

Audubon Great Lakes Impact Report

FALL 2022



A Year of Impact Across Audubon Great Lakes

Birds face an unprecedented number of threats—none more acute than climate change, which imperils nearly two-thirds of North American species. Audubon Great Lakes knows that protecting birds today and tomorrow in the Great Lakes region requires substantial investments in the places they need most. Through a powerful mix of policy, partnerships, and effective conservation strategies, along with

a strong commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging, Audubon Great Lakes is making an impact on birds and communities across the region.

Our voice is amplifying with great urgency that if we can protect birds and the habitats they need, we can secure a better climate future for all.

Thank you for your support of our important work. Together, we're building a brighter future for birds.



About Audubon Great Lakes

5
States

53
Chapters

2
Audubon Nature Centers

215,000
Members

390
Important Bird Areas

On the Cover:

Sandhill Cranes, Pulaski County, Indiana
Photo: Jack Eichner/
Audubon Photography Awards

Page 2:

Great Blue Heron.
Photo: Jerry amEnde/
Audubon Photography Awards

Restoring Coastal Wetlands

Securing a bright future for the birds and people of the Great Lakes region has never been more important. As the largest freshwater ecosystem on the planet, the Great Lakes provides clean drinking water to 40 million people and serves as a global resource to millions of birds. In 2020, Audubon Great Lakes launched an ambitious vision plan to improve or restore nearly 300,000 acres of high priority Great Lakes coastal habitat. The projects and programs highlighted in this report are critical to helping the region recover from current threats and will directly benefit key bird species that have seen dramatic declines, while setting the region on a path to long-term environmental health and resilience.

Over the past year, significant progress has been made in these priority areas to protect birds and the places they need. With the support of our partners and donors, we've been able to complete 8 projects that restored 23,000 acres, have 14 active projects, and are on track to meet our goals for the region by 2030.

Working in the Areas Where Birds Need Us Most

Wisconsin: Our work in Wisconsin is in full swing with bird monitoring and wetland restoration. We are planning a Lake Superior coastal wetland project in the St. Louis River Estuary, which is also an Audubon Important Bird Area. Bird monitoring and community engagement are ongoing in our partnership with the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin in Green Bay. Audubon Great Lakes is also coordinating the



monitoring of endangered Piping Plovers at Cat Island in Green Bay, WI.

Michigan: Audubon's restoration work in Ottawa County, Michigan is complete and funding has been secured to begin Phase III to support restoration of wetlands and inland lake shoreline for secretive marsh birds within Ottawa Sands County Park. Additionally, partnerships were strengthened in west Michigan and new funding from Grand Valley Metropolitan Council and West Michigan Environmental Council will support a multi-year landscape conservation design planning process.

Restoration continues at three important Black Tern colonies at Saginaw Bay, Wigwam Bay and Portage Marsh including removal and treatment of invasive Phragmites and cattail that is encroaching on two important Black Tern colonies. Statewide Black Tern monitoring and Conservation Action Planning at five priority Black Tern colonies is underway in partnership with the Sault Tribe of the Chippewa Indians, Lake Superior State University, and Common Coast Research and Conservation and Cooperative Invasive Species Management Areas to measure the impact of restoration on breeding birds.

Illinois & Indiana—Making Progress for Birds and People in the Calumet Region:

A new data visualization tool, the Calumet Marsh Bird Monitoring Hub, was recently launched and communicates marsh bird monitoring results to inform decision making for at least eight land managers, helping shape conservation planning. In 2022, 25 volunteers helped monitor 32 wetlands for breeding marsh birds in the Calumet region of Illinois and Indiana. Two wetland sites were monitored for breeding marsh birds in Indiana as part of a region-wide survey used to evaluate the impact of National Fish & Wildlife Foundation's Sustain Our Great Lakes Program on wetland birds in the Great Lakes region. Two new projects launched which will support the conservation of stopover habitat in the coastal region of Illinois. The first



Conservation Impact

8
Completed Projects

14
Active Projects

23,000
Acres of Coastal Wetlands Restored

390
Important Bird Areas

project will place three radio towers as part of the Motus Wildlife Tracking System to help us better understand bird movement along coastal Illinois. The second project is an assessment of coastal stopover sites in Illinois that will be used to develop a tool for informing management for landbird stopover habitat conservation.

