The Intermountain West Region Waterbird Plan[1]

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The planning process for the Intermountain West Region component of the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan began in November 2001. This is one of several region-specific plans being developed as part of the Waterbird Conservation for the Americas initiative (Kushlan et al. 2002), as called for in the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan. The plan includes species not covered by the other three bird conservation initiatives (Partners in Flight, U. S. Shorebird Plan, and North American Waterfowl Management Plan). Waterbirds are defined here as wetland-associated species, including both colonial breeders (e.g., gulls, terns, most grebes, cormorants, herons, egrets, ibis and pelicans), and solitary nesting marsh-birds (e.g., cranes, rails, coots, bitterns and loons), but excluding waterfowl and shorebird species.

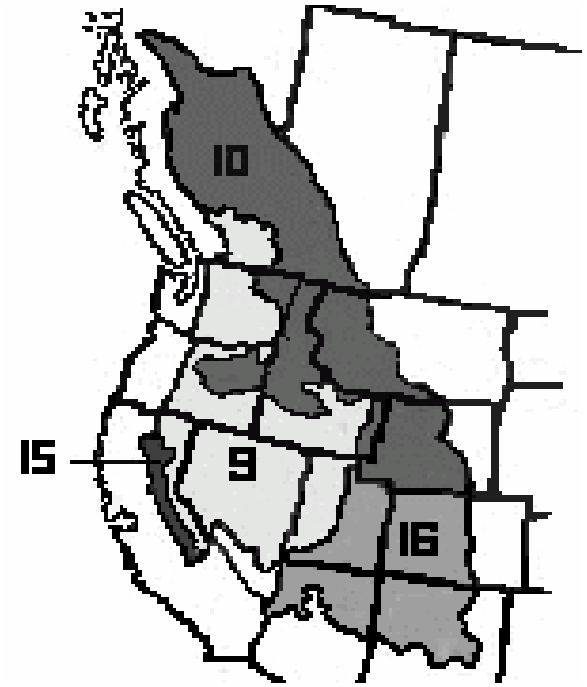

Figure 1— Bird Conservation Regions covered by the Intermountain West Region Waterbird Plan.

This plan addresses populations and habitats in Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs) 9, 10, 15, and 16 (U.S. NABCI Committee 2000) (*fig. 1*), focusing on conservation strategies for the U.S. portion of the region. The purpose of the Plan is to fill knowledge gaps and aid in "all-bird" conservation efforts of the Intermountain West Joint Venture (Intermountain West Joint Venture Management Board 1995), 11 States, and other entities associated with the geographic scope of the Plan. The content of this Plan will be integrated and linked to that of waterbird conservation plans developed for the Canada portions of the Intermountain West Region and for adjacent regions. It is intended that this plan be a working document, with focus towards on-the-ground implementation of projects.

The Intermountain West Region, as its name implies, is bounded by the Sierra Nevada and Cascade mountains on the west, and the Rocky Mountains on the east (*fig. 1*). It includes the extensive Great Basin, Columbia Basin, Colorado Plateau, and the Wyoming Basin. Characterized by diverse basin and range topography, the region provides a variety of habitats for waterbirds including high mountain lakes, rivers and streams, both fresh and brackish basin wetlands, and large terminal alkaline lakes. Due to the arid climate, a result of the rain shadow cast by the mountains to the west, Intermountain West wetlands serve as life-giving yet inconstant oases for aquatic birds.

The region's dispersed lakes, marshes and riparian zones host about 40 waterbird species, including many or most of world's Eared Grebes (*Podiceps nigricollis*) (Jehl 1994), American White Pelicans (*Pelecanus erythrorynchos*) (Evans and Knopf 1993), White-faced Ibises (*Plegadis chihi*) (Ivey et al. 2004), and California Gulls (*Larus californicus*) (Winkler 1996). Most waterbird species using this region must be highly adaptable to constant changing wetland conditions and rely on a landscape-scale association of wetlands.

The competing demands for human uses of water, such as agriculture, development, and recreation pose the greatest threat to waterbird populations here. The presence of contaminants (e.g., mercury, DDT and its breakdown products) is also a significant regional threat. Because of the West's feast-or-famine water regime, the Intermountain West regional plan will stress the necessity of conserving a network of high-quality wetland habitats with secure water sources in

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order to provide options for waterbirds during drought and flood cycles.

Planning process

Focal Species

Focal species will be identified by our working group for each BCR starting with species priority rankings from Kushlan et al. (2002) and Area Importance scores developed by the Waterbird Conservation Plan Steering Committee. We will consider each species' population status within the planning region and revise their Area Importance scores. Other considerations for final rankings will include: Fish and Wildlife Service Migratory Bird Species of Concern, state species of concern, state Heritage Program ranks, Partners in Flight focal species lists from state Bird Conservation Plans and Physiographic Area Plans. We will also assess degree of threats to breeding and migrating waterbirds. We will develop population and habitat objectives for focal species, and perhaps in some cases, for guilds of species (e.g., emergent nesting habitat objectives for colonial nesting egrets and ibises). When possible, objectives will be quantitative, but in some cases may need to be qualitative.

Focal Habitats

Habitat priorities will be developed as we generate lists of Important Bird Areas (www.Audubon.org/bird/iba) for waterbirds by BCR. We will consider their importance to focal species, their value to multiple waterbird species, degree of threats, and opportunities for conservation projects. We have yet to deal with the issue of secretive waterbirds for which we have no population status or trend information. We will recommend monitoring and research to provide data for these species and set interim habitat objectives to assure no net loss of habitat for these species. We see a need to address both focal areas and best management practices to resolve threats to waterbirds in this region. For example, we need to maintain important habitats such as Mono Lake which supports high numbers of staging Eared Grebes, and also provide guidelines to land managers to protect nesting Common Loons (*Gavia immer*) on recreational lakes.

Measures of success

Success of the plan will be measured by habitat and species monitoring. The planning team will design a monitoring strategy for focal species and important habitats, and identify needed monitoring and/or research to develop trend and/or population data for species for which there are few or no data. We will work closely with the Intermountain West Joint Venture to incorporate waterbird habitat objectives and help develop a project monitoring and evaluation system for habitat projects.

Acknowledgments

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