

# 2019 Annual Report

Protect the birds and we protect the Earth Serving Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah



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## **About Us**

The National Audubon Society protects birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow.

Audubon works throughout the Americas using science, give Audubon an unparalleled wingspan that reaches millions of people each year to inform, inspire, and unite diverse communities in conservation action. A nonprofit conservation organization since 1905, Audubon believes in a world in which people and wildlife thrive.

Audubon Rockies is the regional office of the National Audubon Society for Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah. address the core threats to birds in our region. We are an inclusive, nonpartisan bird conservation organization

over: Wilson's Phalarope on Rockin' 7 Rand d by Audubon's Conservation Ranching Init



# A Letter From Our Director

OUR MESSAGE IS SIMPLE: BIRDS MATTER. Amid habitat loss, climate change, and environmentally hostile policies, birds need people to care. We at Audubon Rockies connect people to birds, advocate for bird-friendly policy, and ground this all in science. Through our staff, volunteers, advocates, and donors, we have become a trusted and unifying voice for birds and nature in our region.

The year 2019 was challenging amid new climate projections and continuing degradation of policies that protect the birds and the places they depend on. In the face of it all, we helped conserve more than 500,000 acres of rangelands, worked with the town of Erie, Colorado, to pen a native landscaping proclamation, held the federal government accountable in court to their management of sage-grouse, inspired river advocates on a float down the Colorado River, and engaged more than 100 people of all ages and state partnerships in our annual Wyoming BioBlitz. And, we grew to three states, six core programs, a staff of 12.

Last October, a new Audubon report, Survival by Degrees, announced that half of Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah's bird species are at risk of extinction due to climate change. In response, we are doubling down on our efforts to combat climate change. All of our core programs address this pressing issue in some form, from working to ensure that water remains in our rivers to keeping carbon sequestered on conservation ranches.

This year also concluded our previous strategic plan's timeframe. A look back revealed strong growth in our membership, capacity, and outcomes; a greater emphasis on inclusivity; and successful partnerships with other organizations and agencies. In our new strategic plan, completed this year, we continue our commitment to a science-based approach to conservation and advocacy, increase our outreach throughout the three states we now serve, and bolster our focus on climate change.





A new year is coming right up, but before we launch into it, please join me in a look at our successes in the last year, and celebrate. It's been a trying year for birds, but they're a lot better off than they would be without passionate people like you. Whether you've volunteered, advocated, or donated to Audubon Rockies in the last year, thank you. And if you're new to Audubon, I hope you'll take a look at the amazing work that we are doing and join us in our efforts to protect birds and the places they need.

Yours in conservation.

Alison Holloran **Executive Director** Audubon Rockies



## **Community Naturalist**

People will only conserve what they care about, but people are increasingly disconnected from nature. That's why we inspire lasting connections to nature by delivering place-based programs to people across Wyoming and Colorado, both outdoors and in classrooms. In addition, our community science programs help them understand the role of science. To expand our impact even further, we develop quality resources and trainings to help educators teach their students about nature and science.

## Highlights

• Last June we helped 200 students build pollinator homes in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. "Our goals were to benefit plants and birds, and help the community understand the value of native pollinators," said Community Naturalist Keith Bruno. After installing the homes, the students released 700 native bees. • Thanks to the help of scientists and 80 volunteers, we documented 103 species of plants and animals at Wyoming BioBlitz. Participants explored sagebrush, stream, and riparian habitats with scientists and learned about mammology, nature journaling, fish ecology, and the impacts of roads on wildlife.

## Katelyn Reimers, Volunteer Bird Bander How community science inspires and empowers volunteers

**KATELYN REIMERS'S HANDS MOVE DELICATELY,** carefully pulling the thin net from around the Common Yellowthroat's wing. In less than a minute, she removes the yellow and black bird from the net and places him into a soft cotton bag, which helps keep him calm until she's ready to take measurements on the bird and mark him with a leg band. Reimers has been volunteering with Audubon Rockies for four years, and she's only twelve years old.

Each summer, Audubon Rockies Community Naturalists run four bird banding stations with the help of volunteers. In 2019, we banded 865 birds and 63 species and engaged 103 volunteers. "Part of our goal is to collect data that helps scientists and managers conserve these birds, and the other part is to inspire an appreciation for birds and science in people like Katelyn," said Jacelyn Downey, education programs manager.

