important nesting habitat for waterfowl in North America.

The Mountain-Prairie Region contains approximately 740,000 square miles, nearly as much land mass as all of Mexico. The Region is home to grizzly bears, gray wolves, bison, bald and golden eagles, waterfowl, six species of cutthroat trout, and migratory birds of every imaginable size and color. The pallid sturgeon and razorback sucker, fish that existed more than 5 million years ago, can still be found in our rivers.

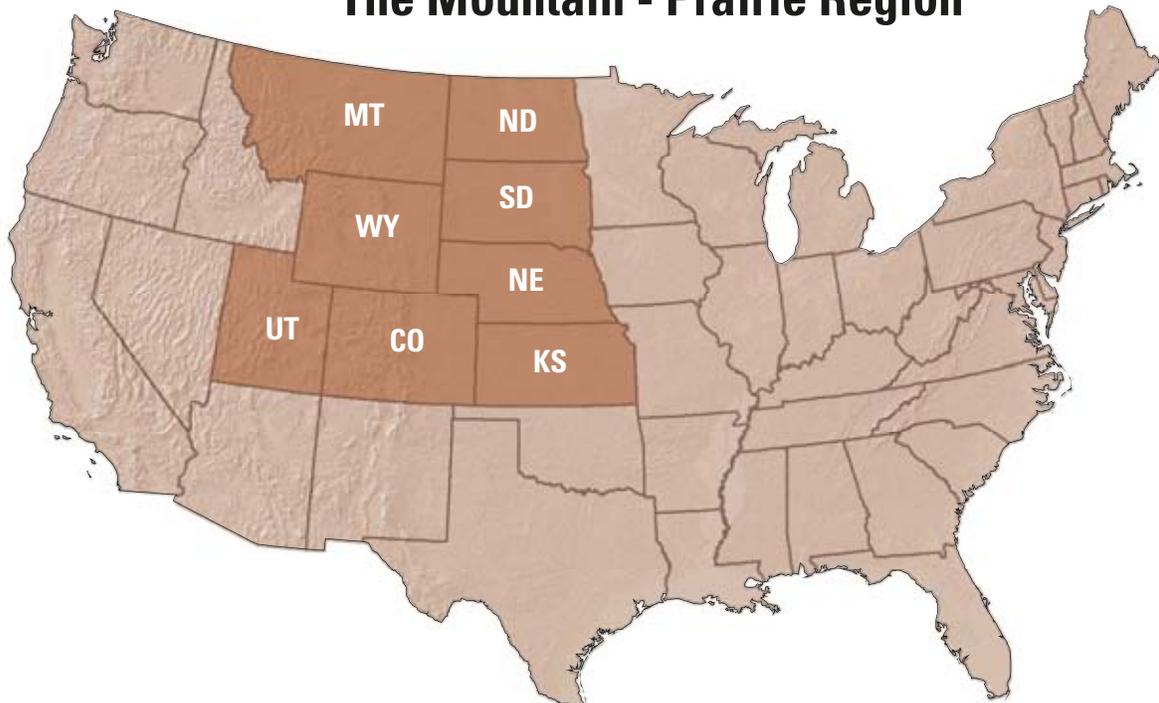
This Region, where the mountains meet the prairies, delivers the Service's conservation mission through more than 5 million acres, including 134 National Wildlife Refuges, waterfowl production areas including fee title and private land easements established to conserve wetlands and grasslands, and 12 National

Fish Hatcheries. Also included in the Region are a National Fish Health Center and National Fish Technology Center, grant funding and technical assistance for states and tribes, migratory bird management, recovery efforts for a variety of threatened and endangered species, programs to help private and tribal landowners restore habitat, and law enforcement for the protection of our natural resources.

In 2009, the Mountain-Prairie Region joined the entire Service in promoting conservation on a landscape scale. Instead of conserving a single species, the Service and our partners will work to safeguard entire landscapes and all the species and habitats that compose a landscape. Toward this end, the Service has started conservation alliances, formally referred to as Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCC). For more information on the Service's emerging LCCs, please see the following page.

