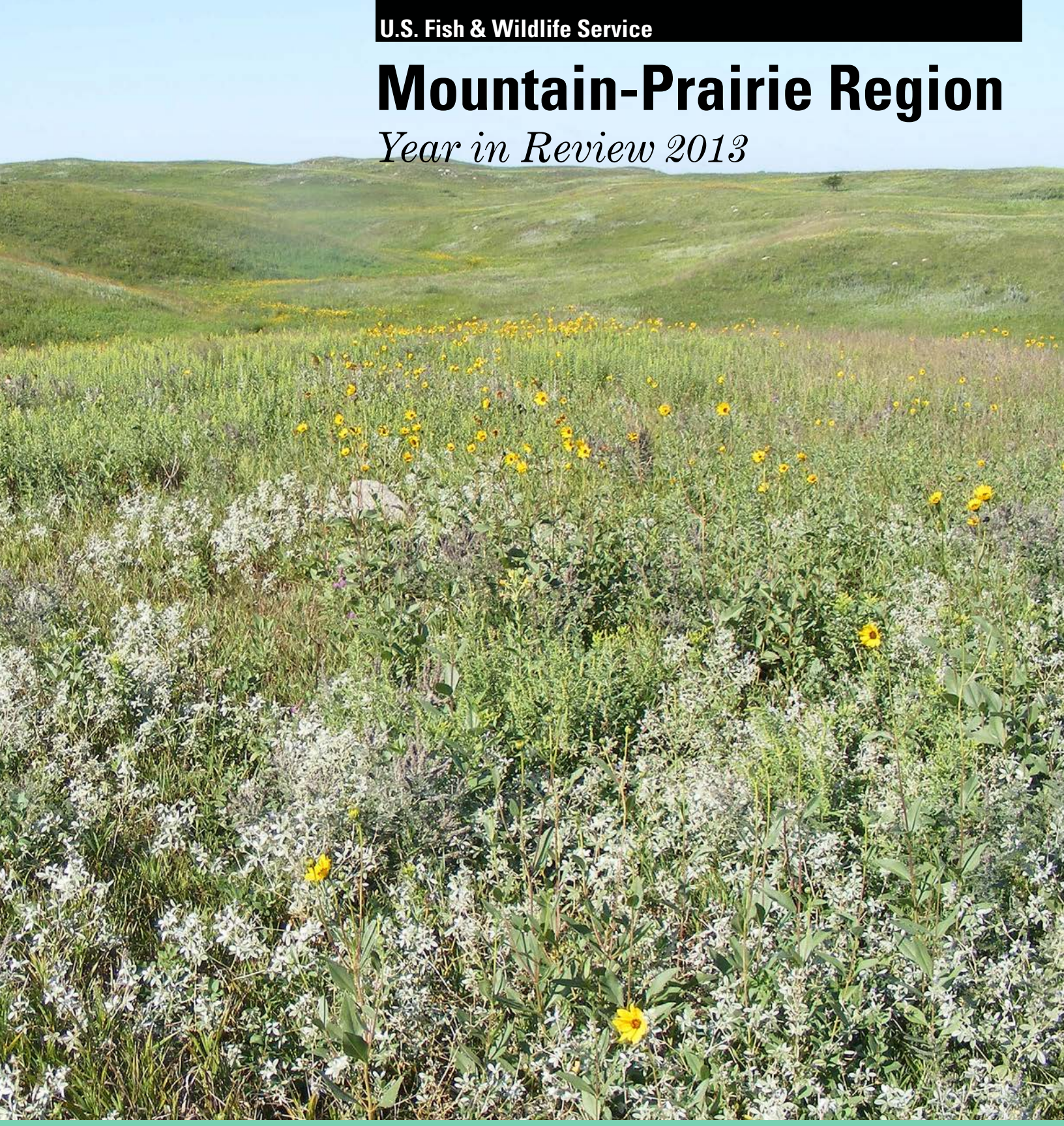
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Mountain-Prairie Region

Year in Review 2013



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

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From the **Regional Director...**

Welcome to the Mountain-Prairie Region and our look back at 2013. I start this new year with a sense of gratitude and I know we will continue to make a difference for conservation in 2014!

