Fort Missoula Ponds Fall 2022 Bird Survey, Five Valleys Audubon

Six bird surveys were conducted from November 8 to December 7. The surveys were organized and led by Poody McLaughlin, Erick Greene and Jim Brown. In all 31 individuals helped in conducting the birding surveys. Beside the three organizers others who helped with the bird surveys included Anne Greene, Adam Mitchell, Andrea Stierle, Don Stierle, Cindy Swidler, Elena Ulev, Harry Croft, Jean Duncan, Jeff Ipsen, Jillian Leblow, Roy Curet, Sally Fraiou, Travis Brakefield, Will Butler, Will Seborn, Steve Flood, Kristi DuBois, Shane Sater, Amber Langley; and students from the University of Montana Bird Club including Taylor Coon, Eric Ray, Savannah Ision, Keith Delaney, Katia Chavez, James Meyer, Hattie Ranson, and Luke Johnson.

Cold weather with below normal freezing temperatures arrived early this year and remained longer than usual. This appeared to accelerate and shorten the period of waterfowl migration. Both north and south ponds remained open and free of ice until November 20, when the north pond was completely frozen. Only about a quarter of the south pond remained open along the west shore. By December 7 both ponds were completely frozen.

A total of 53 species were observed on the ponds and surrounding grassland and riparian wooded areas (tables 1 and 2). Twenty of those species were waterfowl using the ponds. The highest number of individual waterfowl was 150 on November 8. Rare or unusual species Boneparte's Gull and Surf Scoter.

During the time that both ponds had open water they were utilized by an almost equal number of waterfowl species. Although the north pond is considerably smaller than the south pond it was preferred by some species such as Common Goldeneye, Barrow's Goldeneye, Bufflehead and White-winged Scoter. The smaller north pond surrounded by aspen and cottonwood trees appears to be preferred by waterfowl species that typically seek out landscapes containing small ponds surrounded by forest vegetation for breeding, foraging and resting. The larger south pond appears to be preferred by species such as swans and Western Grebe that require a long stretch of water in order to take flight. In both ponds most feeding occurred in shallower sections such as near shore. Resting and preening by diving duck species and grebes was often done in the middle of the ponds. Portions of the south pond remained ice free the longest time and was sought out by a variety of species when the north pond was frozen.

ebird data. The ebird data for the Gravel Quarry hotspot, which includes both ponds and surrounding grassland and wooded riparian areas were examined for the fall period beginning November 1. When many individuals were present, for example flocks of waterfowl, number of individuals were estimated. The ebird observations show a dynamic movement of waterfowl during migration. A peak number of 700 waterfowl were observed on November 1. The most numerous waterfowl reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Fall 2022 ebird waterfowl observations of individuals			
Species	Nov.1	Nov. 8	Nov. 15
Canada Goose	400 (about 11/1)		
Snow Goose	500		
Tundra Swan	50	110	
Northern Shoveler	50		
Mallard			80
Northern Pintail	40		
Green-winged Teal	50		
Redhead		20	
Ring-necked Duck	45		
Lesser Scaup	110		
Bufflehead	240		
Common Goldeneye		90	
Barrow's Goldeneye		25	
Ruddy Duck	30	30 (100 on 9/22)	
Western Grebe			40