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A voluntary partnership with private landowners

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Cover photo of a Mountain Plover chick is courtesy of Danny Martin.

Befriending Birds

Why should landowners care about integrating wildlife conservation with livestock production? The reasons are plenty!

By Kindra Gordon

If someone asked how many cattle you ran on your ranch, surely you'd know a number. But if you were asked how many species of birds and wildlife could be found on your land, would you know? Would it be important to know?

Tammy VerCauteren with the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory in Fort Collins, CO, wants to get landowners thinking about those latter questions and to help them realize the important role birds and other wildlife play in rangeland settings.

VerCauteren, who works as an outreach director informing land managers about integrating bird conservation with rangeland management, says birds are ecologically and economically important to the environment.

Why birds are important

Economically, birds can mean big business. With nature-based tourism now the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry in the U.S., VerCauteren says many landowners are finding that offering wildlife or birding activities on their land can offer value-added opportunities. She reports that one in three of all Americans consider themselves bird watchers. And, a 2001 survey found that over 80 million Americans participated in some form of recreational activity related to fish and wildlife.

But even if nature tourism isn't one of your ranch's future goals, wildlife – particularly birds – also play critical ecological roles by helping keep rodents and insects at manageable levels.

"Birds eat insects and rodents; they spread seeds; and serve as prey for a diversity of other wildlife species," says VerCauteren. As examples, she tells that a Baird's Sparrow will collect an estimated 135 insects – mostly grasshoppers – daily to feed its young, and a pair of Ferruginous Hawks will kill roughly 500 ground squirrels, prairie dogs and rabbits in a single breeding season. These activities by birds help suppress insect and rodent populations, often keeping them below outbreak levels, VerCauteren points out.

Additionally, VerCauteren says, "Birds let us know when there are environmental concerns." For instance when there was DDT in the environment, thin eggshells for birds of prey including Bald

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Befriending Birds

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Eagles and Peregrine Falcons were an initial indicator that there was something toxic in the environment.

She adds that since birds are closely tied to the available habitat structure (height and density of vegetation), they can serve as indicators of habitat change, which in turn can reflect changes in land management strategies and range health.

"A healthy bird community should be a healthy grassland for livestock as well," she says. So if something starts to decrease the diversity of bird species or populations, it may indicate a decline in range health that needs to be addressed.

Lastly – and perhaps the most important factor in conserving grassland birds – are the implications it has for the future. Not only will it mean future generations can enjoy a diversity of species, but implementing beneficial conservation efforts for birds and wildlife may also help keep management strategies within the hands of landowners and operators rather than being dictated by regulatory action. This is becoming even more critical as contentious issues continue to arise with sensitive, threatened, and endangered species.

How to manage for birds

Given all those reasons for the importance of birds and other wildlife, what can you do to manage for more of them on your land?

VerCauteren suggests land managers start by recognizing the habitat requirements of grassland birds. This includes looking at bare ground, species composition of the vegetation and structure of the vegetation.

"Birds need habitat with diversity. If it all looks the same, you're not going to have as many birds. So we encourage landowners to try to keep a mosaic of conditions to meet the broader needs of birds," she says.

VerCauteren offers these guidelines for effective bird habitat:

Focus on habitat structure.

VerCauteren says grassland bird communities are generally influenced more by habitat structure than the particular species of plants in the habitat. Structure consists of many factors including height and density of vegetation, topographic features, ground cover and man-made structures, and is important in providing nesting substrates and opportunities for feeding, resting, and perching.

So, the more structurally diverse a habitat is with grass, shrubs, forbs (flowering plants), etc., the more species-rich the bird community found there. For example, some species require taller, denser vegetation, while others require short vegetation, for attracting mates, nesting and brood rearing, Therefore, VerCauteren says grasslands with a patchy structure will provide opportunities for multiple species to co-exist.

Pay attention to species.

While structure can be the biggest factor impacting bird habitat, it doesn't mean plant species composition isn't important. For instance, in the case of Sage Grouse, not just any shrub species will meet the habitat needs – these birds need sagebrush.

VerCauteren suggests that if you don't have a large land mass that can offer diversity of habitat structure, perhaps you should focus on critical birds that are key to your area and the habitat you can provide.