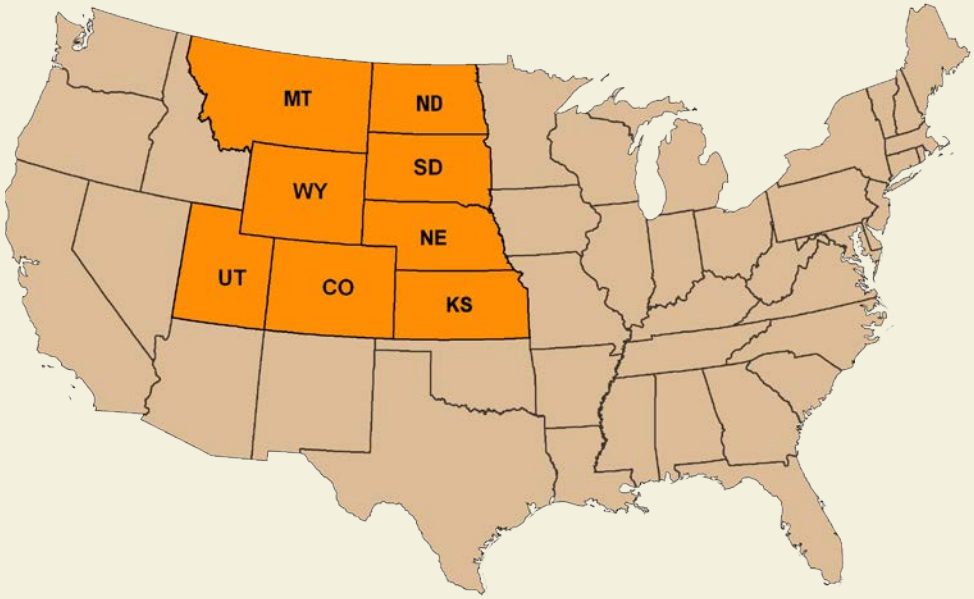
This year we were mindful of our priorities, the level of appropriations we received, and the likely reduced funding we will face in the future. Focusing on our priorities and mission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) made progress across the Region on native grassland conservation, species recovery goals, and our look at the impacts from energy development, water usage, and food production on our landscapes. The Region was able to protect a total of 56,366 wetland and 19,106 grassland acres through conservation easements, reintroduce the endangered black-footed ferret on the Walker Ranch in southeast Colorado and initiate five fish passage projects to restore habitat connectivity for endangered Topeka shiners in Kansas.

Our partnerships play a key role in our mission, and it is our goal to work with our state wildlife agency partners, Tribes, landowners, and others to address challenges posed by land use changes, water quantity and quality changes, and energy development to ensure a future not only for fish and wildlife, but for our economy, health and enjoyment. We are fortunate to live in this Region that still has large, intact landscapes and fish and wildlife populations to enjoy.

USFWS

Noreen Walsh, Regional Director

I am filled with optimism when I reflect on all we have accomplished this past year and look ahead to the many conservation successes to come in 2014.



MAINTAIN & INCREASE COLLABORATION WITH TRIBES AND PARTNERS

Tribal Roundtable
In August 2013, the Service hosted a Tribal leadership roundtable discussion in Rapid City, South Dakota to enhance communication and collaborative partnership efforts to more successfully address mutual interests in fish, wildlife and plant conservation across the eight state western region. Discussed were ways to progress collaborative conservation priorities while improving the working relationship among the Service and the Tribes.

Overall, the meeting was acknowledged as a success with thirteen Tribes participating and twenty-five Tribal members engaging in the workshop-style roundtable. As an outcome of the gathering, the Service will improve its working relationships with Tribes across the Region and increase awareness of collaborative conservation priorities and projects for the benefit of fish and wildlife.

