

The Important Bird Areas (IBAs) of Oregon

An ABA-sponsored Project

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Introduction

On 14 February 1859, Oregon became the thirty-third state in the union. When the final political boundaries were drawn, the resulting landscape included remarkable biological diversity. Although there have certainly been changes in the avifauna since 1859, today Oregon ranks among the Top 10 U.S. states in species richness, with the official state checklist at 494 bird species. Preservation and restoration of avian life and diversity within these political boundaries is the goal of the Oregon Important Bird Area (IBA) program.

Oregon's IBA program is part of a global effort to identify specific geographic locations that are outstanding in their importance for breeding, foraging, or resting birds. Sites identified at the state level may also qualify for recognition for their continental or global importance. The Oregon IBA program identifies these sites across the state and encourages their continued productivity through awareness, conservation, monitoring, and research. In Oregon, IBAs are designated solely on their value as bird habitat. Current ownership and level of protection are not considered when evaluating the avian values of potential areas, but our approach to conservation is tailored to each site.

A Bird's-eye View of Oregon's IBAs

Biologists divide Oregon into ten major ecoregions, each with distinct plant and animal communities. The ecoregional model provides a framework for organizing IBAs throughout Oregon. Winging our way across the state with a bird's-eye perspective, we'll sample the ecoregions and visit just a few of the IBAs found within.

Starting in the southeastern corner of the state, in the Northern Basin and Range ecoregion, we find Steens Mountain looming at 9,500 feet, a vertical mile above the surrounding high-desert landscape. The dry, rugged peaks are home to Oregon's only known breeding population of Black Rosy-Finches. Steens's highest elevations consist of a rare alpine desert habitat with several endemic plant species. Vast stands of quaking aspen drape the upper slopes of the mountain. In the lower and middle elevations, stands of big sagebrush shelter Greater Sage-Grouse, a species currently under consideration for Endangered Species Act listing by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Snowmelt cascading down Steens's dramatic glacial gorges feeds the Donner und Blitzen River Valley and then flows into Malheur and Harney Lakes, providing critical habitat to more than a million birds. Malheur Lake hosts the largest concentration of nesting waterbirds in Oregon, among them Clark's Grebe, American Bittern, Snowy Egret, White-faced Ibis, Wilson's Phalarope, Forster's Tern, and Black Tern. The Malheur basin is a stronghold for nesting Redheads and is also home to the state's largest breeding population of Greater Sandhill Cranes. The willow-lined sloughs and wetlands of the basin harbor the highest density of Willow Flycatchers in Oregon. Exploring the sagebrush uplands surrounding the refuge reveals nesting songbirds such as Gray Flycatchers and Sage Sparrows.

Moving west from Malheur, we make our way to the Eastern Cascades Slopes and Foothills ecoregion and the famous Klamath Basin. IBAs of various sizes are scattered throughout the basin. At the north end of the basin are Sycan Marsh and Klamath Marsh, fertile wetlands surrounded by dry ponderosa pine forest. These two wetlands plus a few more to the south are home to the largest breeding population of Yellow Rails west of the Rockies. Head-

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A hallmark of the Important Bird Areas program in Oregon (and in other states) is broad involvement from both recreational birders and professional ornithologists. *Bandon Marsh National Wildlife Refuge Important Bird Area, Oregon; 30 April 2004. © Ry Thompson.*

ing south toward the California border, we encounter Miller Island along the Klamath River. Like nearly all of the wetlands in this part of the Klamath Basin, Miller Island is a critical staging area for waterfowl. It is here that the largest flocks of Ross's Geese in Oregon often stop to rest and refuel on their spring journey north; 80% of the world's population of Ross's Geese visit the Klamath Basin. Collectively, the basin wetlands are used by 80% of the all the ducks, geese, and swans in the Pacific waterfowl flyway.