By working together; we can effectively address the new challenges to our natural resources in the Mountain-Prairie Region and across the nation.

The Mountain - Prairie Region



Landscape Conservation Cooperatives

In the face of escalating challenges such as land-use conversion, invasive species, water scarcity, and a range of other complex issues — all of which are amplified by accelerated climate change — the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service embarked several years ago to develop a broader vision for conservation.

science capacity to help us carry out the functional elements of landscape conservation — biological planning, conservation design, conservation delivery, monitoring, and research — and inform our strategic response to accelerated climate change.



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Rocky Mountain Front, Montana

To ensure we're "putting science in the right places," the Service Directorate in 2009 determined the agency needed a national geographic framework for implementing landscape conservation. This geographic framework will provide a continental platform upon which the Service can work with partners to connect project- and site-specific efforts to larger biological goals and outcomes and serve as a base geography to locate the first generation of Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs). LCCs are conservation-science partnerships between the Service, federal agencies, states, tribes, nongovernmental organizations, universities, and other entities. They are fundamental units of planning and

Northern LCC to develop scientific capacity to address climate change and other stressors to wildlife species and habitats in an integrated fashion within the Northern Rockies and Columbia Basin, including significant portions of western Montana. At present, the Service and its partners are conducting needs assessments and identifying key infrastructure elements and priority tasking for the Great Northern, a major node for which will be at Bozeman, Montana, allowing the LCC and its participants to tap the outstanding academic and wildlife science resources associated with Montana State University, the USGS Northern Rocky Mountains Science Center, and other local institutions.

The Service's Mountain-Prairie Region is working to "stand up" three LCCs in Fiscal Year 2010.

Together with the Pacific Region, we are working with a wide variety of partners, including federal and state agencies, tribes, nongovernmental organizations, and universities to establish the Great

In addition, the Service's Mountain-Prairie and Midwest Regions have been working collaboratively to engage staff and external partners in order to identify science needs and partnership opportunities in the Plains and Prairie Potholes LCC, which includes the entire state of North Dakota; a portion of South Dakota; two-thirds of Montana; one third of Wyoming; large blocks of southern Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan; and portions of Nebraska, Minnesota, and Iowa.

Finally, we are partnering with the Service's Southwest Region to build the Great Plains LCC, an applied conservation partnership that will provide science and decision-support tools for the full complement of plant, fish, and wildlife resources in the Great Plains geographic area, including parts or all of New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming.



Conservation Accomplishments

Working Together to Conserve the Nature of America

'Bandit of the Prairie' Steals Home in Canada

For the first time in nearly 70 years, the black-footed ferret can call Canada home. On Oct. 2, 2009, with the release of 31 kits and three adults into the prairie dog towns of Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan, and a nearby ranch, the species returned to its historic range north of the border.

The landmark reintroduction marked the first time since the animal's near-extinction that the black-footed ferret has occupied habitat in three North American nations: Mexico, U.S., and Canada.

Restoring a species, often referred to as one of the most endangered mammals in North America, to Canada was cause for celebration by an international consortium of conservationists and the event's gracious hosts. The town of Val Marie, located adjacent to Grasslands National Park, hosted and celebrated the ferret's return to Canadian wild lands and actively supported the reintroduction. Residents attended the ceremonial first release, opened

their homes to visitors, and organized a dinner to commemorate the making of conservation history in the town's backyard.



Black-footed ferret

Researchers from the Calgary Zoo, Toronto Zoo, Parks Canada, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other partners and volunteers are currently monitoring the reintroduced ferrets to see how the animals are adjusting to their new Canadian home.

Nine of the 34 ferrets reintroduced to Grasslands National Park were born at the Toronto Zoo's captive-breeding program before being pre-conditioned for reintroduction at the Service's National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center near Wellington, Colorado. All ferrets involved in the reintroduction were transported overnight from Colorado to Saskatchewan by Service personnel for the release.

