

Manitoba Important Bird Areas Program 2015 Year End Report



Surveying North, West, and East Shoal Lakes IBA, Manitoba, Canada; © Christian Artuso

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1. IBA Program Achievements

Thanks to support from Nature Manitoba, Bird Studies Canada, Nature Canada, our volunteer and funders, the Manitoba IBA program continued to build capacity and public awareness in 2015 through:

- Caretakers covering 6 sites: Donna Martin for North, East and West Shoal Lake IBA, Joanne Smith for Riverton Sandy Bar IBA, Colin Blyth and Gillian Richards, Whitewater Lake, Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre, Carrie Braden, Delta Marsh and Dave Nicol, Grant's Lake.
- Over 40 volunteers contributing to the IBA Program as steering committee members, roving bird monitors and blitz volunteers
- Monitoring data submitted by our volunteers for 17 of Manitoba's 38 IBA's. Those covered were Oak Hammock Marsh, Delta Marsh, Churchill and Vicinity, Southwestern Mixed-grass Prairie, Whitewater Lake, Dog Lake, Marshy Point, Sandy Bay Marshes, Douglas Marsh, Netley-Libau Marsh, Riverton Sandy Bar, Shoal Lakes, Oak Lake and Plum Lakes, Proven Lake, Grant's Lake, Langruth and the Saskatchewan River Delta.
- The donation of over 1000 hours (and counting) of time by IBA Caretakers undertaking grassroots initiatives such as: making and erecting nesting boxes, monitoring bird populations and habitat at their IBA, public outreach, presentations, social media, signage and partnership building;
- The donation of time by the members of the IBA Steering Committee, who provided invaluable guidance and feedback to move the IBA program forward in 2015. Thank you to: Christian Artuso, Paula Grief, Tim Sopuck and Bonnie Chartier.
- Organizing and supporting two fall migration bird blitzes involving 21 people at the North, West and East Shoal Lakes IBA, counting over 10,000 birds across the two mornings.
- Promoting and delivering events at Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre as part of International Migratory Bird Day
- Presentation delivered to the Wildlife Society Conference in Winnipeg
- Attendance at 4 events to promote the program
- The hiring of one Green Team employee, Marshall Birch during summer 2015.

We are currently fundraising to continue the project in 2016/17. Funding has already been secured from MEC, TDFEF, Winnipeg Foundation and the Blennerhassett Family Foundation. We continue to seek additional funding in order to build on the successes of the program in 2015. In 2016 we hope to expand on the number of bird blitzes and bioblitzes delivered in Manitoba's IBAs. Without doubt though the most important part of this program are our volunteers who continue to build it up here in Manitoba.

2. Grassland Bird Initiative

Work continues on the Manitoba Grassland Bird Initiative which is funded from 2014-16 by Environment Canada's EcoAction Community Funding Program. The initiative had some success, raising awareness of grassland birds, especially in and around the Southwestern Manitoba Mixed-Grass Prairie IBA. Additional steps to improve education and enhance stewardship of the important grassland habitats have focused on increasing our knowledge of the distribution of threatened species in the IBA and increasing awareness of the issues. Notable achievements in 2015 were:

- Delivery of a workshop on grassland birds for landowners in the Southwestern mixed-grass Prairie IBA.
- Completion of the first ever bird blitz by the IBA Program in the Southwestern Mixed-grass Prairie IBA. Results included 41 Sprague's Pipit and 230 Chestnut-collared Longspur, confirming that this is a globally important IBA for grassland birds.
- A table at the Melita Banana Days (see <http://importantbirdareasm.ca/2015/08/10/fruitful-morning-in-melita/>)
- Talk on threats to grassland birds delivered by Christian Artuso in Melita as part of an NCC event on threatened Mixed-grass Prairies
- Production of resources for grassland birds in southwest Manitoba, including identification sheets and a management handbook (printing to be complete during March)

3. Caretaker Achievements in 2015

We have some brilliant Caretakers in Manitoba. Staff at Oak Hammock Marsh continue to carry out Caretaker duties, Dave Nichol continues to take on duties at Grant's Lake and Carrie Braden has been volunteering at Delta Marsh. We also have a number of other volunteers actively involved in the program.