Continuing west over the Cascades we enter the Klamath Mountains ecoregion and the Siskiyou Crest IBA. This collection of high mountain peaks, meadows, and forests is part of the larger Klamath-Siskiyou province, one of the most botanically diverse regions of North America. White-headed Woodpeckers, Green-tailed Towhees, Lincoln's Sparrows, and Thick-billed Fox Sparrows all raise young here. The mountain meadows of the Siskiyou Crest provide important post-breeding dispersal habitat for many landbirds from lower elevations and more northerly latitudes. Rufous Hummingbirds, Audubon's Warblers, and Oregon Juncos in particular form impressive congregations.

Heading west over the Coast Range takes us to the Pacific Ocean ecoregion. Just offshore is Mack Reef (see photo, p. 144), a group of 25 sea rocks that collectively host 43% of the state's breeding population of Leach's Storm-Petrels. Farther offshore is Heceta Bank, 25 miles off the coast of Florence. Upwelling at Heceta Bank brings to the surface prey that attract large concentrations of seabirds. A boat trip to the bank often finds hundreds of Black-footed Albatrosses, thousands of Pink-footed Shearwaters and Northern Fulmars, and up to 10,000 Cassin's Auklets in the shallower waters on the way out. Rarities at Heceta Bank have included Streaked Shearwater and Shy Albatross.

Sailing west back to the mainland, up and over the Coast Range we enter the Willamette Valley ecoregion. This valley serves as a winter home for raptors, shorebirds, and waterfowl. Baskett Slough Refuge west of Salem provides winter habitat for the "Dusky" Canada Geese that nest on the Cop-

per River Delta in Alaska. The rolling farmlands north of the refuge support one of the two major breeding concentrations of "Streaked" Horned Larks in Oregon. This declining subspecies can be found in western Oregon, and the bulk of the population nests in the Willamette Valley. At the north end of this ecoregion lies a huge urban wetland complex: Smith and Bybee Lakes in North Portland. The lake's freshwater wetlands provide important habitat for wading birds such as Great Egrets and Great Blue Herons, and they regularly attract

roaming flocks of American White Pelicans, a rare sight elsewhere in western Oregon. The small stand of cottonwood forest between the lakes is one of the few locations in Oregon where singing Red-eyed Vireos can be heard.

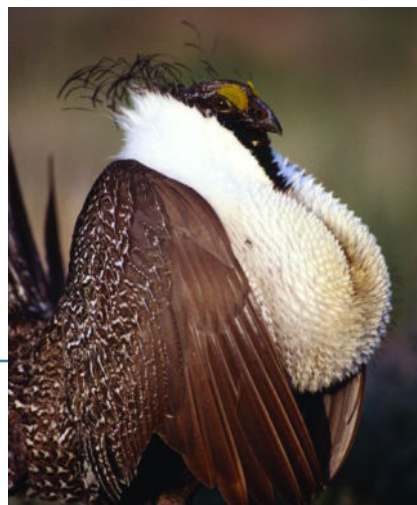
Traveling east from the Willamette Valley takes us to the Cascades ecoregion, an area that encompasses the western slopes and peaks of the Cascades, a mountain range that stretches from British Columbia to California. Quartzville Creek meanders down the west slope of the range below Mount Jefferson and is home to 20–25% of the state's breeding population of Harlequin Ducks, making this drainage a stronghold for the species in Oregon.

Just over the Cascades crest to the east is the Eastern Cascades Slopes and Foothills ecoregion, which we visited earlier, where Green Ridge hosts an autumn movement of diurnal raptors. Northern Goshawks, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Merlins, and Peregrines are some of the species that can be seen moving along Green Ridge as they head south each fall.

Cruising northeast from Green Ridge takes us to the Columbia Plateau ecoregion in north-central Oregon, an area dominated by agricultural, dry grassland, and shrub-steppe habitats. The Boardman Grasslands south of the Columbia River are the largest remaining block of native shrub-steppe and grassland habitat in the ecoregion. Large breeding populations of Swainson's and Ferruginous Hawks, Long-billed Curlews, Burrowing Owls, and Loggerhead Shrikes are found on the grasslands. Horned Larks and Grasshopper and Lark Sparrows also nest here, as does Oregon's state bird—the Western Meadowlark.

