

PROTECT THE WILD FISHING BIRDS OF EASTERN MONTANA

OVERVIEW

Ospreys, a fish-eating bird on the lower Yellowstone River, are routinely being killed by the Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) Hatchery personnel in Miles City to protect a non-native fish, the largemouth bass. Because of this, there has not been a successful active Osprey nest with young on the 30-mile stretch of the Yellowstone River between Rosebud and Miles City since 2018. This population was the easternmost breeding group of Ospreys on the Yellowstone River and beloved by Miles City bird watchers. Now that breeding population is gone.

The killing hasn't been limited to Ospreys. The MFWP personnel have also killed many cormorants, herons and geese, all protected species by international treaty in the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (established in 1918).

WHO WE ARE

We are the Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society and a network of people along the Yellowstone River who watch, study and enjoy birds and other wildlife. We are a volunteer organization with a wide variety of backgrounds. Our members volunteer time and energy to protecting birds and their habitat for all to enjoy.

PROBLEM

The MFWP Hatchery Division has been shooting native birds at their state fish hatcheries for years to protect fish species. Bird species and number killed since 2014 (that we know of):

- 8 Osprey
- 15 American White Pelican
- 60 Great Blue Heron
- 7 Belted Kingfisher
- 57 Double-Crested Cormorant
- 295 Canada Goose
- 40 Common Grackle
- 18 Mallard
- 1 Ring-Billed Gull
- 1 Common Goldeneye (unauthorized)

TIMELINE

- The Osprey population was devastated by the widespread use of DDT in the 1950's and 1960's along with eagles, pelicans, hawks and many other birds. Once DDT was banned in 1972, bird populations started to increase. Ospreys began returning to their summer breeding ranges in Montana.
- 2009-2010: YVAS began mapping and collecting data at Osprey nesting sites along a 140-mile stretch of the Yellowstone River from Big Timber downstream to the Big Horn Fishing Access. 15 volunteers monitored and recorded data at 34 known nesting sites.
- 2012: The Yellowstone River Osprey Nest Monitoring Project grew to include nests from Yellowstone National Park to Miles City (eastern-most known Osprey breeding range). Banding of Osprey nestlings began.

- 2012: the nest monitors' Osprey data began to be compiled and submitted to the Montana Natural Heritage Program as well as the Osprey banding records.
- 2018: the number of volunteer nest monitors grew to over 40.
- 2018-2021: the Miles City Hatchery received a Depredation Permit for Ospreys from the US Fish Wildlife Service because the birds were eating their largemouth bass brood stock.
- 2018-2020: the Miles City Hatchery reported shooting eight adult Ospreys during the breeding season. This decimated the easternmost breeding population of Yellowstone River Ospreys.
- The annual average total number of fledglings within a 10-mile radius of Miles City Hatchery:
 - 2012 to 2017 = 3.6 young per year
 - 2018 to 2021 = 0 young per year
- The Yellowstone River's easternmost range for known breeding Ospreys is currently Miles City.
- Osprey facts:
 - 70% of nestlings die before reaching breeding age of 3 years.
 - 10% of nestlings return to nest.
 - Their life expectancy is 7 ½ years.
 - It is not uncommon for an adult osprey to fly 20 miles or further for food for their young.

WHY ARE THE VERY AGENCIES CHARGED WITH PROTECTING WILDLIFE INSTEAD TREATING THEM LIKE AN ENEMY?

These killings were avoidable. Rather than net or reconfigure their ponds to “protect” introduced largemouth bass, the Miles City Hatchery chose to simply shoot these birds. MFWP took irresponsible and lethal measures to control the loss of their largemouth bass by Ospreys.

If Montana hatcheries are allowed to raise and release nonnative fish into Montana waters, killing of native Montana migratory birds by the hatcheries should not be allowed. The hatchery should take care of the ponds responsibly and prevent the fishing birds from fishing there rather than just wipe them out.

Another culprit in this needless slaughter of fish-eating birds is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) because it continues to give the Hatchery permission/exemptions to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act by issuing Depredation Permits. Exemptions to this important Act should only be granted in an extreme situation where there are no other solutions and then, only on short-term basis. Instead, USFWS granted approval with minimal or no legitimate research and no requirement of proof of other methods failing. There is no end in sight to this USFWS Depredation Permitting and lethal management.

SOLUTION

The Miles City Fish Hatchery could use non-lethal methods to discourage fishing birds such as fish pond netting, pond configuration, sound and other methods widely used by responsible hatcheries.

USFWS should require hatcheries to use non-lethal methods to manage fish-eating birds especially when protecting a non-native fish at the expense of native birds. USFWS should base their decisions on sound science and legitimately investigate whether a hatchery is doing all it can to discourage fishing birds using techniques that don't harm the birds.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT

Ospreys were hit hard by the use of DDT in the 1950's and 1960's. After DDT was banned in 1972, they have slowly returned to their summer breeding range in Montana which includes the Yellowstone River. Some states still consider Ospreys as endangered or threatened, especially inland states where pesticides decimated or extirpated many populations. Montana is fortunate to have these beautiful raptors.

None of the agencies involved in this killing are using sufficient data to evaluate rationale and impacts of this lethal management on any of the bird species being killed.

When State and Federal agencies charged with protecting our wildlife instead treat wildlife as enemies, it erodes the public's confidence that the agencies are doing their jobs. It gives us all a black eye.

TAKE ACTION

- Write, email or call the governor. Tell him to stop the killing of fish-eating birds at the Miles City Fish Hatchery.
Office of the Governor
PO Box 200801
Helena, MT 59620-0801
Phone: 406-444-3111
<https://svc.mt.gov/gov/contact/shareopinion>
- Write, email or call US. Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland. Tell her to make her agency, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, better protect the migratory birds of the lower Yellowstone River.
Secretary Deb Haaland
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W., 6th Floor
Washington DC 20240