



# Audubon | DAKOTA

## 2022 Annual Report



Upland Sandpiper



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## MISSION STATEMENT:

**Our mission is to protect birds and the places the need, today and tomorrow. Audubon works throughout the Americas using science, advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation.**

## Stay Connected

**Kristal Stoner**

Executive Director & Vice President

**Audubon Dakota**

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   @Audubon Dakota



Nome Schoolhouse Birding Retreat

# Supporter Messages



**A**s a lover of the Great Plains and conservation enthusiast, my position as a member of the

Audubon Dakota Advisory Board has given me the opportunity to witness the efforts and achievements of a small but mighty team at Audubon Dakota. This past year has been marked by leadership transition, continued remarkable growth, and the unlocking of new opportunities. The Audubon Dakota team continues to display unbridled enthusiasm, benchmark effectiveness and relentless dedication to their mission in the Dakotas.

A frequent visitor to the Brigham Sanctuary, I have witnessed Audubon Dakota in action restoring this treasure of prairie ecology, putting the land to work for the good of the resident and migrating birds and setting the stage for the development of a center for education and engagement. The Sanctuary is but one example of all of the exciting work being done and yet to be done all of which has benefited from your generous support. Be assured of our appreciation of that support and our hopes that your support will sustain us going forward towards ever more impactful endeavors.

## Robert Bates

*Board Chair of Audubon Dakota  
Advisory Board*



**I** was born into a farming family in 1956 and through the years I watched farming practices change and saw yields increase

dramatically but I also saw other changes that were concerning. I did not pursue farming as a career but I always had a connection to the land.

I started to learn about better land management practices through my involvement with Pheasants Forever. About two years ago I purchased my own land and my thirst for knowledge increased significantly. I was fortunate enough to learn about the Meadowlark Initiative through the Audubon Society and will soon have acres of native grasses and flowers. I also learned about the benefits of controlled burning.

Am I doing this for conservation and habitat development? Yes, but I have learned that native grasses and flowers handle our prairie weather best. Controlled burning rejuvenates the pastures and those acres are preferred by cattle. I am thankful for the knowledge I gained through Audubon Society programs because conservation is good for my land and has long range benefits to me, the land and nature. I look forward to continuing to learn more with the help of the Audubon Society.

## Ken McDougall

*Landowner*



**I** have heard it said that “sharing is half the fun of birding” and Audubon Dakota has proven that statement

true. Over the last year Audubon has given me the opportunity to share my passion for birds and the environment by leading bird walks and giving talks to the public. Seeing other people discover the fascinating world of birds is one of the greatest joys in my 20 years of watching birds. Educating people about the challenges birds face is increasingly important as North America has lost 30% of its bird population since the 1970s. Taking my knowledge from the classroom at NDSU to the people of Fargo-Moorhead gives me hope in the future of bird conservation and has provided me with a community of people to share my passion with.

## Tucker Jones Lutter

*Volunteer*



# Transitioning to Audubon Great Plains

Through partnership, programming, and collaboration Audubon Dakota supported a more sustainable future for birds in 2022. This was a year of transition for Audubon Dakota; we gained new leadership and announced our merge into a regional office, combining Dakota and Nebraska offices. This merge will encourage adaption, expansion, and unification of strategies.

Merging the Dakotas with Nebraska sanctioned our approaches beyond State borders at a Great Plains scale. Through a united Great Plains office, we see greater opportunity to make an impact on habitat critical to our grassland bird population, including the Western Meadowlark the State Bird for North Dakota and Nebraska, who desperately needs grasslands for survival.

Through this transition, we continue to serve North and South Dakota, making strides in conservation and restoration work for bird and wildlife habitat. Our work prioritizes the Prairie Potholes, where some of the best remaining grassland and wetland habitats support an incredible diversity of waterfowl and avian species. Many species are at risk and show declines correlated to the loss and degradation of this unique prairie landscape. The Dakotas provide exceptional breeding and stop-over habitat for millions of ducks, geese and a wide array of avian species. Between North Dakota and South Dakota, over 370 species of birds depend on the states' grasslands, wetlands, and forests for survival. Migratory birds traveling thousands of miles stop through as they

continue their journey to their final Northern destination. Millions depend on our two states for nesting, breeding, and foraging and it is our priority to protect these critical habitats. With 60% of the nearly 5 million wetland acres converted to croplands or lost, and over 72% of native prairie converted, the chance for survival becomes increasingly difficult for many species already facing peril.