Tribal Wildlife Grants
Service leadership visited two project areas in South Dakota that received funding through the Tribal Wildlife Grant (TWG) program. The first project was the successful effort to reintroduce swift foxes on six sites within Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and to monitor the effort over a two-year period. Restoration of the species provides an important cultural link to traditional Lakota Tribe spiritual practices. The second project site visited included an area where funding was provided through the TWG program for a comprehensive study and management of the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep located within the boundaries of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

Tribal Officer Training
The Office of Law Enforcement hosted training for Tribal officers in New Town, North Dakota in July 2013. Courses included federal wildlife protection laws within Indian Country, authority and jurisdiction, search and seizure, raptor identification, crime scene analysis, defensive tactics, officer safety and use of force scenarios and drills, ethics, firearms re-qualification, and National Eagle Repository information.

Thirty-four Tribal conservation officers attended the forty-hour course from Arizona, Montana, North and South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. This training was supported by the National American Fish and Wildlife Society and was hosted by the Three Affiliated Tribes (Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation) in the Great Plains Region. The training was very appreciated and a resounding success.

Top photo: South Unit of Badlands National Park in South Dakota

Photos left to right: Bighorn sheep, Tribal officers at training

CONSERVE & RESTORE NATIVE GRASSLAND ECOSYSTEMS

Top photo: Prairie potholes in South Dakota

Photos left to right: Mallards in flight, Yellow-headed blackbird, Whooping cranes in flight, Male greater sage-grouse, Coyote in sagebrush

Grassland and Wetland Conservation
In 2013, the Service continued to receive increased funding levels, enabling us to expand the protection of vital grassland and wetland conservation easements, focusing on high priority conservation targets. In addition to the number of acres conserved, one of the more positive results has been strong landowner support and participation in our easement programs, helping to mitigate fragmentation of habitat in the Dakotas and Montana.

Through these efforts, the Service protected a total of 56,366 wetland and 19,105 grassland acres through perpetual conservation easements using the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, North American Wetlands Conservation Act, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund, in addition to donations.

Crisis in the Prairies
A new wave of grassland loss continues to accelerate across the Northern Great Plains. The dire situation for American grasslands was created by a variety of factors, including changes in the value of commodities within the global market economy. This conversion of grasslands is threatening one of North America's most imperiled landscapes, the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR), and prompted the Service Director to declare a "Crisis in the Prairies." The PPR, named for its glacially formed wetlands, is the breeding epicenter for the majority of North America's waterfowl. The Crisis in the Prairies has been so rapid that the full effects of conversion on wildlife aren't clear yet, while many biologists continue to study the affected grasslands.

The Service has made combatting the Crisis in the Prairies one of its highest priorities and is working with partners to reverse this troubling trend. In FY13, the Service worked with the states of North and South Dakota, several non-governmental organizations, the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture and the Plains and Prairie Pothole Landscape Conservation Cooperative, to complete Phase 1 of the Crisis in the Prairies campaign. In Phase 1, a strategy and messages were developed and videos were produced for outreach and education about the crisis.

Whooping Crane Wetland Restoration
The Nebraska Partners for Fish and Wildlife, Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District, Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, and Nebraska Ecological Services Field Office were awarded $933,000 through the Cooperative Recovery Initiative to restore watershed function to high priority whooping crane wetlands in the Rainwater Basin of Nebraska. These wetlands were identified using a GIS model developed by the Service and partners. An associated Decision Support Tool was developed to prioritize watershed restoration activities. At the goal level, one-hundred forty idle irrigation pits will be removed from the watersheds of the fifteen high priority wetlands important to whooping cranes. In the first year of work, this partnership developed wildlife extension agreements with fifty-six private landowners, filled seventy-seven pits, far-exceeded the amount of leveraged funds they expected for the entire grant period, and most importantly, positively impacted 1,860 wetland acres for whooping cranes in the Rainwater Basin.