While reintroduction was a positive step, the Service and its partners must complete many more recovery actions before the species can be removed from the Endangered Species List. Approximately, 800 black-footed ferrets compose the entire wild population, while a few hundred live in captivity for breeding and educational purposes.

Service Responds to Major Flood Event in Dakotas — Significant Impact to Service Resources from Flooding

In 2008, significant late season rainfall in North and South Dakota saturated soils there and, when followed by heavy winter snowpack, created ideal conditions for severe flooding in early 2009, especially in areas east of the mainstem Missouri River, including the Red, James, and Sheyenne River systems. Steadily rising temperatures in March – interrupted only by several spring blizzards - triggered flood events on multiple river systems in the region. Thirty-eight counties in North Dakota were ultimately declared a Federal Disaster Area. Within the disaster area, the Service administers 54 National Wildlife Refuges and approximately

197,240 acres of Waterfowl Production Areas within 9 Wetland Management Districts, and 1 National Fish Hatchery.

Throughout the flood disaster in North Dakota, the Service provided both mutual aid to local law enforcement authorities and direct assistance to the State of North Dakota via a Federal Emergency Management Agency mission assignment. The Service is the largest federal entity within North Dakota and mobilized many specialized and valuable resources stationed in and around the state, including airboats, which were deployed to great effect for search and rescue operations in areas flooded with water, ice, and snow. This capability allowed the Service to play a key role in assisting state, local, and federal emergency response personnel

during this historic flood disaster. Service emergency response efforts included ongoing water search and rescue operations, sandbagging, and assistance with the demolition of ice jams on the Missouri River.

The floods in North and South Dakota impacted numerous Service assets, the majority of which are on units of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Examples of damage range from sedimentation of wetlands in the Prairie Pothole Region on which the Service has purchased easements to structural damage due to flooding of Service buildings and infrastructure. The Service and our partners are currently working to fully assess and respond to these impacts.

Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area

A grassroots endeavor by landowners and various organizations to conserve the Flint Hills has led to a Service initiative, the last landscape-scale example of native tallgrass prairie remaining in the U.S. Less than 2% of the historic range of tallgrass remains, 80% of which is located in Kansas' Flint Hills. In 2009, the Service approved a Preliminary Project Proposal for the establishment of the Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area (FHLCA), which would protect up to one million acres of tallgrass prairie in the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas. The FHLCA project would establish conservation easements to protect tallgrass prairie, and the wildlife that are dependent on it, from fragmentation threats. These threats come in the form of encroachment by invasive plants as well as residential, mineral, and wind energy development. These conservation easements would protect habitat for more than 100 species of grassland birds and 500 plant species.



© Mike Blair
Golden Konza Prairie, Flint Hills, Kansas

Fish Passage

A major focus of fish habitat restoration in the Mountain-Prairie Region is re-establishment of free movement by fish and other aquatic organisms in streams through the removal of barriers. Completion of numerous projects through the National Fish Passage Program and under the National Fish Habitat Action Plan, as well as continued operation of existing fish passage structures in 2009, resulted in initial opening or maintaining connection of 281 miles of aquatic habitat that had formerly been restricted from free fish movement by barriers. An example was a project to modify the Yellow Calf irrigation diversion on the Little Wind River on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. By removing the existing sill and replacing it with a rock structure to allow fish passage throughout the year, the project restored 9 miles of historic Yellowstone cutthroat trout spawning and rearing habitat.



Lander FWCO

Yellow Calf irrigation diversion on the Little Wind River, Wyoming

Partnering with the Intermountain West Joint Venture

The Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) Management Board, a strong and diverse group of 17 agencies, organizations, and corporations, made a policy-level commitment to Strategic Habitat Conservation and implemented it throughout the Region.