As part of Little Calumet Marsh Restoration project, Audubon's Wild Indigo engagement team visited 170 preschool students at Bethune Early Childhood Development Center to deliver educational programming about the importance and benefits of trees using art and storytelling. The students later participated in a tree planting coordinated by The Wetland Initiative with the members from the Student Conservation Association.

On a regional level, Audubon has continued its leadership across the Calumet Region, working with partners to lead secretive marsh bird monitoring

at 32 sites, habitat restoration across over 500 acres, and community engagement in Chicago and Gary, Indiana.

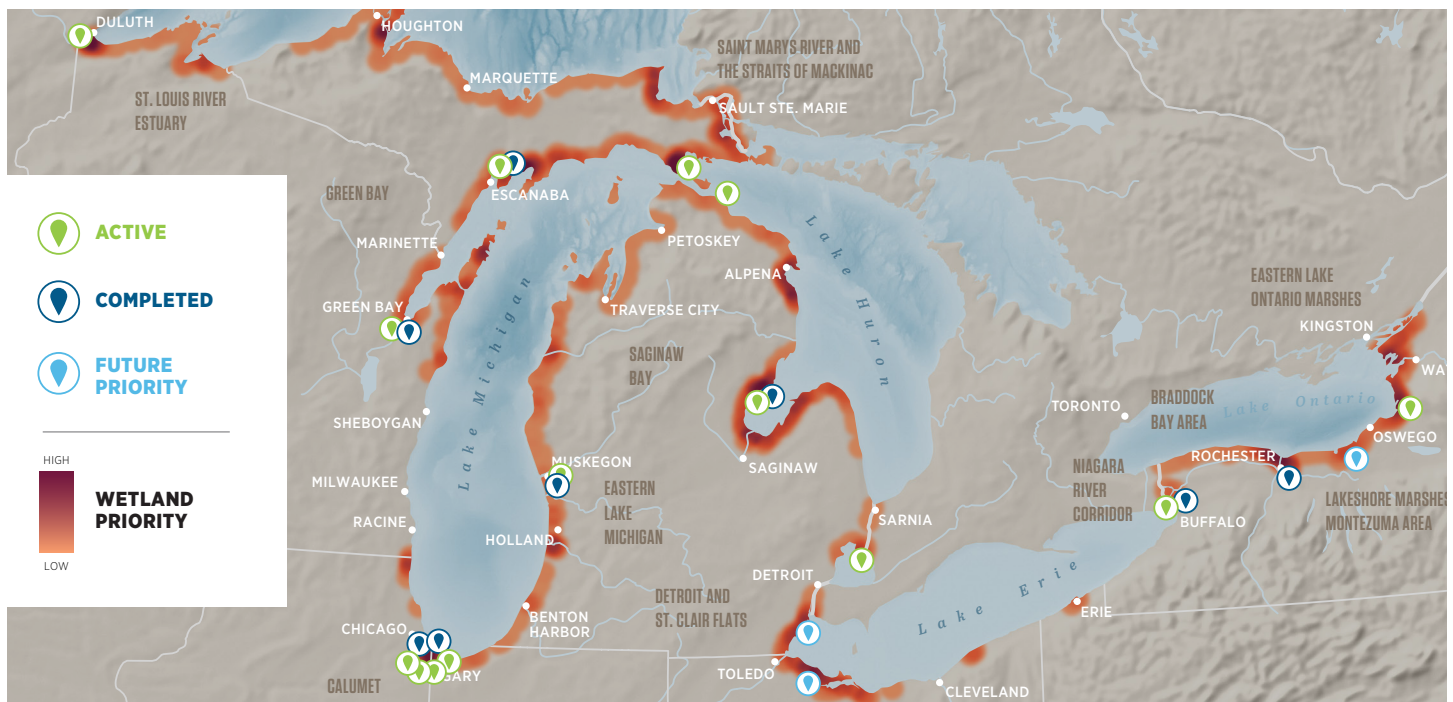
Protecting Illinois Grassland Birds:

One important project completed this year was restoration work to clear invasive Callery Pear from Orland Grassland, one of the Chicago region's most important grassland habitats for its population of breeding Henslow's Sparrow. Volunteers and contractors worked tirelessly to remove this new woody invasive from prime nesting areas, and our Phase II of the project began in March, focusing on an additional 70 acres.