Greater Sage-Grouse
A team of federal and state biologists completed the Conservation Objectives Team report in 2013, which explains the threats, identifies conservation objectives, and describes the degree to which those need to be addressed to ensure long-term conservation of the species.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (FS) are revising their existing land management plans to address conservation needs and threats to the species from inadequate regulatory mechanisms and habitat loss. The Service is supporting BLM, FS and the states in developing plans that will provide regulatory certainty for conservation of the species. Four science proposals aimed at sage-grouse information needs were initiated including: examining cheatgrass control, the efficacy of using fire breaks for reducing the threat from wildfires, mapping invasive conifers, and developing improved population monitoring techniques. The Service also increased capacity to work with the energy industry to proactively address threats to sage-grouse and are exploring opportunities for sage-grouse/sagebrush habitat mitigation, including habitat exchanges and conservation banking. The Service continues to work with landowners to implement on-the-ground conservation efforts and completed a draft statewide Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances for ranching operations in Wyoming.

Conserving Sage Steppe Ecosystem
Launched in 2010, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) is a highly targeted and science-based landscape approach to delivering enough of the right conservation practices in the right places to elicit a positive sage-grouse population response to management. This initiative uses dedicated Farm Bill conservation program funds at appropriately large scales to alleviate threats that otherwise fragment habitats, the primary reason native species become candidates for Endangered Species Act protections. The SGI targets Farm Bill resources to high sage-grouse abundance centers or "core areas" to maintain large and intact habitats rather than providing palliative care to small and declining populations.

The Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program continues to cooperate with the NRCS on initiatives funded under the Federal Farm Bill. The SGI and Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative have been extremely successful throughout the Mountain-Prairie Region. The Service and NRCS are working together to target, fund, and deliver conservation for a number of candidate and federally listed species.