Continuing east, we end our trip around Oregon in the Blue Mountains ecoregion in the northeastern

The sagebrush desert of Oregon is home to the **Greater Sage-Grouse**, a declining species that may soon be accorded protection under the Endangered Species Act. *Foster Flats, Oregon; April 1999. © Don Baccus.*



corner of the state. The highest range in the region is the Wallowa Mountains. From a biological perspective, the Wallowas are essentially an extension of the Rocky Mountains into northeast Oregon. Bird communities have an eastern flavor, with nesting species such as Veery, Gray Catbird, and American Redstart, as well as a Rocky Mountain influence, with Spruce Grouse, Bohemian Waxwing, and Pine Grosbeak. The Wallowa range is also home to an endemic breeding subspecies: the “Wallowa” Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch.

The sites we’ve visited on our tour around Oregon are among the 104 IBAs that have been identified thus far in the state. The Oregon IBA program has three major components: site identification, conservation, and education. In building this program, our first task has been to assemble a team of experts to serve as a Technical Advisory Committee. The committee’s primary responsibilities are to identify IBAs in Oregon and to provide oversight and guidance for monitoring programs developed for Oregon IBAs. The committee consists of ornithologists and expert birders from around the state, representing different organizations as well as diversity of expertise with species groups and geographic areas. To date, the committee has reviewed 224 nominations and has identified 104 as IBAs in Oregon.

A Global Context

Important Bird Areas were first identified in the 1980s, when BirdLife International initiated the program in Europe. In Europe, more than 3,000 sites—totaling 7% of the land area—have been identified. IBAs have proven to be an effective tool for bird conservation, as they directly benefit birds by setting science-based priorities for habitat conservation and by promoting positive action to safeguard habitats. In the mid-1990s, the American Bird Conservancy launched an effort to identify globally important sites in the United States, and the National Audubon Society



Although still widespread and fairly numerous in western North America, the **Burrowing Owl** is disappearing from some regions. By preserving Important Bird Areas in Oregon and elsewhere, population declines may be halted or reversed. Lane County, Oregon; January 1999. © Don Baccus.

launched an effort to identify sites of statewide or greater importance in all 50 states. Today, 46 states either have IBA programs in progress or have completed state-level IBA inventories. The Audubon Society of Portland initiated Oregon’s IBA effort in 2002, and the Oregon IBA program received funding from the ABA Eugene convention grant in the summer of 2003. Other supporters of the program include the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, the Jubitz Foundation, a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Joint Venture, the National Audubon Society, and Mrs. Georgia Leupold Marshall.

The Important Bird Areas program is a global effort, with the difference between global and state level IBAs being a matter of relative scale. Global IBAs are significant to species of global conservation concern, taking into consideration worldwide populations of a species or a group of species. State-level IBAs have a narrower focus, taking into consideration a site’s significance to statewide or regional populations. The criteria used for different IBA programs reflect the relative size of the effort. For example, a location that shelters a large percentage of Oregon’s Yellow Rail population may not meet global IBA criteria, but when considered at a statewide level, it becomes much more significant. Global IBA criteria may require an annual concentration of, say, 12,000 Redheads (1% of the total population), whereas some state-level thresholds are set lower, for



Mack Reef, an assemblage of 25 sea rocks right off the Oregon coast, is home to 43% of the state’s breeding Leach’s Storm-Petrels. Mack Reef (Oregon Islands NWR Complex) Important Bird Area, Oregon; 19 June 1998. © Roy W. Lowe / USFWS.

example, a concentration of 5,000 ducks. Because community grassroots advocacy works best at the local level, state-level IBAs may have the best potential for citizen involvement and on-the-ground progress in bird conservation.

