

Shooting of Piscivorous Birds at the Miles City Hatchery

In late summer 2020, Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society (YVAS) learned that the MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) Hatchery in Miles City had been applying for and receiving Federal Migratory Bird Depredation Permits to shoot Ospreys and other piscivorous birds. Between 2018 and 2020, 8 Ospreys, 105 Canada Geese, 26 Great Blue Herons, and 16 Double-Crested Cormorants have been shot.

Their 2021 application requests authority to shoot up to 4 Ospreys, 15 Double-crested Cormorants, 15 Great Blue Herons, 50 Canada Geese, and new this year, 5 Belted Kingfishers. The US Fish Wildlife Service (USFWS) issues the Depredation Permits.

According to MFWP, the Ospreys were eating too many of the hatchery fish, specifically largemouth bass, which are an introduced species in Montana. YVAS was told that the number of bass taken by Ospreys was an unacceptable operational and financial loss for the hatchery. The hatchery shot two Ospreys in 2018, five in 2019, and one in 2020.

Miles City is the eastern extent of breeding Ospreys on the Yellowstone River. Data submitted by the Miles City nest monitors shows that the number of fledglings from known nests within a 20-mile radius has declined drastically over the years. In fact, no fledglings have been produced since 2018.

The killing of native wildlife to support an introduced fishery in Montana goes against YVAS philosophy, sound science, and management for good ecological integrity. This deadly bird management and permitting situation at the Miles City Hatchery is upsetting and unacceptable to many of us.

Discussions with USFWS and MFWP to find alternative non-lethal solutions to this conflict resulted in no significant results or cooperation the agencies.

Currently, over 1,000 Ospreys have been banded. Of these, 10% will breed and 70% will die before reaching the breeding age of 3 years.

Over 1,000 people signed Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society/National Audubon Society's Petition in June 2021 to stop the shooting of native birds at the expense of nonnative fish species at the Miles City Hatchery. More progressive and nonlethal solutions are available. They need to be studied and implemented.

Background Information: YVAS' ongoing Yellowstone River Osprey Nest Monitoring Project began in 2009. By 2012, the Project had grown from a 120-mile stretch between Big Timber and Pompey's Pillar to a 320-mile stretch between Gardiner and Miles City. On average there are 40 to 45 nest monitors. Besides recording nest and observation data, the banding of Osprey nestlings has been a very significant focus since 2012 as well.

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