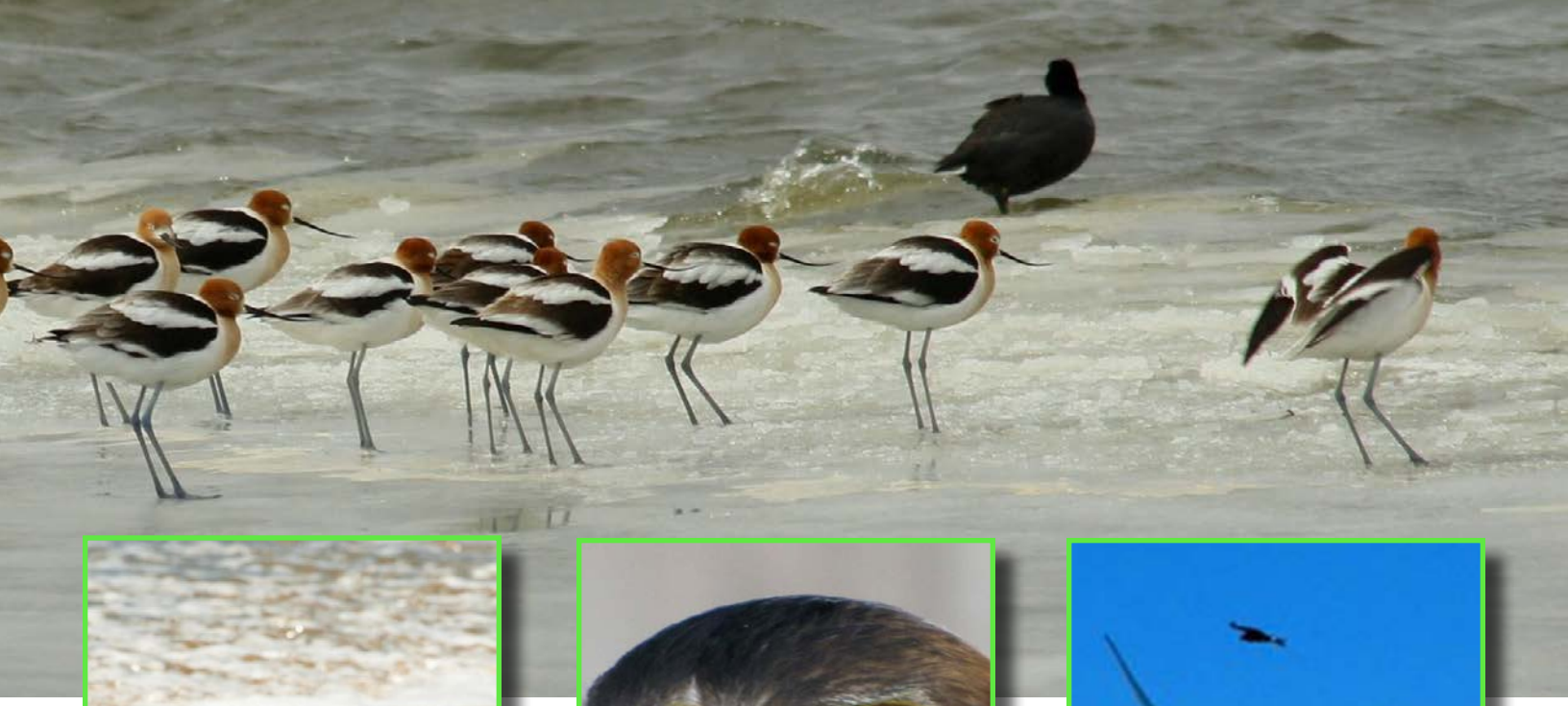
CONSERVATION DELIVERY IN AMERICA'S GREAT OUTDOORS

Crown of the Continent
The eighteen million acre Northern Rockies Crown of the Continent landscape is one of North America's most biologically diverse and intact ecosystems. Spanning the United States and Canada, it includes a remarkable assemblage of high peaks, aspen glades, dense conifer forests, clear and cold rivers, native grasslands, and numerous small communities heavily invested in the land and its health. Successful landscape-scale conservation requires collaborative and coordinated efforts between government jurisdictions and local communities. In 2013, the Service acquired an additional 19,000 acres of conservation easements in the Rocky Mountain Front and Blackfoot Valley Conservation Areas, utilizing Land and Water Conservation Fund dollars.

Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area
In 2013, the Service acquired a 2,445 acre easement for the Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area in Chase County, Kansas. The Service purchased 2,158 acres, while the remaining 286.8 acres of this valuable contiguous tallgrass prairie was donated. The Service and its partners are working to prevent incompatible development of this vital habitat and conversion to nonagricultural uses while maintaining traditional cultural values, such as ranching lifestyles and economies.

Top photo: American avocets in shallow water at Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Photos left to right: Crown of the Continent/ The Nature Conservancy. *Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area, Long-billed curlew, Golden eagle, Wind turbine*



Dakota Grasslands
The Dakota Grasslands Conservation Area (DGCA) is part of landscape-level strategic habitat conservation in the Prairie Pothole Region. The objectives are to conserve 240,000 wetland and 1.7 million grassland acres in the famed "duck factory" of North and South Dakota. The DGCA provides critical habitat for bird and vertebrate species, including twenty-two species of shorebirds, ten species of waterbirds and twenty species of grassland birds that have been identified as priority species. In FY13, the Service acquired 6,154 acres of grassland and six acres of wetland habitat, through the purchase of perpetual easements from willing landowners.

Law Enforcement
In FY13, Service special agents and wildlife inspectors opened 288 investigations and carried an additional 196 investigations, which had been opened prior to FY13. Of the ongoing 484 investigations in the Mountain-Prairie Region, special agents and wildlife inspectors partnered with state, local, tribal, and federal law enforcement agencies on approximately half of the investigations and enforced more than thirteen federal laws through the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Endangered Species Act, Lacey Act, and Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act accounting for eighty-one percent of the Region's investigations.

In a precedent setting, first of its' kind prosecution, special agents opened an investigation into the mortalities of golden eagles and other migratory birds located at wind generation projects in southeast Wyoming. The investigation, supported by the Service's Cheyenne Ecological Services and Regional Migratory Bird Offices documented at least fourteen golden eagles and more than 150 migratory birds of various species, which had been killed at two wind generation plants over a three year period.

The parent company responsible for the two wind generation plants entered a guilty plea for violations of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and was ordered to pay $600,000 in restitution and $400,000 in fines with a five year unsupervised probationary period. The restitution and fine monies were ordered to be divided amongst several non-governmental conservation groups for the conservation of golden eagles and other migratory birds. The company was also ordered by the court to develop an Eagle Conservation Plan, and a Migratory Bird Compliance Plan, apply for a programmatic eagle take permit, and pay up to an additional $600,000 per year for five years testing experimental eagle take avoidance strategies and related research.