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#### ↓ 2019 By the Numbers

**6,436** Total program participants

## **354** People engaged in community science

projects

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This year, 672 youths and 156 adults visited our banding stations on field trips.

For many people, seeing a bird up close for the first time is transformative. "Usually you just see them in the air from far away. But up close you get to notice their feathers and all the different details on them," said Reimers. "I feel like most of my friends don't notice birds like I do. They're just like, 'Oh, there's a bird, nothing special about that.' But, there is something special about birds," said Katelyn.

Through our banding stations, Community Naturalists cultivate an interest in birds and grow it into a passion for conserving them. "Community science is a powerful opportunity because it helps people realize that birding isn't just a hobby; it can be an important and meaningful career," said Community Science Coordinator Zach Hutchinson.





## **Habitat Hero**

One of the greatest threats that birds face is habitat loss. To address this, Habitat Hero provides people, businesses, and cities with the resources to create bird habitat in their own communities. Collectively, Habitat Hero volunteers are weaving together a landscape in which birds and wildlife can flourish. This is also a powerful way to recruit new audiences into bird conservation. By planting native gardens, we're not only creating more beautiful and water-efficient communities; we're connecting people to nature.

## **Highlights**

• We partnered with Colorado State University to provide students with opportunities to help Habitat Hero. Nineteen students developed community science protocols, bird-friendly garden designs, an educational children's book, a spatial analysis of focal areas, and research on incentivizing the sale of native plants.

• We led a six-week program for 75 first grade students in Fort Collins focused on threats to birds and pollinators and ways to create habitat for them. We led birding field trips, built birdhouses, and planted a Habitat Hero garden. Fort Collins Mayor Wade Troxell attended our final presentation.

## **Connecting People to Birds, With Plants** A garden planting at Audubon's Kiowa Creek Ranch

ON A SUNNY SEPTEMBER MORNING, 45 volunteers gathered at Audubon's Kiowa Creek Ranch near Colorado Springs to plant a native garden. Throughout the day, they planted more than 300 native plants and constructed 25 birdhouses and 20 pollinator houses. "We selected species that would provide a variety of food and cover types throughout the year," said Jamie Weiss, Habitat Hero coordinator for Audubon Rockies.

"One really exciting part of this event was the diversity of volunteers," said Weiss. Cub Scouts, Colorado College students, Aiken Audubon Society members, and other Coloradans all joined to help. Some came to help birds, some came to learn more about native gardens, and some just came to spend a day in a beautiful place with like-minded people. "This is



#### ↓ 2019 By the Numbers

3,026 education program attendees

256 Habitat Heroes certified to date

really what Habitat Hero is about. We're restoring habitat for birds, but in a way that builds community and empowers people to help birds," said Weiss.

The ranch is leased and managed by Corner Post Meats, certified by Audubon's Conservation Ranching Initiative, which regularly holds public events on site. "The number of people who visit the ranch make this an ideal place for a demonstration garden," said Weiss. Now, when people visit the ranch, they'll also learn about the powerful role they can play to create bird habitat in their own gardens.

Support from Colorado Garden Foundation, National Audubon Society's Susan Burke - Plants for Birds grants, and Fort Collins Wholesale Nursery made this project possible.





## **Conservation Ranching Initiative**

Grassland birds have recently declined more than any other bird group in the continent, some by as much as 80%. Because the majority breed on private land, working with ranchers is our best hope for conserving them. Audubon is partnering with ranchers to implement bird-friendly management. Ranches that meet our protocols receive an Audubon certification, which can help garner a premium price. Ranchers keep ranching, consumers have a way to support birdfriendly ranches, and birds' habitat is conserved.

## **Highlights**

• We greatly increased research and monitoring this year. Nine monitoring projects took place, including bird, soil, prairie-dog, sage-grouse, and sagebrush revegetation monitoring. This work helps improve our management techniques in order to benefit wildlife and the health of the land on the ranches we certify. • "I think this year we finally hit the tipping point for our network to be a powerful tool to connect certified ranches with one another to share information and discuss new opportunities for revenue that may not have been created without us," said Dusty Downey, Conservation Ranching lead."