Ohio: Conservation efforts have expanded in Ohio with the addition of a new Senior Conservation Coordinator, who joined the team at Grange Insurance Audubon Center in Columbus. In collaboration with Columbus and

Franklin County Metroparks, Grange Insurance Audubon Center has started studying migratory ecology through the use of transect surveys and automatic recording unit surveys for nocturnal migration calls. The center has also recently installed Motus Tower technology that will expand an international efforts to connect various migratory pathways of tagged birds.

New York: Three major habitat restoration projects are complete—two in Niagara River Corridor, one in the Braddock Bay Area. The fourth project is underway in the Eastern Lake Ontario Area with draft design completed. Audubon's science team also has avian monitoring points in several focus areas along Lake Ontario as part of new multi-year study looking at the impacts of restoration for secretive marsh birds. Opportunity for more work and bigger impact continues to emerge.



This year, Audubon Great Lakes has completed 8 wetland restoration and resiliency projects and is actively working on an additional 14 projects and improved 20,000 acres of wetland habitat. The wetland restoration effort will help stabilize declining bird populations, improve critical coastal habitat, restore clean waters, and build resiliency to climate change.

CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHTS

Innovative Restoration

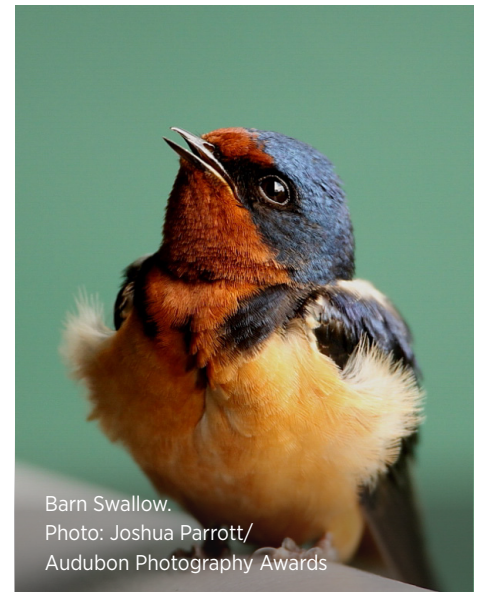
Reconnecting waterways to help restore habitat for birds and fish

Audubon Great Lakes and the Forest Preserves of Cook County have been busy this season on a major restoration project to restore more than 100 acres of wetlands by reconnecting Powderhorn Lake to Wolf Lake in the Calumet region in Illinois. The connection will restore the historical hydrologic connections between the two waterways, helping to reestablish the vital marsh habitat that birds like the Least Bittern rely on to successfully reproduce and raise young each summer. The connection will allow fish to move between lakes, bolstering populations of game and non-game fish including Northern Pike. This innovative work will also reduce flooding and help ensure a resilient future for the wildlife and people who depend on the region. Audubon is partnering with Southeast Environmental Task Force and Center for Neighborhood Technology to monitor the impacts of the project on neighborhood flooding and to initiate restoration at a new site, Powderhorn North.

New research shows urban wetlands are important for birds

A new three-year study in northeastern Illinois and northwestern Indiana from Audubon and partners at the Illinois Natural History Survey found that—even at scales as small as the footprint of a house—urban wetlands support many wetland bird species and the surrounding urbanization had little effect on the species. More than 90% of wetland habitat in Illinois has been lost to development and conversion to agriculture. This may lead wetland bird species to concentrate in any remaining wetlands. More research will be needed

to see how successfully they're breeding to ensure their continuing presence in the state, but initial research shows restoration does work and is important even in small urban wetlands. To that end, the Audubon Great Lakes' Marsh Bird Monitoring Hub is collecting and sharing wetland bird data with land managers and the public to promote wetlands restoration and maintenance in the region. Working with land managers is critical to bringing vulnerable marsh birds back and it's encouraging to know that our efforts can make a difference even in heavily impacted and urbanized areas.