THREATENED & ENDANGERED SPECIES RECOVERY

Top photo: Black-footed ferret being released onto the Walker Ranch in Colorado

Photos left to right: Gary and Georgia Walker about to release black-footed ferrets on their ranch in Colorado, Utah prairie dog / Laura Romin, Juvenile razorback sucker from the lower Green River / Julie Howard

Black-Footed Ferret Safe Harbor Agreement and Reintroduction

As part of the recently approved Black-Footed Ferret Programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement (SHA), thirty black-footed ferrets found a home in Colorado in October 2013. The ferrets, which are one of North America's most endangered mammals, were reintroduced on the Walker Ranch west of Pueblo. In 1967, the black-footed ferret was among the first species to be listed as endangered. Currently, outside of Colorado, there are about four hundred alive in the wild at twenty experimental sites. The Walker Ranch was the second reintroduction site in Colorado and the first under the new SHA.

The Programmatic SHA was created in cooperation with state, federal, Tribal, and local partners in twelve states. This SHA provides opportunities for private and Tribal landowners to volunteer their lands as sites for reintroduction of this endangered species without affecting their land-use activities beyond mutually agreed-upon measures. It also extends these assurances to surrounding non-participating lands and other landowner interests via a Section 7 Biological Opinion for the SHA. This SHA approach will be an important step in promoting the recovery of this iconic species.

The Walker Ranch was selected because they have prairie dogs and the black-footed ferret is a highly specialized predator that depends upon prairie dogs for survival. Prairie dogs make up more than ninety percent of the black-footed ferret's diet and prairie dog burrows provide ferrets with suitable dens to raise their young, as well as a means to escape from predators and harsh weather.

The reintroduction was spearheaded by the Service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo and Gary and Georgia Walker.