## Mav Ranch An island of grass in a sea of developed land

**IN THE BLUE TWILIGHT** of a spring morning, the bubbly chorus of Lark Buntings rings through the prairie. As the sun emerges, blue grama and buffalo grass begin to glow. Walking between the herds of cattle, it feels as if the prairie rolls on forever, but it does not. This place, the May Ranch, is an island of grass in a sea of developed land.

Surrounding the 15,550-acre cattle ranch near Lamar, Colorado, is a patchwork of cropfields spreading farther than the eye can see. This is why maintaining a financially and ecologically sustainable ranch is so important to the May Family; without it, the island of grass would likely be swallowed whole.

"So in looking for ways to become more financially viable, we started down the road of being all natural, grass-fed," said Dallas May, co-owner and manager of May Ranch. He contacted Audubon Rockies and learned about Audubon's Conservation Ranching Initiative. "It's obvious to anybody that's involved that if you have habitat that birds can thrive in, every other species of wildlife will thrive in that habitat," said Dallas.

Under the stewardship of the May family, the prairie



#### ↓ 2019 By the Numbers

## 530,950 22 Acres enrolled in Colorado and Wyoming to date

Ranches in Colorado and Wyoming enrolled to date

has remained not only unplowed, but also healthy and full of life. "We try to keep as natural a balance as we can through our pastures," said Dallas. "We graze them lightly and we move [the cattle] at different times of the year." This practice creates a diversity of habitat types, from sparse vegetation where Horned Larks pluck insects from flowers, to tall grass where Grasshopper Sparrows sing, swaying in the wind.

The Mays also understand how important grasslands are for fighting climate change. By allowing grass on parts of their ranch to grow tall, they increase the amount of carbon that the grasses can sequester. "We're taking in that carbon and storing it in the soil rather than releasing it in the atmosphere," explains Riley, Dallas's son who comanages the ranch. "I think that's a huge benefit of being able to graze efficiently-we can provide a carbon uptake instead of spewing it out.

"We would really like to have everything the way you see it here be exactly the way it is today in a hundred years, so that my kids and my grandkids and their grandkids can all come out and appreciate this," said Riley.

## 110 Ranching workshop attendees this year



## **Sagebrush Ecosystem Initiative**

More than 350 species depend on the sagebrush steppe, as well as people. Reaching 14 states, the ecosystem is vital bird habitat, but only half of it is left and new demands continue to be placed on it. The sagebrush steppe is at a critical point. Audubon's Sagebrush Ecosystem Initiative brings together citizens, industry, government, and NGOs to find pragmatic solutions that balance the needs of people and birds. Our goal is to ensure a healthy future for the sagebrush ecosystem and its iconic sage-grouse.

## **Highlights**

• We convened bipartisan congressional staff and collaborators to experience the ecosystem and its stakeholders first-hand. We co-led a tour of a sage-grouse breeding ground and an active energy field in Wyoming and followed this with in-person meetings in Washington, DC in May.

 Audubon remains a leader of SageWest Communications Network, which facilitates communication among a broad range of stakeholders interested in the sustainable management of the sagebrush ecosystem. Audubon manages an email listserv for SageWest with almost 400 members.

## **Fighting From the Ground Up** A year of struggle and hope for Greater Sage-Grouse

THE YEAR BEGAN WITH the Trump administration opening Greater Sage-Grouse habitat on federal land to oil and gas drilling, tossing aside hard-won compromises in 2015 that prevented the species from being listed under the Endangered Species Act. In February, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) offered oil and gas companies drilling rights on 758,198 acres of federal land in Wyoming, all of which fell within sage-grouse habitat. This failure to prioritize leasing outside sage-grouse habitat was consistent in federal lease sales across western states, which an in-depth report released by Audubon and partners confirmed. Then in March, the BLM stripped protections from millions of acres of sage-grouse habitat when they finalized their changes to the 2015 management plans.

The federal government's energy dominance policy combined with climate change and invasive grasses—is putting the species's future at risk. Surveys this year found that Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah each have lost more than a third of their Greater Sage-Grouse populations in the last three years. Habitat loss continues while the federal government prioritizes energy development above all else. Audubon's strategy has been to elevate the issue and urge state governments to take leadership.