MB015 – Whitewater Lake IBA

Caretaker – Colin Blyth and Gillian Richards

Achievements in 2015

- Colin and Gillian hit the ground running in their first year, visiting the IBA 8 times over the course of the year.
- A Facebook page was launched for Whitewater Lake IBA
- Monitored over 120 species in the IBA in 2015.

Bird Highlights

Highlights included:

- 800 Pectoral Sandpiper counted in spring. This meets the continental trigger for this species.
- 55,000 Snow Geese in fall
- Large concentrations of shorebirds in late summer
- Species-At-Risk encountered included Buff-breasted Sandpiper and Sprague's Pipit

Habitat Changes

- The lake level went down a bit over the summer and fall but remains higher than pre-2011 levels
- More oil related development has been observed along the North shore

Possible Conservation Actions

- Expand the area of the IBA – this would reflect bird populations and give more land access to the IBA. At present a large portion of the “edge” of the IBA is under water and inaccessible to the public. It would be much better if the border of the IBA was moved out to give road access. Roads (or at least road allowances) as borders to the IBA would be far easier for observers.

Other Activities

- The road to the observation mound deteriorated over winter/spring – no car access any more. There remains narrow walking access.
- Colin and Gillian purchased a canoe. This will enable them to monitor Sextons Island and marsh areas more effectively

MB038 – NORTH, WEST AND EAST SHOAL LAKES

Caretaker – Donna Martin

Achievements in 2015

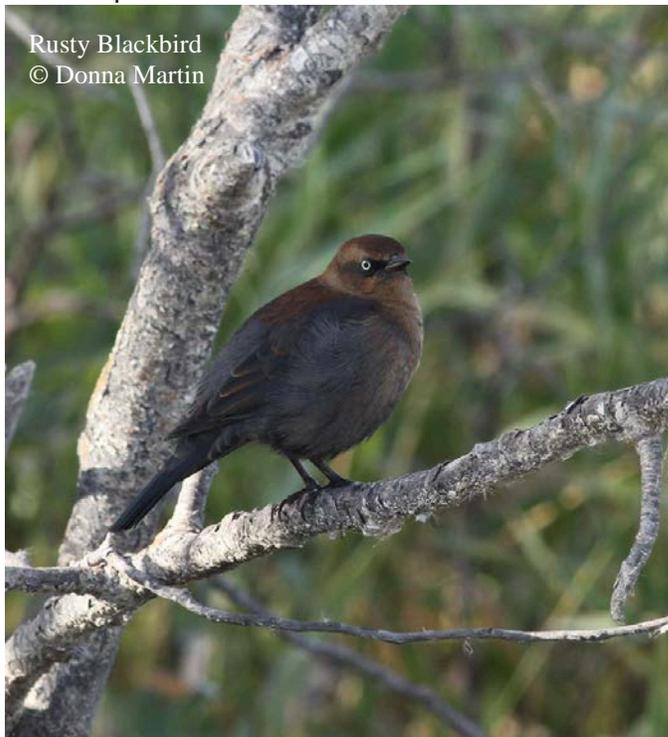
- 9 visits to Shoal Lakes in 2015.

- 2 IBA survey Blitzes were carried out this fall that encouraged a number of volunteers to get involved ([Click here for August blog, and here for an update, and here for October](#))
- 20 bird houses were donated to the RM of Armstrong, with attached IBA brochures and care instructions, to be distributed to local land owners interested in bird populations. No more than 2 houses per land owner were to be passed out.
- Made one early morning and two evening trips out to check for Least Bittern along the 229. Although one was seen, it was not seen consistently. No young were seen, although they were specifically looked for.

Bird Highlights

Over 9 trips, a good picture has been built up of bird numbers in at least part the parts of the IBA surveyed. Trigger Species seemed low in numbers, which could be due to survey effort and times surveyed. Other highlights included:

- A fairly large group of Rusty Blackbirds in the fall.
- Least bittern were recorded but without young unlike last year.
- Lots of duck species, a few shorebirds and some Canada Geese were recorded in the IBA area during fall staging.
- Small breeding populations of Eared grebes and Red-necked Grebes.
- A fairly large group of Horned Grebes were seen during spring passage. Given recent changes to Horned Grebe IBA status, this could soon be a new trigger species for the IBA.