The IWJV built crucial science capacity by hiring its first Science Coordinator and conducted population-habitat modeling for priority species. Accomplishments include establishment of habitat objectives for shorebirds and/or waterfowl through bioenergetics modeling at the Great Salt Lake and in the San Luis Valley of Colorado, and the construction of decision support tools for priority shrub-steppe birds.

Likewise, the IWJV catalyzed focused conservation delivery by helping partners secure \$6 million in North American Wetlands Conservation Act funding; brokering a sagebrush-steppe Farm Bill special initiative in the Green River Basin of Wyoming; and providing leadership to the Natural Resources Conservation Service in development of the Wetland Reserve Enhancement Program with reserved grazing rights. This is a new programmatic twist on the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) and could greatly enhance WRP's role in conserving intact wetlands and grassland complexes on working ranches.

Partnering with Tribes

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been proactive in its outreach to the 36 federally-recognized tribes located in Region 6. Tribal Liaisons of the Service developed a Tribal Consultation Guide and have implemented a Tribal Trust Training for Service employees on how to fulfill their federal trust responsibilities to Tribes. In addition, six tribes in Region 6 received Tribal Wildlife Grants for work with fish, ferrets, bighorn sheep, wetlands, and cougars in 2009. The Service met and consulted with Tribes regarding eagles, petitions to list

endangered species, and refuge management plans. The electronic update "Tracks," a compilation of topics of interest to Indian Country, continues to inform an ever-growing list of recipients. The Region 6 management team held its first Tribal Fish and Game Day in 2009 after the Denver March Powwow to discuss the effects of climate change on species and their habitats. This annual effort is one at which tribes can meet with all of the Region 6 decision-makers simultaneously to discuss topics of mutual interest.

Wyoming Toad Recovery

The Saratoga National Fish Hatchery in Wyoming began a captive breeding program for the endangered Wyoming toad as part of recovery efforts for the species in 1997, and today is one of the most successful of the propagation facilities for the species. During 2009, the hatchery released a record high of over 9,000 tadpoles and almost 80 young into safe harbor release sites within the species' historic range. Of the toads released into the wild by propagation facilities since 1999, an average of 43% were produced by Saratoga.

The Wyoming toad was listed as endangered by the Service in 1984. Although the species was historically restricted to the Laramie River basin in Wyoming, it was common until populations crashed in the middle 1970s. Use of insecticides, agricultural practices, increased predation, disease, and climate change have all been suggested as contributing to the species' decline, and the amphibian chytrid fungus has been found in captive and wild populations.



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Wyoming toad

Great Plains Fish Habitat Partnership

The Great Plains Fish Habitat Partnership, one of the newest partnerships recognized by the National Fish Habitat Action Plan, will focus on protecting, restoring, and enhancing river and stream habitats of the Northern Great Plains. Removing barriers that prevent movement of aquatic species and improving water quality are examples of actions that will benefit native species such as sauger, burbot, Topeka shiner, and cylindrical papershell mussel.



Great Plains Fish Habitat

H. Johnson / USFWS

Trumpeter Swan Recovery

In the early 1800s, Meriwether Lewis wrote about a magnificent white bird in the Blackfoot Valley, the trumpeter swan. By the end of the 20th century, this species no longer was found in the Valley. Decades of exploiting these birds for food and to decorate ladies' hats severely impacted this largest of North American waterfowl. In the spring of 2000, a pair of swans took up residence on a wetland in the Valley, which spawned an amazing coalition of partners dedicated to restoring swans. Since 2005, 112 swans have been released, each sporting a red collar with white letters and numbers. Although more than 400 sightings

of these birds have been reported, many information gaps remain about habitats used during migration and winter periods. In 2009, biologists placed transmitters on five birds which allowed them to be tracked by satellite. In addition to providing vital information to wildlife managers, teachers and students are learning about swan biology and wetland ecology by tracking swan movements. Adults and children also participate in releasing the swans, affording them a hands-on learning experience about wildlife management. The Blackfoot Valley Trumpeter Swan restoration effort provides a glowing example of success achieved through partnerships.