**↓**2019 By the Numbers

12,654 Signatures collected urging US Forest Service to maintain sage-grouse plans

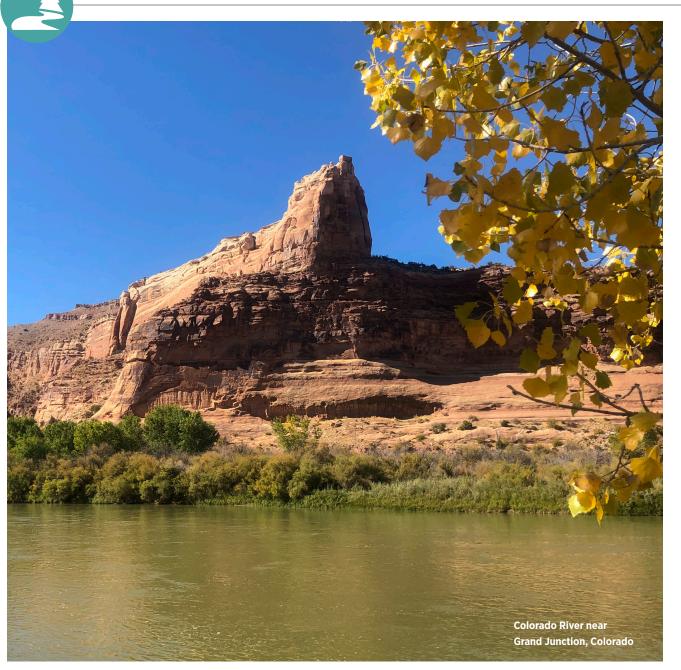
3,081 Signatures on letters urging new governors to conserve sage-grouse

Our members have spoken up for the bird and the future of the West with 15,735 petition signatures and calls to decision-makers.

Signs of hope finally emerged in August. Governor Mark Gordon worked with the Wyoming Sage-Grouse Implementation Team-of which Audubon is a memberand released Wyoming's revised sage-grouse executive order. With it, Wyoming strengthened its state plan and committed to maintaining the level of Greater Sage-Grouse protections agreed upon in the 2015 management plans. It was an inspiring example of state leadership. Finally, in October a federal judge temporarily blocked the Trump administration's plans that lifted sage-grouse protections. "The federal administration's actions have blatantly disregarded what is best for western communities," said Daly Edmunds, Audubon Rockies director of policy and outreach. "The judge affirmed that they ignored the best available science when they removed important protections for sage-grouse." The decision may bolster a lawsuit to hold the federal government accountable, brought by Audubon, the National Wildlife Federation, and The Wilderness Society, which will continue in 2020.



campaign



## Western Rivers Initiative

Water connects us all. Riverside habitats along the Colorado River and its tributaries support abundant and diverse bird communities in the West. Our environment, communities, and economies depend on healthy, flowing rivers, but increasing water demand, climate change, and inflexible management are putting them at risk. Audubon's Western Rivers Initiative is finding collaborative water solutions for the environment and people through science, partnerships, policy, funding, and habitat restoration.

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## **Highlights**

• In partnership with Wildlands Restoration Volunteers. the Audubon network helped contribute 4,533 volunteer hours to the restoration/ enhancement of 7,900 feet of riverside habitat and 29 acres of wetland habitat, planted 1,550 native plants, and improved 2,500 acres of Gunnison Sage-Grouse habitat.

•We produced *Ranching in the* New Normal in partnership with American Rivers. This widely celebrated film explores three Colorado ranches as they adapt to increasingly dry conditions and the hope they have for their land and water legacy. Watch the video at rockies.audubon.org/ ranching-new-normal.

## **Conserving Our Rivers** How Audubon is shaping Colorado's water future

**WATER VARIABILITY IS CHANGING** the Colorado River basin. Every single drop of Colorado River water is used by cities, agriculture, and industries across the southwestern US and Mexico. Our water use outpaces supply. In most years, the river dries up long before it meets the Gulf of California. And now, climate change is intensifying the problem. A persistent drought coupled with hotter and drier weather is projected to reduce Colorado River flows by as much as 30 percent by mid-century.

"Amid a changing water dynamic, Audubon played a lead role amongst NGOs across the Colorado River Basin in finalizing the landmark Drought Contingency Plans (DCP)," said Abby Burk, western rivers regional program manager. Signed in the spring of 2019, these agreements govern how Colorado, all seven Colorado River Basin states, and Mexico will share water supplies until 2026. We worked directly with Colorado and federal stakeholders and mobilized our broad coalition to help get the DCP passed.

