



Columbia Wetlands Waterbird Survey

Summer 2018



Interview with a Waterbird Survey Volunteer

John Zehnder has been involved with the Columbia Wetlands Waterbird Survey since its inception in 2015. His survey sites are at the southwest end of Lake Windermere. Because he often has so many birds at his sites he takes photographs of the larger flocks to count and identify them after the survey. Many thanks to John for this interview!

How did you hear about the survey to begin with and why did you get involved?

In Spring 2015 I saw a poster at the Brisco store, went to a training session, and found it was just my thing. Part of what interested me in the survey was the chance to learn more about different waterbirds. I also liked the idea of doing something that may eventually help contribute to bird conservation in a significant way.

Were you interested in birds before the survey, if so in what capacity and for how long?

I've always been interested in birds in one way or another. I used to raise birds as a hobby on our ranch. I was always fascinated (and a little upset) with the different birds of prey which showed up to hunt my pigeons: Peregrines Falcons, Goshawks, even a pair of Gyrfalcons once. My interest in wild birds increased mostly in the last decade or so with

our ranch's involvement in the 'Wings Over the Rockies Bird Festival. I take photos to document the many different species which live on or migrate through our farm and have collected photos of more than 160 species on our ranch!

Why have you kept doing the survey for all this time?

I really enjoy it as I'm able to go to different areas I don't normally get to and get really excited about discovering new bird species I haven't seen before. I once saw Scoters, which were new to me, diving down in the water, bringing large freshwater clams to the surface and swallowing them whole. I've seen other animals too like coyotes, elk and otters on my surveys.

What have you learned from your surveying?

I'm definitely more aware of mass migration. Some of the waterbirds are in large flocks and it's quite impressive when I count them, sometimes up to 2000 American Coots in one flock! I've also observed how sensitive birds are to human disturbance, whether it's myself, a motor boat, or a mountain biker. They take to the sky if I get too close, so I've learned to stay quiet and keep my distance.



Photo: John Zehnder

Do you have any interesting stories about surveying on this project?

On one of my first surveys I was walking along when I spotted something white, with binoculars I realized this was an American White Pelican, which I wasn't expecting! I took a photo and then seven more pelicans flew overhead. Then a Belted Kingfisher flew and landed on a sign right in front of me. He sat there for a few seconds, dove into the channel and flew back to the sign with a good sized fish in his beak. He stayed just long enough for me to get a few pictures. That was still probably one of my favorite surveys ever! Sometimes I've seen Bald Eagles dive down on huge flocks of coots or ducks trying to catch one and there's a massive whooshing noise as they all dive under water or into the reeds trying to get away. And recently I saw about 150 swans at the south end of Lake Windermere, maybe because of the late ice thaw. This was great to see!

Columbia Wetlands Bird Species-at-Risk

24 at-risk bird species found here

It has been reported that one-third of all North American bird species are currently in decline and are in urgent need of conservation action. There are several bird species at-risk who utilize the Columbia Wetlands habitat, either to nest in or to migrate through each year. These birds include the Horned Grebe, Eared, and Western Grebe, American White Pelican, Great Blue Heron, American Bittern, Tundra Swan, Surf Scoter, Long-Billed Curlew, California Gull, Barn and Bank Swallow.

There are many reasons for population decline. For instance, loss of habitat is a huge issue for birds. We are incredibly fortunate with the extensive Columbia Wetlands ecosystem, because around the world many wetlands have been and are continuing to be drained. Pesticide use can be detrimental as it can poison birds and cause insect populations to decline, which many birds rely upon for food. Climate change can wreak havoc on birds' food supplies, destroy their habitat, and birds can be exposed to severe storms. Birds are caught in fishing nets and oil spills. Introduced predators such as housecats are also a big cause for concern, as are the huge mortalities caused by birds striking buildings, planes, or cars.



Many of the birds you see at this time of year fly huge distances each year to get here. Perhaps next time you see some birds, contemplate on how amazing they are and perhaps think about what you could do to help them so that they will always be around.

Western Grebes

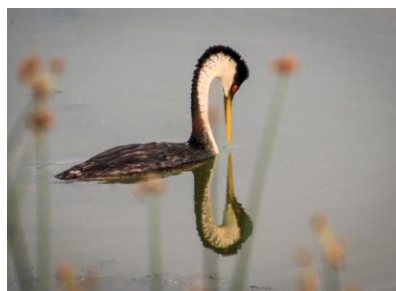


Photo: Emma O'marr

Western Grebes have been seen during the waterbird surveys during both spring and fall, with larger numbers recorded during fall. They are a red-listed species in BC and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) states that their population is in decline. The largest of six grebe species found in Canada, they breed in large lakes with marshy vegetation. While not known to breed in the Columbia Wetlands, there are fewer than 100 pairs nesting in BC, most of which are in Salmon Arm Bay.