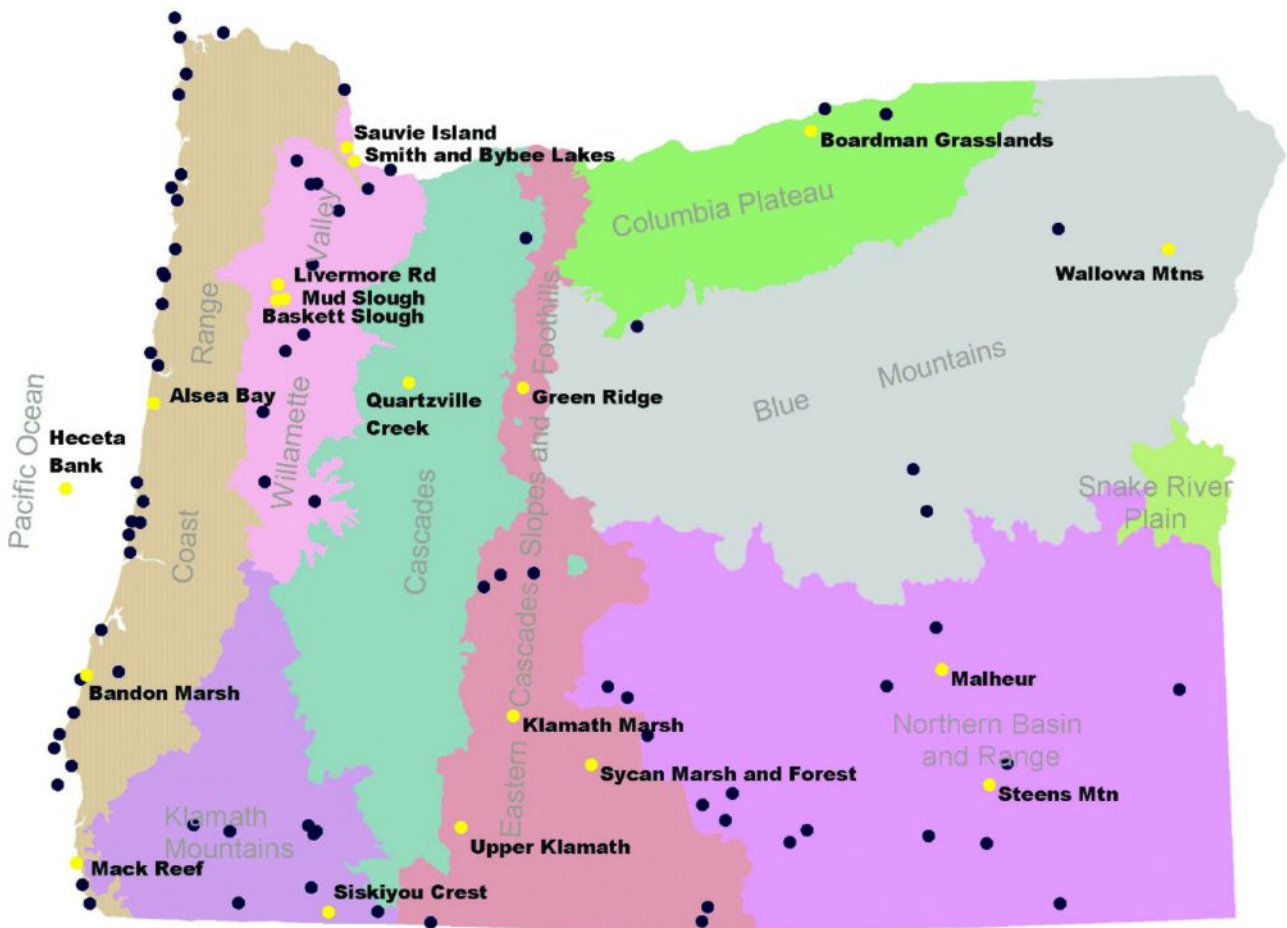
Selection Criteria

What are the qualifications for IBA designation in Oregon? Using continental criteria and other state IBA programs as a starting point, the Technical Advisory Committee developed criteria specific for Oregon. There are four primary selection-criteria for a potential site, as follow: (1) significance for endangered species, threatened species, or species of special concern; (2) importance to species of a high conservation-priority; (3) being representative of rare or threatened natural communities; and (4) hosting of significant concentrations of birds during the breeding, migratory, or non-breeding seasons. Most IBAs in Oregon and around the world qualify under the fourth criterion, so “significant concentrations” deserves further explanation. Specific numerical thresholds have

been established for Criterion #4 by the Technical Advisory Committee. Examples include: a location that has 5% of a statewide population; a location that is used by more than 1,000 shorebirds in marine or estuarine habitats; a location that hosts 100 or more shorebirds in freshwater habitats.