Since 1970 there has been an alarming 53% population loss in grassland birds, roughly totaling to 720 million birds, like the highly vulnerable Baird's Sparrow, whose rangeland is completely lost. Our programs support birds and wildlife by restoring and protecting critical bird habitat, conserving places where birds thrive and people prosper.



## Message from the Executive Director, Kristal Stoner

*This past year has brought new opportunities and expansion for our team. As our programs strengthen, so do our partnerships. This past year we have impacted acreage and restored habitats across North and South Dakota to further our mission of protecting*

*birds and the places they need. As we merge with Nebraska to form the regional office, Audubon Great Plains, our growing wingspan will only strengthen Audubon's influence, impact, and ability to advocate for birds and protect their habitats.*



# Baird's Sparrow

*Centronyx bairdii*

**HIGHLY VULNERABLE TO CLIMATE CHANGE**

A grassland sparrow, breeding on the northern Great Plains, wintering locally in the Southwest. Originally was a very common bird within its range, now uncommon and local. Loss of habitat on summer range (to farming) and winter range (to overgrazing). Baird's Sparrow runs through the grass like a mouse, almost never perching up in the open, and is very difficult to flush. On the nesting grounds, however, males will give a surprisingly musical song, much more attractive than those of related sparrows.

## CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

Urban Areas  
Suburban Areas  
Agriculture  
Livestock Management  
Oil and Gas Production  
Light Pollution



## MIGRATION

Traveling in October and November, the Baird's Sparrow departs the Great Plains and heads to the Southwest and into Mexico to survive during the winter months. Returns in the spring in April for nesting and breeding habitat.

# Migratory Bird Explorer

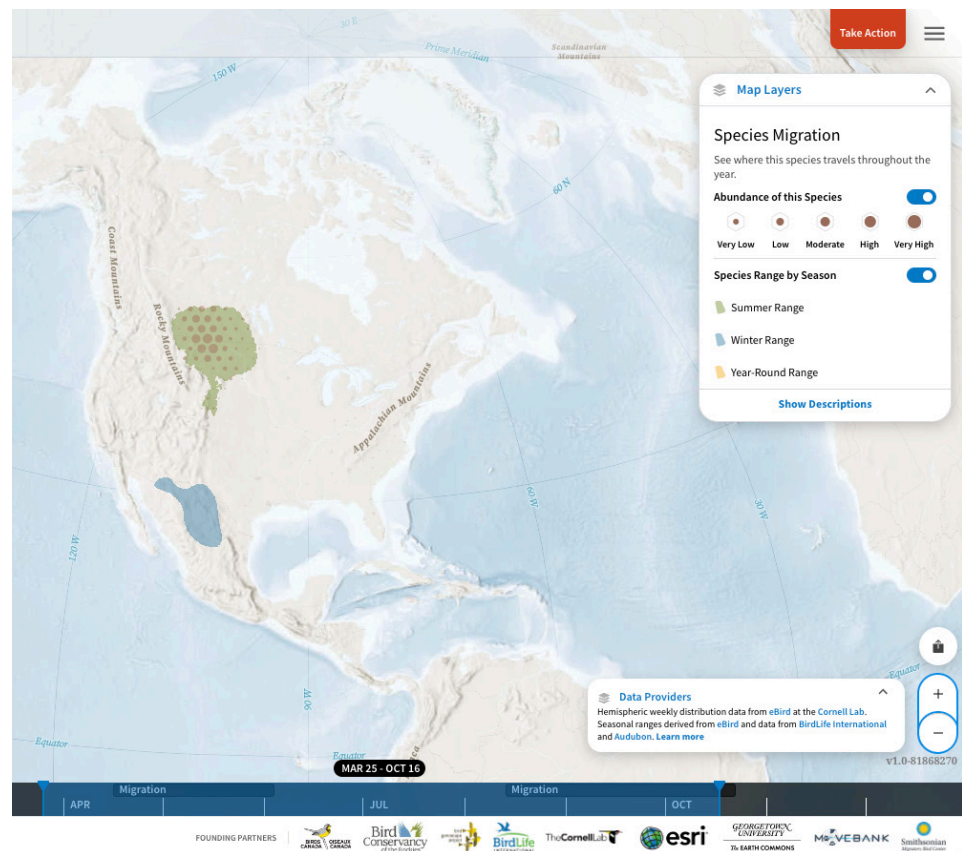
## MIGRATORY BIRD EXPLORER

Launched in the Fall of 2022, **The Bird Migration Explorer** is your guide to the heroic annual journeys made by over 450 bird species, and the challenges they face along the way.

