

SAGEBRUSH SONGBIRD SURVEY ANNUAL REPORT

2017 FIELD SEASON

A community science partnership of Audubon Washington, the National Audubon Society, Audubon chapters, and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

 Audubon WASHINGTON



Western Meadowlark.
Photo: Roger van Gelder

By the Numbers: 2017 Field Season Science Stats

SITES SURVEYED **57**

SURVEYS COMPLETED **171**

VOLUNTEER HOURS **2,821**

VOLUNTEERS **105**

SURVEY SITES WITH FOCAL STUDY SPECIES OBSERVED (2014–2017) **116 out of 203**

FEDERAL SPECIAL STATUS SPECIES OBSERVED (2014–2017) **23**

Message from the Program Director

As we close the books on our fourth year of the Sagebrush Songbird Survey, I am once again awed and inspired by the devotion, deep natural history knowledge and exceptional birding skills demonstrated by Audubon community science volunteers. We are working as individuals and collectively in multi-chapter teams to document avian species in order to benefit the birds and the sagebrush landscape of the Columbia Plateau.

Our volunteers are stepping up their cooperative efforts across Audubon chapter lines. Adventurous volunteers from as far as the Okanogan (read Canada border!) and Puget Sound

surveyed sites along the Snake River near the Idaho and Oregon state lines, because they care that even the remotest sites get surveyed. Add the long distances, averaging 80 miles each way over rural “roads,” a late wet winter and spring, and you have soggy going. But go the survey volunteers did. Collectively, they completed three surveys at 57 sites for a total of 171 surveys, driving over 30,000 rural miles and hiking over 60 miles in the pursuit of our sagebrush steppe birds.

Many of our sites this year were on Washington Department of Natural Resources leases, public land managed for multi-purpose uses including livestock grazing. Grazing is not considered the primary threat to sagebrush habitat in the west but it is ubiquitous across the

Columbia Plateau. Are there different grazing practices that improve habitat conditions for sagebrush steppe birds? These are the questions we can explore with the agricultural community and land managers once we identify where our focal birds are breeding. Meanwhile we continue to survey with the cooperation of ranchers who care deeply about stewarding healthy sagebrush habitat and wildlife.

Near the completion of Phase I of our survey on public lands, we’re looking ahead to Phase II, which will increasingly focus on private lands. Our goal is to complete the project by 2020—please join us!

Christi Norman

The Science Behind the Survey

The Sagebrush Songbird Survey engages local communities in protecting sagebrush songbirds by deploying trained volunteers to survey for sagebrush birds in potential habitat areas across the Columbia Plateau. When first envisioned, the sagebrush songbird project focused on filling an information gap in our understanding of how birds were responding to the relentless loss, fragmentation and degradation of sagebrush habitat.

From this, the Sagebrush Songbird Survey was born, a landscape-level effort to document the presence of sagebrush obligate and other shrub steppe species across a range of habitats. The data collected in this survey will improve species distribution models for sagebrush birds. These models are used in a variety of land planning tools, like the Western Association of Fish

“Just because a map says there is a road does not necessarily mean there is one!”

Adventurous Survey Volunteer Ann Brinly



Photo: Joel Rogers

and Wildlife Agencies Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool, and having better models will result in more bird-friendly land management and planning across Washington State. In addition, our data is incorporated into the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Priority Habitats and Species database, a legally-recognized source for best available science in our state.

How does it all work?

Using ArcGIS online to identify and assess potential sagebrush steppe habitat areas in the Columbia Plateau, sites are selected and ground-truthed by adventurous volunteers. Once a site is established, it's surveyed by volunteers on a monthly basis during the spring breeding season to document the presence or absence of sagebrush songbird species. Our data undergo quality control and results are entered into eBird—the world's largest biodiversity database. After that, we summarize the year's results and then it's on to the next field season and the next round of sites!