Barn Swallow.
Photo: Joshua Parrott/
Audubon Photography Awards



Courtesy of: Audubon Great Lakes

Wild Indigo team leading a hands-on education program with preschoolers about the importance of trees during a Tree Planting event at Gary Community School Corporation's Bethune Early Childhood Development Center



Photo: David Fuller

Audubon staff attach a NanoTag to a pre-fledged Black Tern chick at St. Clair Flats to better understand the marsh birds' steep population declines

Saving Species

'NanoTags' Help Researchers Understand Marsh Bird Population Decline

St. Clair Flats State Wildlife Area and Wigwam Bay State Wildlife Area are home to the largest colonies of state endangered Black Terns in Michigan. Since 2013, Audubon Great Lakes, Detroit Audubon, Michigan DNR, Common Coast Research and Conservation and several other partners have studied Black Terns in Michigan. Data from these studies is being used to help inform land management and conservation strategies to increase Black Tern nesting success and stabilize the population. With an annual

population loss of 7.6% from 1966 to 2019, Michigan's Black Tern population has plummeted by as much as 98% (with only 1.4% of the population remaining in the state), according to the USGS North American Breeding Bird Survey. Researchers at Audubon Great Lakes are using small tracking devices called NanoTags to study and understand what is driving this decline and to develop conservation strategies that can help bring these elegant marsh birds back. By tracking whether Black Terns successfully fledge and depart their breeding grounds, we can better understand if the cause of their population decline is from low chick productivity or low adult survivorship. Last year, 28 NanoTags were deployed

on pre-fledged chicks at St. Clair Flats and Wigwam Bay State Wildlife Areas. Of the 12 fledglings, 9 had detections at receivers along the Atlantic coast, indicating heavy stopover use in this area prior to southward migration. National Wildlife Refuges along the Atlantic Coast were used by multiple individuals, highlighting the importance of the continued protection and management of these areas for Michigan's Black Terns.

Our work more broadly demonstrates that research and conservation efforts for Black Tern's outside of the breeding season should focus on threats and environmental conditions along the Atlantic coast, which are likely to boost the

recovery of Michigan-breeding Black Tern populations. We are currently incorporating results from this work into an integrated population model, which will reveal the demographic drivers of Black Tern population growth and viability of Michigan colonies.

Education, Outreach and Monitoring Endangered Piping Plovers

The Great Lakes population of endangered Piping Plovers had a 2022 breeding season for the record books thanks to many organizations, partners and volunteers working to protect them. This year, 150 chicks fledged in the wild – the greatest number of

chicks fledged since the population was listed as federally endangered in 1986. This year, Audubon Great Lakes launched an engagement and outreach pilot program aimed at educating Michigan beachgoers about the importance of sharing the shore with our beloved plovers. Volunteers staffed outreach tables at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, in conjunction with the National Park Service, as well as Leland Harbor in northern Michigan. The public was encouraged to take the Plover Pledge, which entailed a promise to keep dogs off nesting beaches, carry out trash, give plovers space to nest and rest, and spread the word about

sharing the shore. The program was a success, gathering nearly 500 pledges of people joining a united effort of "good eggs" taking action for birds.

At Cat Island in Green Bay, WI, Audubon Great Lakes is working with U.S Fish and Wildlife Services and other partners to monitor this endangered population. In 2022, the plovers at this site successfully fledged 11 wild chicks out of 12 chicks that hatched, which is an impressive 92% fledge rate. Going forward, Audubon hopes to continue to grow and expand its efforts to help protect the Great Lakes Piping Plovers.