Many of our conservation programs restore habitat in support of endangered species like the Baird's Sparrow. With the Migratory Bird Explorer, we can learn more about their epic journey and target conservation work across the Americas.

Learn more about a species, the migratory birds at a specific location, or a conservation challenge birds face.

[explorer.audubon.org](https://explorer.audubon.org)



## Dakota Highlights

Audubon relies on our network of conservation partners, collaborators, and supporters both regionally and nationally to successfully amplify our work and coordinate outcomes. Through the Audubon network, various programs, and a dedicated team, we achieved so much this year. With 407 acres restored in 2022, we completed a 595-acre restoration project at Edward Brigham

III Alkali Lake Sanctuary. We received the River Keepers Environmental Award, which recognizes outstanding leadership in the protection of the river environment relative to environmental concerns, water, soils, vegetation, and wildlife. We increased forage availability for birds on 1,300 acres by enrolling ranchers and offering cost-share assistance into the North Dakota Conservation Forage Program. And lastly, US Fish and Wildlife Services and the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture presented the opportunity to spread our wingspan



"Being a state office of the National Audubon Society has allowed us flexibility to address local conservation issues while also having the structure and focus established by national strategic priorities, in particular the Working Lands and Bird-Friendly

Communities initiatives. The support we receive from the Audubon network ranging from financial planning, policy, to technology, and so much more, allows our small team to be much more effective and focus on what we do best—on-the-ground conservation."

**Sarah Hewitt, *Director of Conservation***



Prescribed Fire Workshop at Brigham Sanctuary

nationally by hosting celebrations of the Federal Duck Stamp Art Contest.

**This report details our important accomplishments achieved this past year. To leverage the power of Audubon, we follow a tight framework of strategic conservation priorities including Working Lands and Bird-Friendly Communities.**



### BIRD-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

Audubon Dakota's Bird-Friendly Communities

strategic priority improves the health of birds and people alike by investing into local North and South Dakota communities. We value our strong partnership network that ensures resources are available across urban centers and rural towns to make all neighborhoods safe for birds. Each community has the ability to provide important habitat for native birds, which in turn, offers people a diverse, more beautiful, and healthy place to live.

By prioritizing Bird-Friendly Communities, Audubon strives to provide food, shelter, safe passage, and places for birds to raise their young, while also engaging our communities. The Yellow Warbler is one of the most widely distributed warblers and is on the priority bird list. Through our programming, we protect them and other species by conserving their habitats through our Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative, volunteer opportunities, Plants for Birds, Lights Out, and Bird-Friendly Buildings programs. As Audubon continues to create healthy natural environments for recreational use, we also ensure safe spaces for our feathered friends.





## WORKING LANDS

In the Dakotas, our Working Lands programs consist of privately-owned land enrolled into Audubon Conservation Ranching, Prairie Management Toolbox, and the Conservation Forage Programs. Our Working Lands team collaborates with landowners, land managers, government agencies, and private industry to apply bird-friendly land-management practices on their lands. We collaborate with landowners to expand bird habitat, providing technical and financial assistance.

Audubon Dakota continues to increase our conservation efforts by collaborating with national and regional partners. Our Migratory Habitat Conservation Protection efforts concentrate on supporting short term and permanent easements throughout critical migratory habitat for Sandhill cranes, waterfowl such as the American Avocet and the Northern Pintail, and grassland birds such as the Bobolink.

We utilize our partnerships that work through the North American Wetlands

Conservation Act grant program to fund conservation easements and habitat enhancement projects within major migratory corridors for targeted wetland and grassland species.

To date, Audubon has assisted the conservation of over 80,000 acres across the Dakotas through these efforts. In addition to these programs, Audubon Dakota owns and manages the Edward Brigham III Alkali Lake Sanctuary and the Frederick L. Wicks Prairie Wildlife Sanctuary which support habitat for a suite of wetland and grassland birds.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

# Program Achievements



## URBAN WOODS AND PRAIRIES INITIATIVE (UWP)

The Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative integrates native landscapes in urban settings, reconnecting the community with nature. Through enhancement practices for urban prairies, woodlands, and wetlands we

provide high quality habitat for our local bird and wildlife species, while also encouraging community members to explore for recreational use and connect with the outdoors.