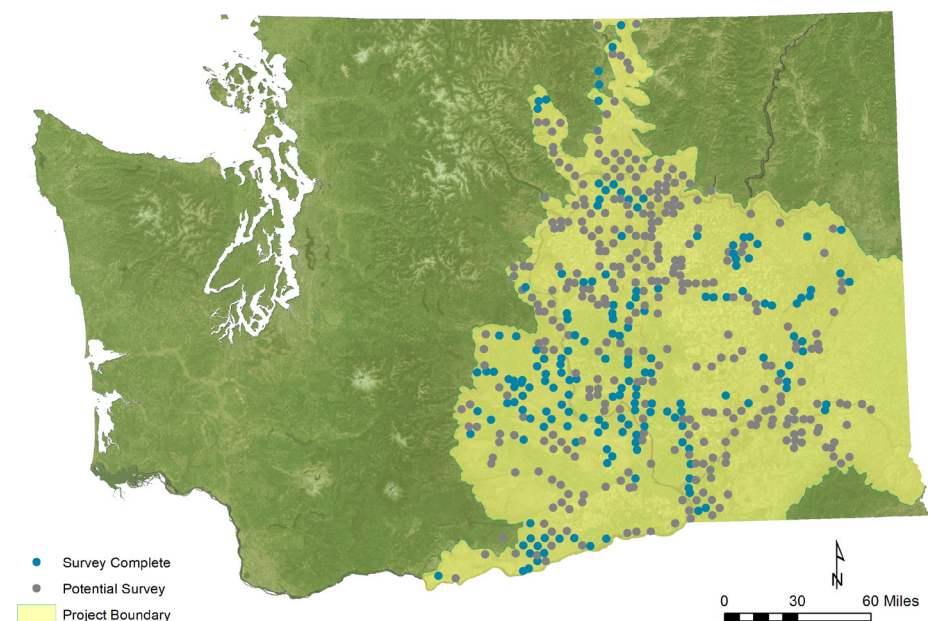
What makes our survey unique?

- We work with the entire suite of public and tribal landowners in the Columbia Plateau, creating a common body of field data that can be compared across land ownership types and management regimens.
- We collect landscape-scale bird data that will help identify limiting factors in species occurrence across sagebrush habitat conditions, and improve conservation effectiveness by supplying more refined models of species distribution in remaining sagebrush areas.
- We work directly with private landowners and lease holders, engaging them through invitations to participate in the surveys and by sharing survey results.

Keeping Birds on the Land

The Sagebrush Songbird Survey is part of Audubon's initiative to conserve the sagebrush ecosystem in the Columbia Plateau. Focal species like the Brewer's Sparrows and other sagebrush-loving

Public Land Survey Site Locations



birds are constrained on the landscape by their need for high quality sage habitat, which is in increasingly short supply. To keep birds like these on the land, we need to work strategically to ensure the long-term health of Washington's eastern rangelands. For starters, we need to preserve the land that's already protected. By fighting to keep the Hanford Reach National Monument intact this summer, Audubon advocates showed that they are prepared to do just that, adding to the nearly 3 million comments sent to the Department of the Interior during the review period. The Hanford Reach Monument and Hanford Nuclear Reservation contain some of the best remaining sagebrush habitat in the state—which is why Audubon continues to advocate for long-term protection and management of these public lands.

We also need to safeguard public and private lands from the effects of our changing climate and prepare for the increased drought and wildfires that science says are coming. By working collaboratively with government agencies, ranchers that use rangelands for grazing, and the surrounding communities, we are taking preemptive steps to improve wildfire response and raise awareness around climatic threats before it's too late.