Piping Plover.
Photo: Deborah Bifulco/
Great Backyard Bird Count

ADVOCACY

Empowering our Network and Communities

This spring, more than 50 Audubon members from across the Great Lakes region came together online for the 2022 Audubon Great Lakes Chapter Gathering and Awards. The theme of the event was the Great Lakes Piping Plover, whose recovery success story highlights the importance of Audubon chapters and volunteers lending their voice for birds and climate policy. Event attendees heard from Audubon's Chief Conservation Officer, Marshall Johnson, who spoke on the significance of Great

Lakes in achieving Audubon's mission to protect birds for future generations. Video messages from Great Lakes legislators Senator Todd Young (R-IN) and Congresswoman Jackie Walorski (R-IN-02) thanked Audubon members for their work to protect birds across the region.

Expanding Connections to Nature in Urban Communities

Wild Indigo Nature Explorations is Audubon Great Lakes' education and engagement program that works to address barriers that prevent communities of color from experiencing and enjoying their local natural areas. Wild Indigo engages children, teens, adults, and families in immersive nature-based activities and programs that promote health, wellness and an appreciation for birds and the outdoors.

Wild Indigo Nature Explorations currently operates in six cities across the Great Lakes region and launched a new program in Columbus on Juneteenth to engage urban communities of color in nature-based experiences. Experiences have included introductions to bird watching with binoculars, explorations of water bugs in local wetlands, and nature-based art projects.

This summer, the new Wild Indigo program in Columbus partnered with Home for Families Foundation to host a three-day overnight camp for kids to explore nature in the backyard of our Grange Insurance Audubon Center. Wild Indigo Columbus is also partnering with the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department to offer educational planting days for the benefit of pollinators at Linden Park.



Courtesy of: Audubon Great Lakes

A group participates in hands-on nature learning about wetlands during a Wild Indigo program at Grange Insurance Audubon Center.

Indigenous-Led Conservation: Bird Monitoring, Restoration and Community Outreach

Audubon Great Lakes, in partnership with Oneida Nation and Northeastern Audubon Society, and the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Cofrin Center for Biodiversity, are leading a volunteer bird monitoring effort on recently restored Oneida Nation grasslands, marshes, and forests to evaluate the success of this restoration. The project builds bridges between partners who all have a stake in ensuring healthy habitat in the region, strengthening local community ties, and lays the foundation for future restoration work

to be informed by community voices and indigenous conservation practices. Bird monitoring can help evaluate the success of restoration projects and will assist the Oneida Nation in determining future conservation decisions.

The next phase of this project includes further highlighting the significance of Oneida lands local bird populations by securing an Audubon Important Bird Area designation for a portion of Oneida land. Bird data will be used to provide guidance to the Oneida Nation at their key restoration sites. Moving forward, volunteers will also advocate for Indigenous communities when meeting with elected officials.



Wood Thrush.
Photo: Megumi Aita/
Audubon Photography Awards



Eastern Bluebird.
Photo: Danny Brown/
Audubon Photography Awards

Building the Next Generation of Conservation Leaders

Audubon's Habitat Restoration Internship in partnership with Forest Preserves of Cook County and Chicago Park District ran another successful field season, engaging 6 interns in career-building experiences performing ecological restoration across a variety of habitats. The Habitat Restoration Internship Program has a strong network of program alumni with 80% of our interns moving into jobs in conservation-related and green fields immediately following their time at Audubon.



**Overall,
Wild Indigo Has:**

42

Partnered Organizations

124

Events Hosted

2,006+

Participants Engaged

Policy

Working to Protect Wetlands in Indiana

Indiana has lost 85 percent of its wetlands, forcing birds like the Black Tern and Yellow-headed Blackbird out of the state to find suitable habitat. Earlier this year, Audubon Great Lakes released findings from an Indiana state-wide poll, which found that Indiana residents across the political spectrum overwhelmingly support wetlands protections.

A diverse group of experts and stakeholders were appointed by Indiana Governor Holcomb to create the Indiana Wetlands Task Force and were charged with examining wetlands issues in the state. The task force cited Audubon's poll findings in their Final Report, which outlines the importance of wetlands and the steps we need to take to protect them. Together, members of the Task Force agreed—loss of wetlands is negatively impacting Indiana residents, and we need to do more to protect this important natural resource.