**In 2022 alone, we enrolled 16 new UWP parks across 430 acres in six cities.**

Birds benefiting from the UWP site improvements include the migratory birds that pass through like the Orange-crowned Warbler, Red-Winged Black Birds, and the Belted Kingfisher. To date, the UWP Initiative has enrolled over 30 sites across North Dakota totaling over 1,000 acres, benefiting additional species such as the American Kestrel, Baltimore Orioles, and the Rose-breasted Grosbeak which are vulnerable to loss of habitat.



American Kestrel



# WORKING LANDS ACREAGE IMPACTED IN 2022

EDWARD M. BRIGHAM ALKALI LAKE SANCTUARY

**407**

ACRES RESTORED

COMPLETING 595 ACRES OVER 4 YEARS

PRAIRIE MANAGEMENT TOOLBOX

**3,234**

ACRES RESTORED IN NORTH DAKOTA

ON 7 PROJECTS

PRAIRIE MANAGEMENT TOOLBOX

**3,700**

ACRES RESTORED IN SOUTH DAKOTA

ON 3 PROJECTS

CONSERVATION FORAGE PROGRAM

**1,300**

ACRES SEEDED AND COMPLETED

AND 1,300 ACRES IN PROGRESS FOR SPRING 2023

AUDUBON CONSERVATION RANCHING

**27,000**

ACRES UPDATED

ON 7 HABITAT MANAGEMENT PLANS



Guided Bird Walk in Bismark, North Dakota at Atkinson Nature Park, an Urban Woods and Prairie site.



Audubon Dakota establishes Urban Plains Park as a new Urban Woods and Prairies Park in May 2022



### THE NORTH DAKOTA CONSERVATION FORAGE PROGRAM (CFP)

The North Dakota Conservation Forage Program (CFP) works with North Dakota's producers to reestablish grasslands on marginal cropland to improve forage availability and quality, which benefits grassland and migratory birds. By providing support through financial and technical assistance to landowners, CFP accelerates grassland restoration and improves overall soil health across the state.

These enrolled acres benefit the landowner and livestock, as well as grassland birds and native wildlife, protecting North Dakota's air and water quality for future generations. This land supports grassland birds like the Upland Sandpiper, priority bird species Swainson's Hawk, and the Greater Prairie Chicken, a ground-foraging grassland bird facing decline due to loss of habitat.

CFP was launched in the spring of 2021 supported by a \$6.9 million North Dakota Industrial Commission Outdoor Heritage Fund grant, the largest awarded by the Commission. To raise awareness around this pilot program we engaged partners, like the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, to promote the program to their audiences through digital and social media advertisements, and by

connecting with landowners considering enrollment. Through targeting audiences, we reached over 8,000 people with this campaign.

Additionally, in partnership with the North Dakota Natural Resource Trust we enrolled three projects into CFP in association with their Dakota Skipper program, offsetting funding for high diversity seedings in the threatened butterfly range, impacting 309 acres.

**This past year we collaborated with over 30 landowners and have enrolled a total of 1,300 acres into CFP, with an additional 1,300 acres waiting to be seeded in the Spring of 2023.**



### AUDUBON CONSERVATION RANCHING

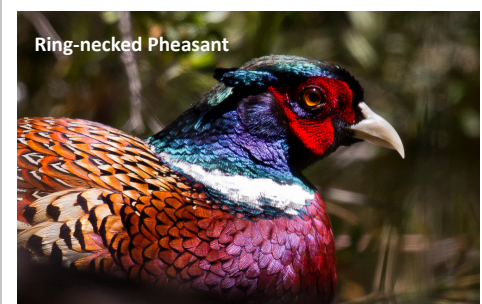
Rooted in wildlife habitat, Audubon Conservation Ranching is a program that provides producers with individual assistance and ranch-specific habitat management plans. Uniquely, Audubon Conservation Ranching connects consumers to conservation through the marketplace, with the Audubon Certified bird-friendly seal distinguishing products that come from lands actively managed for wildlife through rotational and regenerative grazing practices.



### THE PRAIRIE MANAGEMENT TOOLBOX

The Prairie Management Toolbox provides financial and technical support for grazing infrastructure for private landowners. Funding for the program was provided by the North Dakota Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF) and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, which has allowed Audubon Dakota to enhance over 18,000 acres of rangeland. We continue to partner with landowners to meet their specific land and infrastructure needs.

