



Birds on the Move: Fall Migration in the Harney Basin

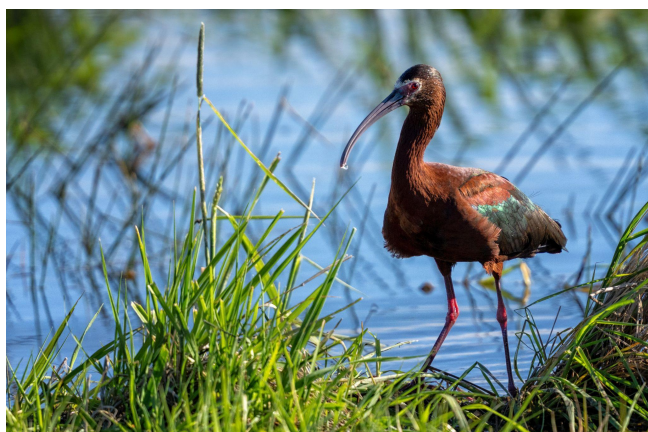
While there are more birds in the spring, autumn offers plenty of opportunities to see birds as they pause on their journey

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by Lauren Brown

Fall brings to mind piles of leaves, mounds of pumpkins at the grocery store and cold, crisp mornings as the weather starts to change. It also means birds will be on the move as they migrate from their northern breeding grounds to the places they overwinter in the south. As part of the Pacific Flyway, birds use the Harney Basin as a place to pause on that journey.

Melissa Petschauer, Ecological Programs Coordinator with the High Desert Partnership, noted that fall migration has already begun for many species. "Fall migration starts earlier than people might expect, with birds starting to move south as early as August," she said. "September and October are peak months for movement for waterfowl, but with the flooded wet meadows dried up, they will be in open bodies of water," she said.



According to Friends of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, this forces concentrations of shorebirds such as ibis, gulls, terns, pelicans and herons to gather around the remaining pools of open water to feed on trapped fish. The open water areas at the pond at refuge headquarters, as well as Benson and Knox ponds north of P Ranch, will often see many ducks, although larger concentrations will occur in remote areas of Malheur and Harney lakes. In late October, tundra swans and diving ducks are regularly seen at Krumbo Reservoir.

meadows. Cranes from the north will join the pairs that nested over the summer to fuel up on their journey to California's Central Valley, where they spend the winter. Their numbers swell in October with as many as a thousand birds congregating in the meadows south of refuge headquarters.

About 200 pairs of sandhill cranes nest on the refuge each year. In September, large groups of cranes will gather in the refuge



Raptors will also be migrating. Look for Swainson's and red-tailed hawks, bald eagles and rough-legged hawks as they begin arriving in mid-October. Raptors are commonly seen on power poles and in open fields. Occasional sightings of merlin and peregrine falcon have also been reported.

Songbirds such as warblers and sparrows log peak migration numbers from mid-August to late September. Unusual species, such as American redstart and indigo bunting can be seen along with the regular visitors.

Wildfire interference

This summer, the Harney Basin saw hundreds of thousands of acres burned because lightning sparked wildfire. The Stubble and Jackass Butte fires burned parts of the refuge in July, closing off areas to the public.

This can affect bird migration as well. "If birds are migrating during an active wildfire, the fire and smoke can force birds to change their path," Petschauer said. "They might need to backtrack, take a risk on a new flight path, or fly farther to rest and refuel, all things that will increase their flight time."

A rude shock awaits birds that stop to refuel at a site that has already burned. "If birds arrive at a location and a wildfire has gone through, this reduces suitable habitat and food availability. These stressors can leave birds exhausted, and not able to make it to their wintering grounds," Petschauer said.

According to a study released by the U.S. Geological Survey in 2021, bird migration in 2020, which was a significant wildfire year for Oregon, took twice as long as the 2019 migration. It took nine days versus four, and they flew an added 470 miles to avoid wildfire smoke.

The study stated that "megafires and thick smoke portend big problems for migratory birds," as wildfires coincide with the beginning of fall migration. Longer migrations require more energy and take more time to recover from. That could make it harder for the birds to reproduce and even put them at risk of dying.

By late August, the Jackass Butte Fire was 92 percent contained as were the majority of all the other large fires in Harney County. As wildfire season intensifies across the nation and particularly in the west, this could have a significant impact on bird populations over time.

Things to keep in mind

One thing to know about fall migration is that bird identification can be trickier than in the spring. Petschauer noted that "before migration many birds go through a molt in which subdued colored feathers replace the bright ones of spring."

Fall is also the time when birds that hatched over the summer make their first long flight, and these birds may still be in their juvenile plumage. "Fall is a great time to hone your identification skills," Petschauer said.

During peak migration times, lights from cities and towns can confuse birds on their journey. The Bird Alliance of Oregon website states that "as migrating birds pass over brightly lit cities, sky glow drowns out the stars, confusing them and luring them into urban areas." It's a good reminder that reducing sky glow over cities during these peak migration times can ultimately help birds get where they're going more quickly. Some tips to reduce sky glow include making sure exterior light fixtures are well-shielded and not overly bright, selecting warm LED bulbs that are under a 3,000 Kelvin rating, and drawing blinds or curtains to reduce light spill that contributes to sky glow.

Fall migration is a great time to get out in the Harney Basin and see a variety of birds as they pass through. Cornell Lab at birdcast.org monitors this data in the Migration Dashboard under their Migration Tools header. It lets you see how many birds are on the move by county to explore the data specific to your region. For example, during the night on Aug. 27, 132,300 birds crossed Harney County.

As the leaves fall and pumpkin spice dominates our palates, remember that birds are on the move. Grab your binoculars, go for a hike and check out the great variety of birds that pass through the Harney Basin on their journey south. Also, turn down those lights at night to help them along the way.

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting seven collaboratives including the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative and the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