Building the Next Generation of Conservation Leaders

6
Habitat Restoration Interns

113
Acres Restored by Interns

59
Volunteers

118
Volunteer Hours

U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin Tours Site of Audubon Great Lakes' Restoration Work in Wisconsin

U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin went birding with Audubon in Allouez Bay in Superior, Wisconsin to learn about Audubon Great Lakes' plan to bring back declining bird populations across the St. Louis River Estuary region, and to discuss bipartisan conservation and climate solutions to protect Wisconsin's birds and people. Loss of quality wetland habitat in Allouez Bay and throughout the St. Louis River Estuary region has contributed to the region's decline of vulnerable marsh bird species. Black Terns, a species that was once common, have not bred in the estuary since the 1990s. The event brought together project partners, including representatives from Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Lake Superior National Estuarine Research Reserve, Duluth Audubon Society, and Chequamegon Audubon Society, and the City of Superior.



Courtesy of: Audubon Great Lakes

Habitat Restoration Interns



Policy Impact

18,000

Individuals from

5

States that have
participated in

44,300

Actions

70

Meetings with
Decision Makers

300

Climate Advocates

3

Birdwalks with
Decision Makers

Improving Michigan's Climate Plan

Governor Whitmer and Michigan's Council on Climate Solutions released the MI Healthy Climate Plan this year, which guides the state in boosting renewable energy use and energy efficiency as Michigan grows its clean energy economy. Renewable energy sources are key to reducing greenhouse gas pollution, abate global temperature rise and protect birds and the places they need to survive. More than 900 Audubon members took action during a public comment period to express appreciation to Gov. Whitmer and her administration for taking climate action, and to urge the plan to be further strengthened to better protect Michigan's birds and people. The Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy took notice, and the final plan contains important improvements to help ensure Michigan reaches net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Building People Power for Seabirds

Audubon Great Lakes harnessed the voices of Audubon members and advocates across the region during the 2022 Save the Seabirds Fly-in. During this day of advocacy, Audubon Great Lakes staff and members met with congressional offices across the region to encourage bold action to protect Great Lakes seabirds, like the Black Tern and American White Pelican, from threats like overfishing and climate change. Audubon advocates shared

the importance of policies like The Sustaining America's Fisheries for the Future Act and The Resilient Coast and Estuaries Act, to make sure Great Lakes birds continue to thrive for generations to come. In total, Audubon had nine advocates from six chapters in Michigan and Wisconsin. Our advocates met with three offices, including two Senate offices: Senator Peters (D-MI) and Senator Baldwin (D-WI).

Advancing Renewable Energy Solutions

The recently signed Inflation Reduction Act is the most significant federal climate legislation ever to become law. It contains critical investments that will speed up the production and transmission of renewable energy and invest in the natural climate solutions that are needed to tackle the climate crisis head on. Combined with high-profile bills like the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Audubon policy experts have worked to ensure that federal policy will bring much needed funds to protect water quality and build a more climate stable future across the Great Lakes region. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act includes an unprecedented \$1 billion for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). Since 2010 the GLRI has provided federal funding to strategically target the biggest threats to the Great Lakes ecosystem and has been critical to Audubon's efforts to restore wetlands across the region.

American White Pelican.
Photo: Constance Mier/
Audubon Photography Awards



CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHTS

Looking Forward

Audubon Great Lakes made critical strides over the past year, preparing for even greater impact in the year ahead. With conservation and policy victories in place, an active engagement membership and administration committed to greater conservation and climate action, we are poised to move forward on proactive strategies for protecting Great Lakes ecosystems long into the future.

With your help, we will be able to restore extensive habitat in the highest priority wetlands along the Great Lakes to stabilize declining bird populations. We will continue to provide leadership on applied science that engages our

communities, fill critical information gaps, and inform sustainable natural resource management. We will do what we do best - mobilize our network across the region in science, policy, and conservation action and advocate for public policy that supports Great Lakes conservation.

Thank you for your support of Audubon Great Lakes. This impactful work would not be possible without your commitment to protecting birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow. We truly are stronger together and are shaping a brighter future for birds and communities across the Great Lakes region.

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Audubon Great Lakes

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Black Tern.
Photo: Diana Whiting/
Audubon Photography Awards