Habitat Changes

Donna is unaware of any changes to land use or new land owners that could immediately affect the IBA. A large part of this IBA is Crown land, with a large area along PR 518 designated as a bird sanctuary. The land mass in this area had been altered as a result of high water levels seen in the Province over the past 10 years or so. Water fluctuations will of course affect some species of breeding birds. This year the water levels were lower than 2014, showing comparatively more land area. Donna believes this impacts some of the species using this IBA. The Least Bittern observed last summer was feeding on the rocks close to the road where high water levels created shallow pools producing perfect fishing opportunities. As the land slopes down into deeper ditches, this water level seemed ideal for this species. This year water levels were quite low which may have reduced the available feeding areas for Least Bittern, at least in this part of the IBA.

Monitoring issues

Hunting is allowed in this area and certainly hunting pressures will push some trigger species into safer areas, away from the accessible parts of the IBA. This might be impacting (lowering) survey numbers and not give a true number of trigger species, especially in the fall surveying period.

Other Activities

- Donna ran into a few farmers this year while out surveying that were quite interested in the IBA program and the surveying effort that was being carried out.
- IBA brochures were placed in the RN of Armstrong, and Inwood. Brochures were also taken out to St Laurent, but unfortunately they were closed on that day.
- A trip was made to Inwood to inquire about someone with a boat that could help with fall surveys. Donna found someone that offered to do it for free, although diary clashes meant he was unable to help.
- At least 50 people were contacted for various reasons.
- Donna was asked to give a presentation on Shoal Lakes IBA at the Selkirk Bird Club in November, but unfortunately had to decline. Donna may do one later in 2016.
- An active IBA Facebook page is maintained and Donna actively engages in the IBA Canada Facebook page and offers support to a number of people involved on this page.
- Donna had two meetings with Tim Poole, one in the IBA and one at the IBA Office in the city to discuss setting up IBA's Blitzes.

MB091 – RIVERTON SANDY BAR

Caretaker – Joanne Smith

Achievements in 2015

- Joanne managed an impressive 32 visits in 2015. Some were during winter ice fishing season and there were few birds present.
- Through Joanne's efforts, Manitoba Conservation and Water Stewardship have agreed to put up new signs at Sandy Bar in 2016 highlighting the new Special Conservation Area designation and the ban on ATV use that it causes.
- Joanne has been instrumental in highlighting the invasion of zebra mussels in the Sandy Bay area on social media.
- Joanne's Facebook page has been seen by over 150 people in 2015
- Joanne continues to take signs out onto Sandy Bar and put in the ground each year
- A survey of Hecla Bar was completed by boat

Bird Highlights

Regular visit to Riverton Sandy Bar, even in the depths of winter! Piping Plover have bred here in the past but not in 2015. Bird highlights included:

- Migrating Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstone and Sanderlings
- Snow goose recorded flying over
- Canada Goose migration and nesting
- Regularly roosting pelicans

The Herring Gull colony produced a small number of chicks but the Ring-billed Gull colony failed to breed in 2015.

Water Levels

Joanne reports that lake levels have been much lower in 2014 compared to 2015.

Habitat Changes

Riverton Sandy Bar was designated as a Special Conservation Area (SCA) in 2015 by Manitoba Conservation and Water Stewardship. Due to low water levels, accessibility to ATVs and trucks has increased to the entire sandbar. Tire tracks have been photographed going through the Herring Gull colony and along the edge of the Ring-billed Gull colony (which failed). Zebra mussel shells were found during fall 2015 on the beach near the parking lot.

Possible Conservation Actions

- Add a barrier in the parking lot to prevent ATVs and trucks accessing Sandy Bar. New SCA signs to be added to parking lot (complete). New signs should be available at the marina and sandbar warning of zebra mussels and the precautions that might need to be taken.

Other Activities

- Wrote to Minister Thomas Nevakshonoff in December 2015 regarding SCA signs for Piping Plover.