Consider management implications.

According to VerCauteren, management factors can greatly influence the available habitat structure for birds including the use or non-use of fire, haying, grazing, and methods of invasive species control.

As an example, heavy spring grazing year after year in the same pasture may reduce, or eventually eliminate, cool-season grasses in that pasture. This can be detrimental to early-season nesting birds that require a cool-season grass component.

As a solution, land managers should be aware of the habitat needs of birds and wildlife and try to integrate those needs with their rangeland management. Strategies might include:

♣ Implementing a rotational grazing system that varies the grazing patterns and timing in pastures annually.

♣ Using fire as a tool to create disturbance and alter habitat structure.

♣ Waiting to hay areas until after July 15, when most birds are finished nesting.

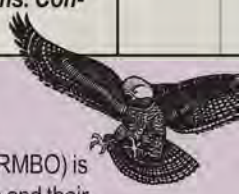
♣ Altering use in riparian areas to allow birds to utilize the area. Or, using escape ladders to protect water quality and minimize loss of birds and other wildlife in stock tanks.

♣ Establishing native shrubs, legumes or forbs to add diversity to the habitat. Avoid establishing monoculture stands of forages.

♣ Considering stocking rate. Overstocking will reduce habitat quality for most species of wildlife and birds.

Of these suggestions, VerCauteren emphasizes that there is a balance between livestock and wildlife. She says, "Grazing is a critical tool and birds need different levels of grazing to keep diversity in their habitat. Grazing can also be an effective tool for invasive species management."

For producers interested in enhancing bird and wildlife habitat on their lands, VerCauteren says there are many partnership opportunities available for funding through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, state agencies, and several private and state incentive programs. Contact any of these organizations for more information.



Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory Offers Assistance

Founded in 1988, the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation of birds and their habitats throughout the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains. Working with private, state and federal agencies as well as landowners, the RMBO strives to increase the understanding of birds and their habitats through research, monitoring, education, and outreach efforts.

Florida Family Named 15th Annual National Environmental Stewardship Award Winner

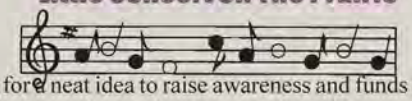
Lightsey Cattle Company (which includes the Layne Lightsey and Cary Lightsey families), nominated for the award by the Florida Cattlemen's Association, is a diverse operation with three separately located ranches. Daily undertakings include managing a cow/calf operation and preconditioning feedlot, tending to citrus groves and timber cutting, and guiding guests on hunting and ecological tours of the ranches. The land has been with the family since the mid-1800s.

The ranches consist of 60 percent improved grasses and 40 percent native grasses. Some of the conservation systems implemented include rotational grazing, harvesting overgrown timber, guided hunting to control wildlife populations, deep ditch water systems, and controlled pasture burning. Most notably, the Lightseys have helped to protect and restore 28 endangered species that live on their ranches.

"Being in central Florida, this operation has increasingly faced the pressures of urban sprawl and they fought back to keep the land intact and make land preservation a top priority," says NCBA President and Texas cattle producer Jim McAdams. "The family is a vocal advocate for preserving and enhancing cattle producers' way of life. Touring their operation, you will find an amazing abundance of wildlife. For example, the bald eagle population has increased hundred-fold and as a result some nest eggs have been transported for re-population efforts."

For many years, members of the Lightsey family have worked with a wide-ranging list of environmental agencies and organizations on environmental stewardship projects. The list includes the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Florida Division of Forestry, University of Florida Extension Service, the Nature Conservancy and Green Horizon. They host environmental groups on the ranch, give ecological tours and participate in conservation efforts with the Florida Cattlemen's Association, Florida CattleWomen's Inc. and more.

Little Concert On The Prairie



Looking for a neat idea to raise awareness and funds for grasslands? Here's one that's coming to the Kansas Flint Hills.

Symphony in the Flint Hills on June 10 will blend two of Kansas' stellar attractions – the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and the Kansas City Symphony – in a concert to fill the senses. Grasslands: Prairie Voices will be performed in a natural amphitheater framed by wildflowers and miles of North America's largest expanse of native tallgrass prairie.