Trumpeter swan

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American Recovery and Reinvestment Act 2009

Mountain-Prairie Region Hits Ground Running

In February, the Federal Government made the largest investment into infrastructure and job creation since the New Deal with the \$784 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The Region received \$34.5 million.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar spoke of the Department's commitment to conservation and the environment while putting Americans to work during a visit to the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge (NWR.) He solicited agencies to provide a list of shovel-ready projects. The Region pre-prepared a list of projects, such as a new visitor center at Audubon NWR in Coleharbor, North Dakota; a solar system at Ennis National Fish Hatchery in Ennis, Montana; and a new irrigation system at the National Elk Refuge in Jackson, Wyoming.

When the list was approved, the Mountain-Prairie Region hit the ground running, setting up the Recovery Action Team to meet the challenge prior to the announcement in anticipation of the program. Individuals from every program including safety, personnel, and budget met weekly to ensure success, provide assistance, and to monitor progress. That schedule ensured the region's success in implementing a program and to work through all challenges.

Region 6 reached the 64 percent mark by January, obligating \$22 million, exceeding the Service-wide goal of 45 percent. Some of these projects have already put people to work, benefitted businesses, and enhanced the Service's ability to accomplish its mission. The Region's success helped the Service reach its 49 percent goal nationally.

The funds helped local communities and the Service by creating and maintaining jobs to address long-standing issues, modernize facilities on national wildlife refuges and fish hatcheries, and work towards renewable energy goals.

A Visit to Audubon National Wildlife Refuge

Secretary Salazar got the chance to see the progress first-hand with a November visit to Audubon National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Coleharbor, North Dakota. Secretary Salazar even got a hands-on experience during the construction of the new \$6.1 million visitor center, hammering in nails during his visit.

This was the first major visitor center project to break ground for the Service under the Recovery Act. The visitor center will replace a 52-year-old deteriorating building that is no longer safe. The contractor's project manager noted the project gave his company a major boost. The North Dakota-based Keplin-Gracon JV project employs several dozen people for the 50,000-man hour project.



Secretary Salazar at Audubon NWR, North Dakota

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Youth Conservation Corps

The Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) received a tremendous boost from the stimulus package. The program provides youth ages 15-18 with hands-on experience in conservation activities like fish data collection, invasive-species removal, and routine maintenance projects, providing them an educational experience.

The Region spent \$145,561 on the YCC program for the year, allowing the Service to hire 31 more youth workers than the previous year, a 47 percent increase. They completed 342 projects, worth nearly \$550,000. The Region expects to employ 27 students next year using ARRA funds.



Youth workers installing drift fences

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Assessing Impacts of Wind Development on Service Easements

The Division of Refuges, Mountain-Prairie Region, has partnered with Western Area Power Administration to complete a programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) to evaluate the impacts of wind energy development in the upper Midwest. The Refuge Program will be evaluating wind development associated with wetland and grassland easements in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana.

The Refuge Program administers approximately 3 million acres of wetland and grassland easements in these states. The easements protect vital migratory bird breeding habitat in the highly productive Prairie Pothole Region.

The prairies have been identified as the “Saudi Arabia” of wind with very consistent winds, making wind generation very profitable.

The Refuge Program has worked with wind companies for several years and has been able to avoid and minimize many impacts, and in limited situations, accommodate wind development on easements. The PEIS will be a comprehensive review of how further wind development will impact the easement program. This analysis will



Tatanka wind project area, South Dakota

Jeff Gleason / USFWS

also consider the ability of the Refuge Program to meet its conservation wetland and grassland protection goals, which could be impacted by how wind or other development activities are addressed.

The PEIS is well underway with scoping meetings completed and writing for the draft PEIS in progress. The current schedule calls for the final PEIS to be completed in the fall of 2010. For more information on the PEIS, visit the website at plainswindeis.anl.gov.

Cover: Private ranch in Mineral County, CO © Rio de la Vista

Right: Trumpeter swans in flight © Alex Badyaev