- Joanne has been in contact with a journalist from the Express Weekly newspaper about running an article in the spring

4. Volunteer Hours

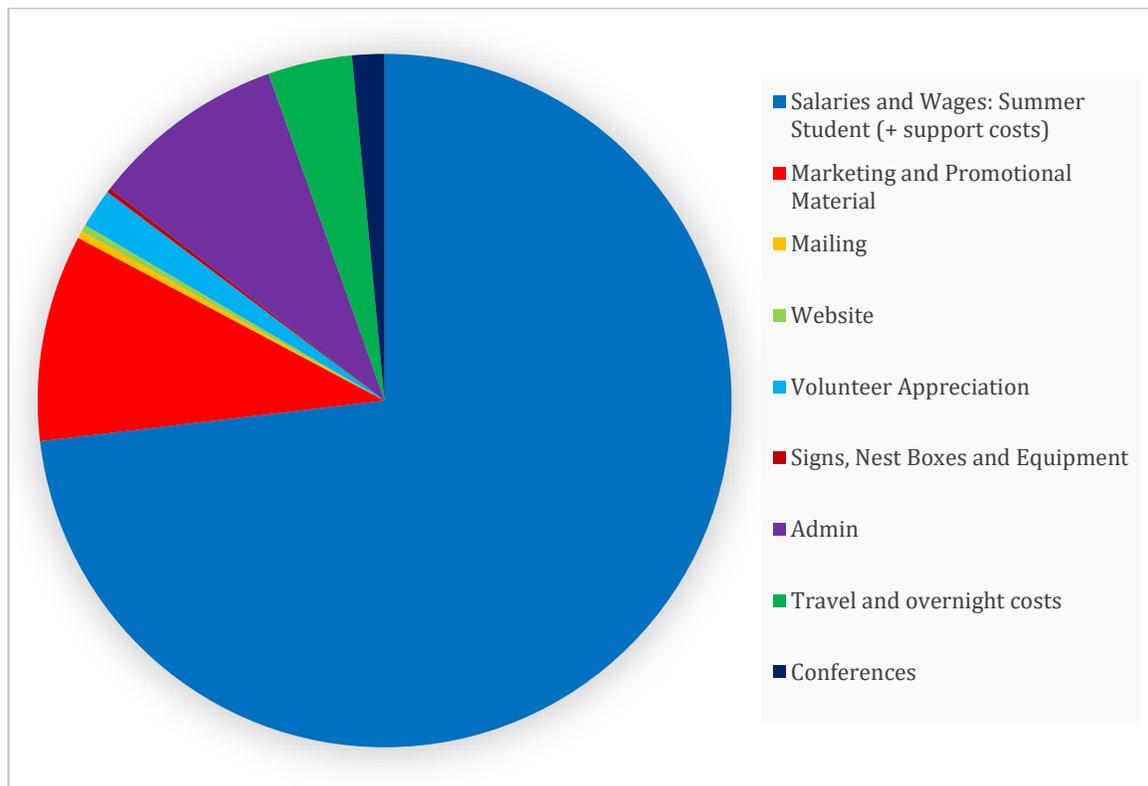
Overall volunteers contributed an impressive 2900 hours to the program in 2015.

5. Budget Summary

A number of funders contributed to the successful delivery of our program. We thank the following funders from 2015:

- EcoAction Community Funding Program: Environment Canada
- Shell Canada
- Province of Manitoba Urban Green Team
- Private donations

We had a budget of \$45,443 to spend in the 2015/16 fiscal. Over 70% of this budget paid the salaries of all staff working on the program while the remainder covered everything from travel to printing brochures. High marketing and promotional costs were associated with paying a designer, Carrie-Anne Lander to produce the grassland bird handbook for landowners and the costs of printing the final product, as well as another run of IBA brochures. This is summarized in the graph below.



6) Priorities for 2016

- Recruit caretakers and volunteer monitors for 9 IBA's (Langruth / RM of Lakeview, Oak Lake / Plum Lakes, Saskatchewan River Delta and Churchill).
- Secure additional funding for the program
- Increased profiling of the work of existing caretaker activities through social and local media.
- Finding funding to continue program beyond March 2016.