By customizing habitat management plans and through financial and technical assistance, in 2022 we completed seven projects on 3,234 acres in North Dakota and restored 3,700 acres across three projects in South Dakota, benefiting the South Dakota State Bird, the Ring-necked Pheasant. Projects included fencing and water infrastructure for grazing management, grassland restoration, and invasive tree clearing.

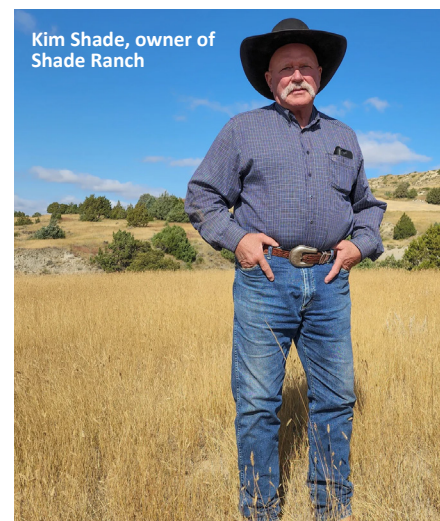


Ring-necked Pheasant



AUDUBON CONSERVATION RANCHING HIGHLIGHT

# Southwest North Dakota Shade Ranch Certified as Audubon Bird-Friendly Habitat



The Shade Ranch south of Medora, North Dakota, has received a Bird-Friendly Habitat Certification from the National Audubon Society. Beef produced on the ranch under its Meadowlark Beef brand can now carry the Audubon Certified bird-friendly seal, a package label that recognizes product origin as lands managed for birds and biodiversity.

The 18,000-acre Shade Ranch, owned and operated by Kim Shade, includes private land as well as a large grazing lease from the Little Missouri National Grassland, administered by the U.S. Forest Service. As detailed in the State of the Birds 2022 report, grassland birds are among the fastest-declining bird species in the United States, with a 34% loss since 1970.

Located in the Northwestern Great Plains Eco-region, Shade has developed a holistic approach for his ranch, one that drew him to the Audubon certification. “I believe if we have a healthy environment for cattle, then we have a healthy ecosys-

tem for wildlife,” he said. Using his herd as a habitat management tool – mimicking what bison did for thousands of years – Shade’s cattle can, in some places, be used to manipulate the short vegetation that favors species like the Chestnut-colored Longspur and Upland Sandpiper. Other pastures are purposely provided breaks from grazing, creating taller prairie plant communities preferred by Bobolinks, Grasshopper Sparrows, and Sharp-tailed Grouse.

But of all birds, it’s the Western Meadowlark – the state bird of North Dakota – whose call resonates with Shade the most. Shade has lived most of his life “where the meadowlark sings,” one of his earliest memories being 4-years-old and hearing the bell-like song for the first time on a Dakota prairie drive. He still works cattle via horseback as opposed to an engine-operated mode, which allows him to hear his favorite bird and avoid running over any nests. Charli Kohler, Range Ecologist, says regular monitoring of habitat and range production, bird

abundance, soil carbon, water infiltration, and soil health on the ranch will provide Shade and Audubon with the data needed to make informed updates, adapting the habitat management plan and bird-friendly practices as needed in the future.



**EDWARD M. BRIGHAM III**  
**ALKALI LAKE SANCTUARY**  
**(BRIGHAM SANCTUARY)**

The Edward M. Brigham III Alkali Lake Sanctuary is a popular wildlife site within the birding community; here, Sharp Tailed Grouse have a lek and every year can be spotted performing their mating ritual. The sanctuary has public access for seasonal recreational fishing on the 1,000-acre lake where Wood Ducks are commonly sighted. In 2022, we completed our restoration goal of 595 acres over four years. This habitat benefits a variety of species including the Chesnut-collared Longspur which can often be heard in the summer singing its flight song over the prairie.



Graze the Grassland guests tour Black Leg Ranch and learn about ACR management practices from the Doan Family

In partnership with North Dakota Game and Fish Department, “no wake” regulations were implemented during waterfowl migration at Alkali Lake. This past May over 20 conservation partners joined us at Brigham Sanctuary for a prescribed fire workshop with partner presentations and a hands-on fire demonstration.

On-site at Brigham Sanctuary sits an empty white gambrel barn that brings tremendous potential for community engagement, research, and education. Future plans include exterior painting and community engagement to finalize the barn and explore the possibilities of an educational resource center.

#### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

## Connecting with Community

This past year we continued creating new opportunities to connect with our community at a variety of events and educational opportunities. We prioritized creating nature-based educational opportunities for students to nurture their relationship with nature, while also emphasizing responsible stewardship of the land.