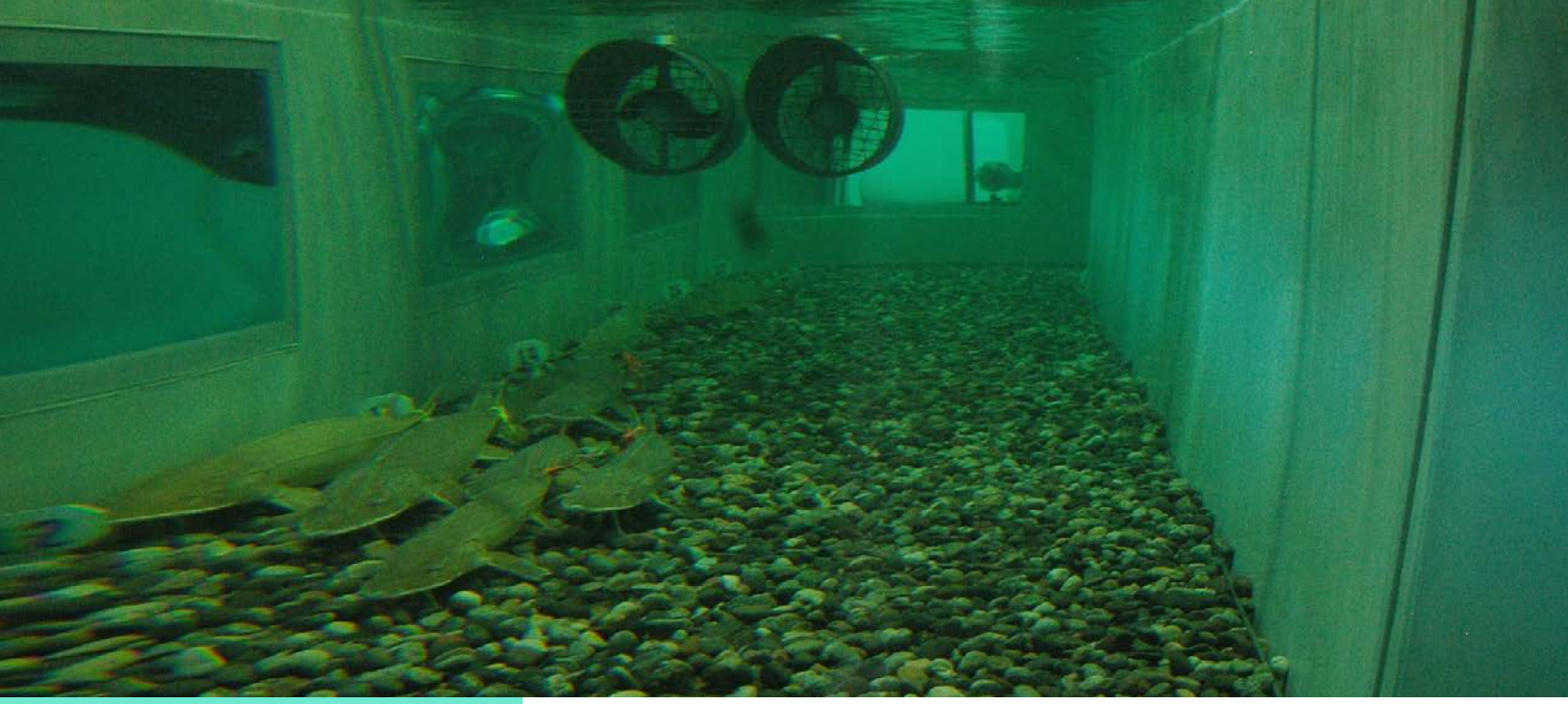
Utah Prairie Dogs

The Service acquired 800 acres of important Utah prairie dog habitat. The Nature Conservancy will own and manage the property in perpetuity for the conservation of the Utah prairie dog. The funding for the purchase of property was provided by the Federal Aviation Administration through a programmatic Section 7 consultation commitment. The 800 acre parcel is located within the greater Bryce area Utah prairie dog metapopulation, which represents a significant component of the Paunsaugunt Recovery Unit (one of three recovery units for the Utah prairie dog). The property supports occupied Utah prairie dog habitats and provides important habitat connectivity with other large, stable prairie dog colonies on U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service lands. The adjacent federal lands are actively managed to enhance Utah prairie dog habitats, including pinyon juniper removal, plague control (dusting with pesticides), and prairie dog translocation sites. This acquisition was a large step forward in our efforts to recover this species.

Colorado River Endangered Fish

The Colorado River Fish Project offices in Grand Junction, Colorado and Vernal, Utah continued efforts to recover Colorado pikeminnow, humpback chub, bonytail and razorback sucker, the four fish species listed under the Endangered Species Act in the Upper Colorado and San Juan River systems. Those efforts, funded through two Endangered Fish Recovery Programs (Upper Colorado and San Juan), included conducting population estimates of wild, self-sustaining populations of Colorado pikeminnow and humpback chub in the Green and Colorado River sub-basin and monitoring reintroduced populations of stocked pikeminnow and razorback sucker in the San Juan sub-basin. Service hatchery personnel have honed their skills over the years and are now producing healthy endangered fish in numbers that meet the stocking targets for both programs.

In 2013, razorback sucker that was stocked in all three sub-basins (Green, Colorado and San Juan) took a big step toward recovery when biologists discovered wild produced juveniles. Until this past year, researchers had not determined the larvae were surviving - a critical component of population self-sustainability. Program partners also continued to explore flexibility in water management to provide flows to assist in the recovery of the four endangered species. Field crews continued their battle to control nonnative predatory fish (e.g. smallmouth bass, northern pike, and walleye) throughout critical habitat and worked with state partners to treat more off-channel sources of these invasive species.