And the plans are working. Because of the DCP, in 2020 Mexico and the Lower Basin states of Arizona and Nevada



#### **↓** 2019 By the Numbers

2,716 Actions taken on behalf of rivers by Audubon members in Colorado

are cutting back on Colorado River water use. In the Upper Basin, states are proactively investigating demand management, a potential flexible water sharing technique in which water rights holders can be paid to temporarily reduce their water use without affecting their underlying water right. Fortunately, Colorado is actively investigating demand management's feasibility. The Colorado Water Conservation Board kicked off a statewide workgroup on the topic and Audubon secured a seat on the environmental considerations workgroup exploring the details.

"Now more than ever, Colorado and the West need improved management for resilient rivers, flexible water sharing, and on-the-ground habitat restoration," said Burk. Birds like the Yellow Warbler and American Dipper depend on these river habitats. In response, Audubon is laying the groundwork for Colorado's water future. "Continued engagement with diverse stakeholders on policy priorities like improved instream flow practices and water sharing agreements are some of the ways we can secure a sustainable water future for communities, agriculture, and birds."

800+

People we presented to on the importance of Colorado's water



Meetings held with key Colorado decision makers



## **Gillmor Sanctuary**

On the shoreline of Great Salt Lake, Audubon's 3,184-acre Gillmor Sanctuary provides habitat to huge numbers of shorebirds and other species that rely on the sanctuary's wetland and upland habitat. Amid rapid population growth, rising water demand, and climate change, protecting Great Salt Lake and its globally important wetlands is critical. Audubon's goal at Gillmor Sanctuary is to provide diverse and healthy habitats for birds with a focus on managing saline mudflats as shorebird habitat.

## **Highlights**

 Gillmor Sanctuary managers Ella Sorensen and Heidi Hoven wrote a chapter on shorebirds for a new book on Great Salt Lake. The chapter presents the first definitive checklist of the lake's shorebirds and a thorough account of how they use it. This information will be of use to scientists, land managers, and birdwatchers alike.

 Audubon obtained a rent-free lease from Kennecott Utah Copper on three in-holdings that allows us to restore water to 266 acres of mudflat habitat. Doing so will create habitat for dozens of species of shorebirds and increase Gillmor Sanctuary's value to birds in an area that faces increasing pressures from urbanization.

## **Gillmor Sanctuary and the Inland Port** Shielding wetlands from a massive development

**EFFORTS FOR DEVELOPING** Salt Lake City's last major open space-which happens to be adjacent to Gillmor Sanctuary—ramped up this year. The proposed project is an inland port, a massive distribution hub operating around the clock. In addition to developing 23 square miles of natural habitat, the port's light, noise, and altered water flows could be a major disturbance to birds, says Gillmor Sanctuary Manager Ella Sorensen.

"Audubon's role is to protect Gillmor Sanctuary by getting conservation easements on a 4,200-acre natural area between Gillmor and the port," said Sorensen. In addition, Audubon is helping developers minimize their impacts.

"The port is probably not going away and Audubon has many concerns about its impacts," said Sorensen. But by building positive relationships with developers and the port's staff and board, we are finding ways to safeguard the most ecologically sensitive areas.



#### **↓** 2019 By the Numbers

Acres of wetlands to which water was restored

# Acres of invasive phragmites control

## **Studying Invertebrates to Feed Shorebirds** How Audubon is pioneering shorebird management

**EACH YEAR. COUNTLESS SHOREBIRDS** feed in Gillmor's saline wetlands. It is truly an amazing sight. How does a seemingly empty landscape support such an abundance of birds? With a robust population of aquatic macroinvertebrates.

"We started this study, because we would see hundreds of shorebirds in one place, and then we'd go to another place that looked exactly the same except there'd be no shorebirds, and we didn't know why," said Gillmor Sanctuary Assistant Manager Dr. Heidi Hoven.

"We manage water," explains Sorensen. "We decide when to put water out there and when to dry it up. We want to understand macroinvertebrates so we can synchronize their abundance with the needs of shorebirds. We're like macroinvertebrate farmers."