This year brought an exciting conservation engagement opportunity

for Audubon in partnership with Prairie Pothole Joint Venture, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. Each year, artists from across the country submit artwork to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in hopes to win the honorable Federal Duck Stamp Art Contest.

To celebrate the annual duck stamp contest, Audubon hosted two events, *Grazing the Grasslands: A Wildlife and Ranch Tour at Black Leg Ranch*, and *Ducks at Daybreak: A Guided Birding Adventure*, to build awareness around the contest and educate the community about one of the easiest ways they can support conservation. During this event, participants learned that Duck Stamps, which are required for waterfowl hunters, can be purchased by anyone, with 98% of the purchase price utilized to acquire and protect wetland habitat and purchase conservation easements.

At Grazing the Grasslands we welcomed over 80 attendees. The Doan Family, owners and operators, shared their conservation legacy on the ranch and the history of the land which has been in the family since 1882. Enrolled in Audubon’s Conservation Ranching Program, the family continues to rejuvenate their land with cattle and birds in mind. Jayce Doan, a fifth-generation rancher and son of Jay Doan, explained how rotational grazing mimics mother nature

which improves productivity of land, returns nutrients to the soil, and improves forage production, which in-turn equals healthy cattle for consumers. By expanding their prairie habitat for grazing purposes, they have increased bird and wildlife populations for conservation and recreation purposes, all while improving the nutrients in the soil and contributing to supporting the environment for future generations to come.

This spring Audubon Dakota was presented with the River Keepers Environmental Award presented by River Keepers, a Fargo-Moorhead conservation organization that advocates for the safe and sustainable use of the Red River. The award recognized Audubon’s efforts through the Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative; a program that restores and enhances riparian habitat along the Red River. The UWP nature parks along the Red River serve as high-quality wildlife habitat while also improving flood resiliency, a key ecological service for the Red River Valley.







Birding at Buffalo River State Park  
with school children of all ages

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

# Educational Outreach

Outreach programs begin with an introduction of the rich natural history of the Great Plains of North Dakota and South Dakota. Regardless of where programming takes place, whether it's in the middle of the prairie, alongside wetlands, or in the classroom, students and adults participating discover the natural wonders of this region while also learning about the habitats of the Dakotas that provide essential breeding and stop-over habitat for millions of birds every year. In tandem with Audubon Dakota's on-the-ground conservation, our educational outreach programs grow public awareness and support of the birds and habitats of the Dakotas.

This year, through the efforts of staff, volunteers, and partner organizations, Audubon Dakota's educational outreach programs engaged over 2,000 students and adults at 31 events, including 11 volunteer opportunities.

As part of our educational mission to introduce children and their families to the joy of birds and spark interest in nature and conservation, Audubon Dakota regularly leads and supports educational outreach programs through events, such as, the *Annual Winter Birding Festival*, *Fargo Bird Festival*, and a variety of bird-watching walks and presentations throughout the year.

Audubon Dakota brought science-based programming to the students at Lake Park Audubon Elementary. A long-standing educational Prairie Program, staff and volunteers connected with the students multiple times this year, both in the classroom and outside at Hamden Slough National Wildlife Refuge, to teach not only about birds and prairies, but also about other critical habitats, such as, wetlands.

Additionally, Audubon Dakota's *Birding for Kids Program* grew both in attendance and availability. In partnership with The Fargo Public Library, Birding for Kids was hosted in the spring and fall in order to capture the excitement of the migration seasons, for children 7 years and older.



"Audubon Dakota's outreach programs encourage students and community

members, to become lifelong advocates for birds and the places they need."

– Meghan Carter-Johnson  
Sr. Coordinator of Engagement

During these programs children learned how to identify birds and discover migratory and resident birds of the Fargo-Moorhead area through a bird-watching walk at Wildflower Grove Park, an Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative site, located along the Red River in Downtown Fargo.

With habitat stewardship needs in mind, Audubon Dakota staff connected with the Legacy Children's Foundation to build new Wood Duck nest boxes in order to replace damaged nest boxes at Forest River Park (Fargo, ND). In June, staff and volunteers met with youth learners, who were a part of the Legacy Children's Foundation summer programming for vulnerable teens, to build and install the nest boxes, as well as, engage with the youth learners outdoors through a bird-watching hike and empower them to be advocates for birds.

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## PARTNERS