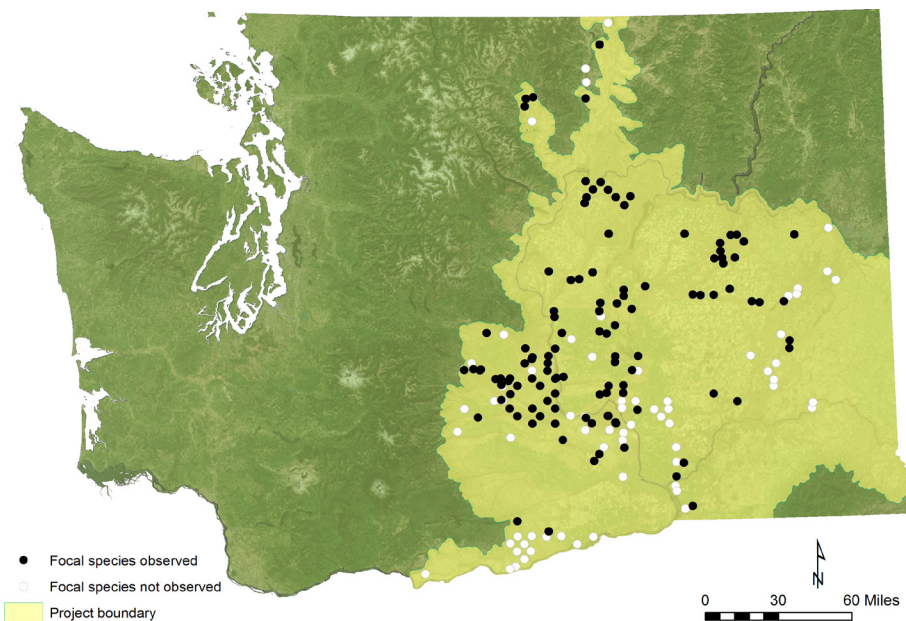
Sage Thrasher.
Photo: Mia McPherson

Top 10 Species Observed in 2017 Surveys

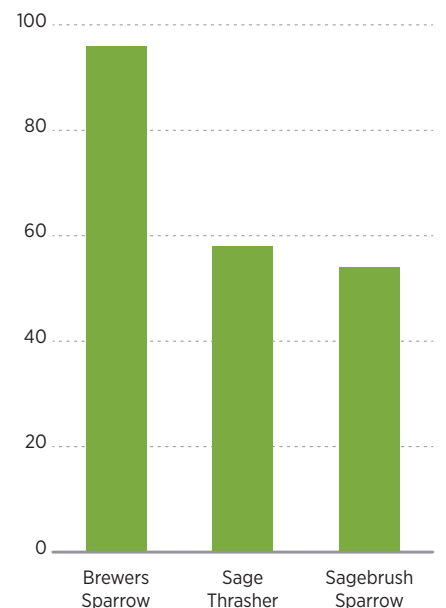
- Western Meadowlark
- Horned Lark
- Vesper Sparrow
- Red-winged Blackbird
- Common Raven
- Brewer's Sparrow*
- Mourning Dove
- Ring-necked Pheasant
- Grasshopper Sparrow
- Sagebrush Sparrow*

** focal study species*

Location of 2014–2017 Survey Sites with Focal Study Species Observed



Number of Survey Sites where Focal Species Have Been Observed (2014–2017)





Margy Taylor and Dave Showalter

Thank You to Chapter Leaders and Volunteers

Thank you to our Chapter ArcGIS online site assessment experts and to all those scouting the back roads, climbing fences, and documenting access routes to remote sites. Your efforts are instrumental to the success of our spring survey volunteers!

Special Thanks to Dave Showalter, landscape and conservation photographer, who flew out from Denver and photographed volunteers surveying in Douglas County where we found all three focal species—Sagebrush Sparrow, Sage Thrasher, and Brewer's Sparrow.

Volunteer Spotlight

Mother and daughter, Marilyn and Amanda Sherling, share a passion for birds. Since retiring to Wenatchee, Marilyn has joined North Central Washington Audubon Society and has taken a deep dive into birding. Just two years into her training, her enhanced ArcGIS and GPS mapping skills are

setting standards for site assessment and ground-truthing practices, improving this collaborative project and enabling volunteers from all chapters. Amanda is following in her mom's footsteps by studying natural resources at Wenatchee Valley College, and developing an undergraduate special studies class about the survey—the first of its kind!

What to Expect in 2018

Phase I of the Songbird Survey was conducted on public lands. However, 59% of Washington's remaining sagebrush steppe is under private ownership. Phase II incorporates surveys on private lands and private leases, which are critical to achieve the geographic coverage necessary to model species occupancy in the Columbia Plateau. In order to reach our goal of completing the survey by 2020, we are ramping up our volunteer training and chapter coordination efforts so that we can continue our 2018 surveys on public land sites, while beginning surveys on private lands enrolled in WDFW hunting access programs.



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Photo: Kathy Crook