



# Flood Irrigated Meadows Provide Needed Habitat for Birds, Wildlife

By Lauren Brown

Photography by Teresa Wicks, Portland Audubon Eastern Oregon Field Coordinator

November 2019

The Pacific Flyway, a superhighway for migrating birds, stretches from the West Coast to the Rockies, but one of the busiest branches cuts right through Harney County. Locals are familiar with the influx of birds as well as birders who want to see the various species that pause in the flood-irrigated wet meadows on their way north.

Teresa Wicks, East Oregon Field Coordinator for [Portland Audubon](#), said that the Harney Basin is an important stop on this journey as the birds migrate from south to north. "Wetlands like we have here in the Harney Basin end up being really important stopover habitat. Birds will stop over and rest and recharge and regain their body condition," she said. The birds then arrive at their breeding ground ready to have a productive season. "There's been some work that has shown that in places like the Harney Basin, the quality and the quantity of the food here actually determines a lot about breeding success when these birds get to their breeding territory in the north," Wicks said.

As water fluctuates across the west and land managers turn to more efficient means of watering crops, the flood-irrigated wet meadows in Harney County have become an even more vital place for birds to rest and recharge on their way north. This is why the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative, a collaborative of the High Desert Partnership, has made one of its priorities to maintain and support the flood-irrigated wet meadows that foster the migrating bird population.

## Birds and Wildlife



According to Wicks, studies of one duck species, Northern pintails, have shown they spend quite a bit of time in the Harney Basin. Songbirds also depend on the flood-irrigated wet meadows as the basin boasts the largest westernmost breeding population of bobolinks in North America. Bobolinks are commonly found nesting in the wet meadows on the [Malheur National Wildlife Refuge](#).

Rod Klus, a wildlife biologist with the [Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife](#) in Hines,

noted that other animals also benefit from the flood-irrigated wet meadows. The way the meadows are flooded, hayed, grazed and managed in general makes them quality habitat for wildlife. “The sunlight gets to the soil a little quicker so it warms up faster and tends to green up and become productive before some areas that are managed differently,” he said. In addition to dabbling ducks, sandhill cranes and other migratory birds, mule deer and pronghorn also use the wet meadows.

## **Managing the Water**

Esther Lev is the executive director of [The Wetlands Conservancy](#) and has been a member of the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative since its inception. She’s interested in the dynamic between the water, the land, those who manage the land and the plants and animals that thrive and grow in the flood-irrigated meadow environment. “It really is a dynamic system. What happens at one time influences what happens at another time,” she said.

For example, there is a big focus on the spring flooding because of the spring migration of birds. But there could be management choices that folks are making in the fall that influence what happens in the spring as far as the how much water and where it flows.

What makes it so interesting to Lev is the changing landscape and the way every person, animal and plant that uses this land must be adaptable to that change. “Everyone responds to water,” she said. The Harney Basin really is a place where water manages everyone, she noted.

The Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative is working with local ranchers to help make water management decisions that support the initiative’s goal of sustaining the flood-irrigated meadows. Lev said that meetings with local ranchers have been productive in determining a collective outcome that can support the birds, the plants and the ranching community. They look at management tools that can be used together and examine whether there are any activities that are having a negative impact on the other. “We’re doing this together to collectively set a vision that we all want those wet meadows to stay there, and we want flood irrigation to stay around there,” Lev said.

## **A Local Perspective**

Tom Schillinger has lived in Harney County all his life. His grandfather was born here in 1899. Schillinger delivers packages for FedEx and is also an artist, with an eye for painting the wildlife in Harney County. One of his murals is on display at the [Selco Community Credit Union](#).

Schillinger’s appreciation for the outdoors was developed as a youth camping, hunting and fishing throughout the Harney Basin. He remembers seeing great flocks of geese and ducks out at the Island Ranch as a kid. He specifically recalled the sound made by a big flock of wigeons. “I remember when we were out hunting in the field, it was almost like a tornado. They landed in the fields, and they’d make that sound – they looked almost like a storm cloud,” he said.

Schillinger’s grandpa was adept at identifying ducks having grown up around them his entire life. “He could tell you what kind of duck it was flying five miles away just from the way it flew and maybe a flash of color on it,” he said.

Schillinger’s mother, Geraldine, was a watercolor painter herself and was instrumental in starting the art show associated with the [John Scharff Harney County Migratory Bird Festival](#), which takes place in Harney County during the spring migration.

Those who live in the Harney Basin know how human life intertwines with nature in this wild, beautiful place, and it's hard to not have an appreciation for the wildlife and plants with which we share space.

As a longtime Harney County resident, Schillinger recognizes the importance of maintaining habitat for the birds. "The ranches with the flood-irrigated meadows and the birds are a great combination because they're really attracted to those short fields with the new growth coming up for feed," he said.

For those who have an appreciation for migratory birds in the Harney Basin and would like to take part in surveys to track them, they should check out Project IBiS. The project looks to provide baseline information on birds that use flood-irrigated ranchlands in Harney County as well as offer information on how new infrastructure is influencing bird use of these areas. For more information about Project IBiS and how to volunteer, see the [Portland Audubon Project IBiS website](#).

*This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative.*