Located just west of Emporia, the concert site opens at 1 p.m. for activities such as nature walks and educational presentations. The concert begins at 6 p.m.

To learn more about the event, call 620-273-8955 or visit www.symphonyintheflinthills.org.

Mark Your Calendar

The Soil and Water Conservation Society, a GLCI partner organization will hold their 2006 Annual Conference July 22-26 in Keystone, Colorado. Areas of special emphasis for the event include water use and management, conservation and the 2007 Farm Bill and the science of targeting – which is getting the right practices implemented in the right places at the right time. Register online at www.swcs.org.

Note from New Jersey

It was announced in the last issue of the GLCI News that New Jersey had a newly formed Project Grass. Chairman of that organization Matt Pearson wants to clarify that they are a separate group from the Garden State Grazing Coalition (GSGC), led by NRCS grazing specialist Jill Kohler. The GSGC receives federal funding through GLCI, while New Jersey Project Grass is strictly funded by members' dues and private grants.

Surveying For Birds

If you'd like to get an idea of how many birds are on your land, you'll first need to have a guide book to identify the different species. Then, establish several survey points at different locations on your ranch. This can be as simple as monitoring birds during a normal driving route for checking cattle. Simply stop for five minutes and record indicator birds for your pasture(s). Select an area that falls within a single pasture. Avoid stopping next to windmills (or fencelines) since some of the birds using stock tanks as their perching areas may not actually be nesting in your nearby pasture.

The best time of year to survey breeding birds is from mid-May until the end of June. The best time of day to survey birds is from dawn until 10 a.m. because bird activity diminishes as the day progresses. If possible, do a survey two or three times during the breeding season, using the same methodology, to get an average number of indicator birds on the land.

This protocol, though not statistically-based, should provide an idea of bird trends within surveyed areas over time.

To learn more about Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory and the programs they offer contact Tammy VerCauteren 970-482-1707 or tammy.vercauteren@rmbo.org.

RMBO has three offices in Colorado and one in Alliance, NE and they have worked with landowners from Mexico to Canada.

Presently, RMBO's Prairie Partners program is working to build a coalition of landowners and land managers actively involved in the conservation of lands important to prairie birds. Through the program, numerous "Train the Trainer" workshops are being held to provide technical assistance and education to interested land managers. The program includes a handbook about integrating bird conservation with rangeland management, a pocket guide for identifying prairie birds, and an interactive bird reference CD.

Additionally, RMBO conducts workshops for the urban public to create awareness of the important role farmers and ranchers have in the conservation efforts of birds and wildlife. "They are the stewards of the land and we want the public to understand the role of landowners in providing habitat," says RMBO's Tammy VerCauteren.

THE CHAIR'S CORNER

Bob Drake

We had a very productive spring GLCI meeting in Washington, D.C. at the end of February. Several representatives from the different USDA agencies took time to visit with us about grazing issues. While there has been some concern about GLCI funding being eliminated from future Farm Bill planning, we feel with GLCI's new strategic plan in place and our visits with our Congressional delegations that GLCI will be included in the next Farm Bill.

Among our GLCI specialists, Michael Hall has returned from active duty, and we are excited to welcome him aboard in Greensboro, NC. Meanwhile, Leonard Jolley has accepted a new position with the NRCS Resource Inventory and Assessment Division in Beltsville, MD, and we wish him well. We hope to fill his GLCI specialist post in Portland, OR in the near future.

Last, but not least, the program committee led by GLCI Steering Committee member John Spain is making good progress on identifying producer speakers for the Third National Conference on Grazing Lands (3NCGL), to be held Dec. 10-13 in St. Louis, MO. The theme for the conference is **Grazing Lands, Gateway to Success**, and I'm optimistic we will have 2,000 to 3,000 participants. It is going to be a great event. Visit www.glci.org for more 3NCGL Conference information.

Bob Drake
National GLCI Steering Committee

To have your GLCI activities or upcoming events highlighted in this newsletter, contact Kindra Gordon at phone 605-722-7699 or kindras@gordonresources.com

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National Cattlemen's Beef Association
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