Western Grebes have elaborate courtship displays which involve two or more birds running across the water in an upright position with loud tapping of their feet, as

well as dancing on the water with bits of aquatic plants held in their bills.

Three to four eggs are laid in a nest that is made from aquatic plant material, which looks like a solid mound with a slight depression.

The young hatch about 24 days after egg laying. Soon after hatching, the chicks climb onto their parents' backs to hitch a safe ride. Nesting in colonies, they can be flushed by boaters that approach too closely, leaving nests vulnerable to predators. Dropping water levels, wind storms and increasing human traffic as well as human development are also playing their toll on Western Grebes.

Columbia Wetlands Waterbird Survey Project News

The Columbia Wetlands Waterbird Survey bird counts in April 2018 had the highest spring counts to date, despite the lingering winter. 77 volunteer surveyors visited 103 different monitoring stations to count **48,264 birds**, which was over 20,000 more birds than were counted during last spring's (2017) survey! The bird species with the highest abundance on a single survey day this spring were Mallards at almost 5,000. Swans were also counted with a high day count of 872, and for the first time several Black-necked Stilts were seen during the survey!

The CWWS has been occurring for 3 days every spring and fall since its inception in 2015 and will continue until at least 2019.



Aerial Swan Survey

CWWS Program Biologist Rachel Darvill, along with two amazing volunteers conducted an aerial swan survey on April 9th from the north end of Columbia Lake to Golden, with an on-the-ground volunteer scoping out the south end of Columbia Lake. They counted **915 swans** in two hours. The Columbia Wetlands ecosystem has two swan species, Tundra and Trumpeter, which can't be differentiated from the air, but were both present during the swan count.

Green Boating

Boaters planning to head to the Columbia River need to be aware of the regulations in place to protect the Columbia Wetlands Wildlife Management Area (CWWMA) between Fairmont and Donald, north of Golden. On the main channel of the Columbia River, motorized vessels are limited to 20 horsepower (15 kw) or less. These restrictions do not apply to Columbia Lake and Lake Windermere. No towing is permitted in these reaches of the river. Side channels and marshes are off limits to motorized watercraft. The regulations are in place to help protect an area of biologically rich, shallow water and marsh wetland habitats. The Columbia Wetlands are one of the largest remaining intact wetlands on the Pacific

Flyway bird migration route that are not permanently altered by large dams.

Avian parents need all the help they can get to successfully raise their young:

- Not only motor boaters, but those in canoes, kayaks and paddle boards can also startle nesting birds and young broods, causing them to be separated from adults and more vulnerable to predators.
- During the spring and early summer season, from April through to mid-July, nesting waterbirds are particularly sensitive to disturbance.
- It is recommended that all boaters stay in open water during breeding season and avoid paddling into vegetated areas.
- Many nests are hidden in vegetation

and along shorelines. Nests with eggs can be damaged or destroyed by boats before they're even seen.

- Avoid deliberately approaching waterbirds especially if they have young with them. Take pictures from a distance.
- Land boats only in open beach areas if possible and be careful not to disturb nests if walking on shore.
- In the main channel, maintain slow speeds if traveling by motor boat to prevent wakes from disturbing shore nests, or birds resting or feeding on the water.

Please do your part by slowing down and giving wildlife room. Enjoy the Columbia River and wetlands, but please treat this sensitive ecosystem and the wildlife with respect.

Two FREE Birding Events at Reflection Lake, Golden on Thursday June 14 from 7 to 9 pm and Saturday June 23 from 8 to 10 am. Are you curious about the birds that call this lake and wetland area home? Come join local naturalist and Waterbird Survey program assistant Verena Shaw to see what birds we can spot. Please bring binoculars, water, a hat, and walking shoes, and expect to be out for up to two hours. Scopes will be set up and binoculars provided for those who don't have any. **For more information or to sign up please contact Verena at verena@wildsight.ca or call 250-344-5530**



A BIG THANK YOU TO CWWV VOLUNTEERS AND TO OUR FUNDERS

This newsletter was compiled by Verena Shaw and Rachel Darvill. Photographs by Rachel Darvill unless otherwise specified.

COLUMBIA WETLANDS WATERBIRD SURVEY



Do you love wildlife and the Columbia Wetlands? If so, you may be interested to participate in a citizen science project. Data you collect will contribute to bird conservation in the Columbia Wetlands.

Fall survey dates: Saturday September 29th, Friday October 5th, Monday October 15th (10 am-1 pm).

To improve bird identification skills, FREE in-class training & field training will be offered during late-September in both Golden & Invermere. High quality optical gear can be lent for free to those in need. Interested? Contact racheldarvill@gmail.com or call 250-344-5530

Wildsight Golden gratefully acknowledges the financial contributions of the following:

Columbia Basin **trust**

