

2009 Update on the PPMMP by John Conkin & Kiel Drake



Horned Grebes/Grèbe esclavon Photo: John Conkin

The Prairie & Parkland Marsh Monitoring Program (PPMMP) is one of three regional Marsh Monitoring Programs that Bird Studies Canada is currently operating – the other two are in Québec and Ontario. Bird Studies Canada and members of the Prairie Habitat Joint Venture launched the prairies program in 2008 in a pilot study at seven sites in Alberta and Saskatchewan. There are now 27 study sites in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba.

Effective partnerships are key to the delivery of this emerging program. Program partners include Wildlife Habitat Canada, Ducks Unlimited Canada, the Institute for Wetlands and Waterfowl Research, Alberta NAWMP Science Fund, Alberta Conservation Association, Environment Canada, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Saskatchewan Watershed Authority, and Manitoba Conservation. Manitoba Sustainable Development

Innovations Fund and Service Canada were new supporters in 2009.

The prairie pothole region of Canada and the United States is one of the most biologically-productive areas in North America. Because of its fertile soils and suitable climate, the region has experienced extensive cultivation since the time of European settlement. One of the results of this historic landscape-level change has been widespread loss and degradation of wetlands habitats; in some areas, wetland loss ranges from 50-90%.

The prairie pothole region of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba encompasses an area of more than 460,000 km². It remains among North America's most important regions for many bird populations. Its wetlands are renowned for their importance to sustaining populations of waterfowl. They also serve as critical habitats for a diverse group of other wetland-dependent birds, including grebes, herons, rails, terns, and a variety of landbirds.



Photo: John Conkin

The Prairie Habitat Joint Venture requires more information to assess how conservation programming affects all these species. Current PPMMP activities are designed to determine the links between species occurrence and habitat characteristics. This information will enable the development of spatially-explicit species-habitat models that will guide efforts to conserve and manage habitats for wetland-associated birds. In addition, the PPMMP framework now being established will serve as the first step needed to develop and implement a long-term marsh bird monitoring program in the region.

The Prairie & Parkland MMP conducts surveys for about 40 species of birds. These include all waterbirds occurring in the region, as well as a host of other wetland-associates, such as the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, where knowledge of breeding distribution is particularly lacking. Similarly, survey data will contribute information on the western population of Horned Grebe. This bird was recently listed as a species of Special Concern by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, due to steady population declines in recent decades. Other notable species detected during PPMMP surveys in 2009 included White-faced Ibis, Yellow Rail, Baird's Sparrow, and Sprague's Pipit.

As Bird Studies Canada and our Prairie Habitat Joint Venture partners endeavor to expand the PPMMP effort, we need help to cover this expansive area. With support from Environment Canada's Science Horizons Youth Internship Program, the PPMMP recently hired Katherine Brewster to develop a volunteer program, so that the interested public can participate in marsh bird surveys. If you're interested in helping, please contact Katherine at prairieprograms@birdscanada.org or (306) 249-2894.

As a final note, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to the more than 100 landowners who allowed PPMMP staff to access their properties during the 2009 field season. This essential contribution toward marsh bird research and conservation is greatly appreciated.