



## **Monthly Bird Happenings**

### **Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge - Utah**

By Bridget Olson - Wildlife Biologist &  
Betsy Beneke - Outdoor Recreation Planner  
Updated 09/15/09

#### **December - January - February**

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, such as the northern shoveler, northern pintail, gadwall, and tundra swan, to migrate further south. If a solid freeze occurs, most of the tundra swans will leave the Great Salt Lake 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 and include such species as tundra swan, mallard, bufflehead, and common goldeneye. Raptors present during winter include bald eagle, golden eagle, rough-legged hawk, northern harrier and prairie falcon. Peregrine falcon may also be present. In February, red-winged blackbirds begin to sing!

#### **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. Marsh wren, horned lark, western meadowlark, song and savannah sparrows return as well. 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. Bald eagles are mostly gone by the end of the month. 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, American bittern, sora and Virginia rail 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. Eastern and western kingbirds, swallows, yellow-headed blackbirds, more sparrow species and warblers also arrive this month. Short-eared owls can be seen hunting over marshes and fields.

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 double-crested cormorants, mallard, white-faced ibis, and California gull. The majority of northbound migrant waterfowl, shorebirds and songbirds have departed.

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.

Continued on back . . .

**June continued . . .** The young of black-crowned night heron, great blue heron, and snowy egret have hatched and are being fed by their attentive parents within their 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 mates, waiting on Gunnison Island.

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. This display continues through July. Songbirds boldly advertise for mates, as activity peaks this month.

## **July**

This is the best month to view a variety of young birds. 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 (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. The southward shorebird migration is in full swing with large flocks of western sandpipers and Wilson's phalaropes numbering in the tens 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. Songbirds are mostly silent.

## **September**

The vibrant greens of alkali and hardstem bulrush in the marsh during the spring and summer months have now given way to the muted browns of fall. 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 gulls decline while the ring-billed gull population swells. Northern harriers are welcomed back in large numbers to the Refuge from northern breeding grounds.

## **October**

The majority of shorebirds have left the Refuge. Only American avocet, marbled godwit and long-billed dowitcher remain. The fall waterfowl migration peaks in mid October at around 220,000. 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 an 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. Tundra swan numbers peak the week before Thanksgiving.

**Your Visit:** There's something new to see each month of the year at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, and we hope you'll return again and again. The auto tour route is open to the public during daylight hours 365 days per year, weather and road conditions permitting. The Wildlife Education Center (visitor center) is open Monday - Friday 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. It is closed Sundays and Federal holidays.

**Web site:** <http://bearriver.fws.gov> **Birding information:** (435) 734-6426 **Refuge Information:** (435) 723-5887