FISHERIES CONSERVATION

Top photo: Shovelnose sturgeon in a living stream at Bozeman Fish Technology Center

Fish Passage Research

Dams on rivers and improperly designed culverts are the primary factor associated with the rapid decline of aquatic populations throughout the plains and prairie region. Creating fishways for aquatic species passage requires knowledge of species swimming and movement capabilities. A research partnership between the Bozeman Fish Technology Center (BFTC), National Fish Passage Program, Plains and Prairie Potholes and Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperatives, the Western Transportation Institute, and Montana State University (MSU) was launched in 2009 to address fish passage issues. The partnership began with the construction of a 56-foot flume at BFTC. The flume, swim chambers, and "endless stream," provided the foundation for a test bed facility for conducting fish passage research. The partnership is unique because the goal of improving fish passage through scientific research is guided by fish biologists with expertise in fish behaviors and fish life history requirements and engineers with expertise in design and hydrology. The remaining two goals of determining scientifically valid swimming abilities of fish species that reside in the plains and northern Rockies ecosystems and training future engineers and fish biologists are now coming to fruition. Research highlights include new swimming capability information on five native species. Researchers at MSU and BFTC are currently studying swimming capabilities of longnose dace and sauger to collect information that can be used to design culverts and fishways.

Fish Passage in Kansas

The Service initiated five fish passage projects to restore habitat connectivity for endangered Topeka shiners in the Kansas Flint Hills. The Ninnescah Barrier Project on Ninnescah Creek, a tributary to the Arkansas River, will replace an impassable road crossing with a culvert to ensure native fish passage. Planning and permitting began on four projects on Lyons Creek, a tributary of the Smoky Hill River. These projects will restore connectivity to a large portion of Lyons Creek and are a cooperative effort between the Service, Dickinson County, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, and the Great Plains Fish Habitat Partnership.

Restore Connectivity and Enhance Habitat for Native Salmonids

Red Rocks Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) received a $48K grant to partner with MSU, the BFTC, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to conduct research studying the winter survival and habitat selection by arctic grayling in Red Rock River watershed. 'Winterkill' conditions in the lake, caused by severe oxygen depletion during long periods of ice cover, is hypothesized to be a limiting factor for the population. The study will document winter survival, movement, and habitat use of Arctic grayling in relation to low oxygen conditions in the lake. Researchers hope to establish habitats most important to this Upper Missouri River distinct population segment of grayling and develop viable management plans for long-term persistence of Arctic grayling in Red Rocks Lake NWR.

CONTINUE TO ADVANCE THE PRINCIPLES OF STRATEGIC HABITAT CONSERVATION

Surrogate Species
The landscape of the Flint Hills ecosystem of Kansas was the first selection for the Service's new surrogate species approach. The Region will learn and improve throughout the planning and development processes as it prepares to ramp up for future implementation efforts.

The Flint Hills marks the western edge of the tallgrass prairie, one of the most altered landscapes in the Nation. Approximately three-fourths of the remaining native tallgrass prairie lies within the Flint Hills. This ecoregion also contains the largest concentration of pristine freshwater streams in Kansas, while supporting over 80 species of native fish and shellfish.

The Region is excited to work on this landscape and the species that depend on it. The existing base of research and common interest with our state partner, the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism, is making the Flint Hills an idyllic geography to begin the process for utilizing surrogate species to design conservation in this landscape.

Landscape Conservation Cooperatives
Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) are aligned around geographically similar landscapes and formed to identify best practices and information gaps, and to avoid duplicative efforts through partnership-based conservation planning and design.

The Great Northern LCC (GNLCC) provided $1 million in funding in FY13 to support science and tools development for large landscape conservation. The GNLCC is developing a Science and Implementation Plan that will guide how its partners can use the Strategic Conservation Framework to achieve a collective vision of landscape integrity through four landscape-scale goals: blocks of land, connectivity, aquatic integrity, and resilience and disturbance regimes.

The Southern Rockies LCC is leveraging existing capacity and agreements with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Utah State University, and the U.S. Geological Survey Utah Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit to assist land management agencies with analysis and application of large data-sets.

Inset photo: Neosho madtom, a small three inch catfish

Top photo: Golden konza tallgrass prairie, part of the Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area in Kansas

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Cover: Prairie hills in South Dakota

Page 1: Photos top to bottom: Swift fox, Black-necked stilt, Sunset at Bear River National Wildlife Refuge / Jennifer Bunker, *Black-footed ferret kit, Service employees holding an arctic grayling at Red Rocks Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Meadowlark*