To do this, Dr. Hoven has spent much of the last two summers measuring various water and landscape characteristics and collecting invertebrates where shorebirds are concentrated. Once this study is complete, Audubon plans to share it with other wetland managers to help shorebirds on a regional scale.





# Climate Change

A study Audubon published in October revealed that North American birds are more vulnerable than ever from rising temperatures and climaterelated threats like fires and extreme weather. Half of the bird species in Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah are at risk of extinction from climate change. The good news is that our science also shows that if we take action now we can help improve the chances for 76 percent of the species at risk

389

Number of North American bird species at risk of extinction from climate change

AUDUBON ROCKIES ANNUAL REPORT 2019

## Birds Are Telling Us It's Time to Act on Climate Change

Across our region, temperatures are expected to warm, available moisture to decrease, and habitats to shift. All of these changes alter availability of food, water, and shelter for birds.

Additional climate-related threats are also expected to impact birds—and people. The climate-related threat affecting the most species and the greatest area in our region is extreme spring heat, followed by increased fire weather.

As a result of all these expected changes, Rockies icons such as American Dippers, Greater Sage-Grouse, and even Colorado's state bird, the Lark Bunting, are among the species most threatened by climate change.

## We already know what we need to do to help birds.

1. Protect the places birds need 2. Urge state and federal action 3. Take personal actions at home

By 2050 we must break even in carbon emissions by reducing the amount of carbon we produce, and by absorbing what is produced through natural solutions like carbon sequestration in grasslands.

We already know what we need to do to reduce global warming and we already have a lot of the tools and solutions we need to do that—what we need are more people who are committed to making sure those solutions are put into practice.

On the ground, Audubon Rockies is working to protect the habitat birds need, advocating for climate action policies, and inspiring people to care. Learn more and take action at rockies.audubon.org/climate-change.



"As a climate activist for decades, I applaud the work that Audubon Rockies is doing to change our climate crisis into climate solutions that will protect not only our birds, but also people for generations to come."

Ed Begley Jr., Actor and environmentalist

> Lark Bunting on an Audubon-certified ranch

## **Donor Spotlight**



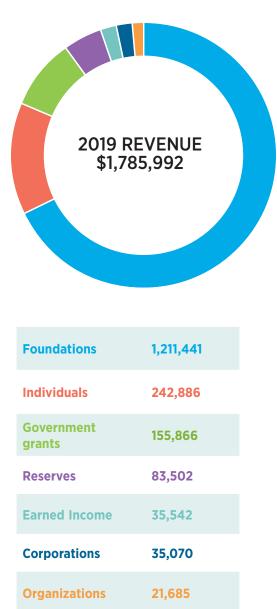
## **Bebo Andrews & Dennis Tharp**

**BEBO AND DENNIS** are a married couple with a love of birds and rivers. In 2014, their world was upended when their son passed away. Not long after, they decided to attend one of Audubon Rockies's river trips on the Yampa River.

On the Yampa, they connected deeply with the other trip participants. They marveled at the wonders and connections between water and birds. And in that free-flowing river, they began to heal. Since then, Bebo and Dennis have attended every one of Audubon Rockies's river trips. For them, rivers have become a symbol of hope and healing.

Because of this, Bebo and Dennis have also become important supporters of Audubon Rockies. They feel that Audubon has helped them understand conservation better. Giving to Audubon Rockies is a chance for them to help protect the birds and places they care about. To them, the work of Audubon Rockies is important because it is both collaborative and multi-faceted.

## 2019 Revenue



Revenue refers to Audubon's fiscal year, July 2018 - June 2019.

# Thvolved

**River restoration** project with Wildlands Restoration Volunteers

## Explore

Discover the natural splendor of your state with us. Our Community Naturalists host free public events and provide custom programs for classes and organizations. Tour a conservation ranch or have an incredible adventure on one of our annual river trips.

rockies.audubon.org/emails

## Donate

Audubon Rockies is entirely self-funded. By donating directly to Audubon Rockies, your contribution stays in Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah. Your donation will support science, education, and policy that conserve birds in your own state.

rockies.audubon.org/donate



## Volunteer

For a hands-on approach, inspire conservation as a volunteer Community Naturalist or promote bird-friendly gardening as a Wildscape Ambassador. Like getting your hands dirty? Restore river habitat, plant a Habitat Hero garden, or collect data as a community scientist.

## rockies.audubon.org/volunteer



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