A site needs to meet only one of these criteria to qualify. However, sites must regularly support large numbers of birds, usually on an annual basis. One-time concentrations of birds will not qualify a site for IBA designation. A certain amount of subjective judgment enters into the evaluation process, and the expertise of the Technical Advisory Committee plays a crucial role. For a given nomination, the Committee members evaluate data in the context of a local bird population or location. Additional Oregon experts are consulted as needed for further insight into potential sites.

While the IBA selection criteria are well-suited to gregarious and colonial species (e.g., waterfowl, seabirds, and herons), they are less effective for identifying critical habitat for landbirds. Landbirds tend to be more widespread over the landscape,



The Ecoregions and Important Bird Areas (IBAs) of Oregon. IBAs mentioned in the article are indicated as yellow dots. Oregon’s other IBAs are indicated as black dots. Map by © Matt Hunter.

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especially during the breeding season. With documented declines in neotropical songbirds and increased concern for species such as White-headed Woodpecker in Oregon, identifying IBAs for landbirds is a challenge and a priority.

What We're Doing

On 24 August 2004 the Audubon Society of Portland publicly unveiled the Oregon Important Bird Areas program as a first step toward raising awareness of critical bird habitats around the state. Excellent press coverage, including a story on Oregon Public Broadcasting, has piqued interest in the program. We highlighted three sites that first day: Sauvie Island and Mud Slough in the Willamette Valley, along with Alsea Bay on the coast. Through the press and other outlets, we will continue to raise awareness and communicate the importance of healthy habitats for healthy bird populations.

The conservation phase of the Oregon IBA program is just starting to hatch. A first important step is assessing needs and setting priorities at each of the 104 identified locations. Each IBA in Oregon is unique; each is in a different community, each has a different owner (or combination of owners), and each has a unique management scenario. Some are protected refuges managed for wildlife, while others are on government land with little management consideration for birds. Some have existing "friends" groups, while others are little known and obscure. Riparian habitat restoration may be a priority at one site, while disturbance to colonial nesting seabirds may be the largest issue at another. On the coast, a specific need has been identified and initial steps are underway for shorebird-habitat restoration at two Oregon IBAs.

For many IBAs, the initial assessment reveals gaps in basic information on birds using an IBA. This deficiency presents exciting opportunities for birders to get out in the field and to monitor populations. An excellent example is Green Ridge in the Eastern Cascades Slopes and Foothills ecoregion. A few years ago, counters from HawkWatch International observed enough hawks migrating along Green Ridge to qualify it for designation as an Oregon IBA, but up-to-date data were lacking. In the fall of 2004 the IBA program partnered with a local group, the East Cascades Bird Conservancy, to initiate raptor migration monitoring at Green Ridge. The long and the short of it: What we have here is local birders contributing directly to bird science and conservation. The results are promising, and we hope to expand efforts in 2005.

Community stewardship drives the conservation component of the IBA program. Frank Gill, former Chief Science Officer for the National Audubon Society, said it best: "IBAs have a unique power to unite people, communities, and organizations in proactive bird conservation, one place at a time." There are many ways for people to get involved, including habitat restoration, bird monitoring, or legislative action. Hands-on citizen participation is a key element of success for IBAs, from site nomination to successful implementation of a conservation plan.

It is an exciting time for bird conservation in Oregon. Our program has momentum and we look forward to a bright future. We are proud and thankful to have the support of the American Birding Association. New collaborative efforts are forming, and communities are taking positive steps to ensure that these magical creatures we call birds always have a safe place to land.

For more information about the Oregon IBA program, please check out the following web sites: <www.oregoniba.org> and <www.audubonportland.org>.

Acknowledgments

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