

Birding in the Helena Area



Last Chance Audubon Society is a local volunteer organization established in 1971 as a grassroots affiliate of the National Audubon Society. LCAS promotes understanding, respect, and enjoyment of birds and the natural world through education, habitat protection, and environmental advocacy.

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Bird Species of the Helena Area

Relative abundance in suitable habitat by season are:

a - Abundant. A common species sometimes seen in large flocks.

c - Common. Likely to be seen or heard in suitable habitat.

u - Uncommon. Present during season, but may not be seen.

r - Rare. Seen only a few times during season, may be only in limited part of the habitat, and/or may be irregular in occurrence from year to year.

v - Vagrant. Accidental in occurrence; out of normal range.

Status:

B - Direct evidence of breeding

b - Indirect evidence of breeding

t - No evidence of breeding

Seasons of occurrence:

W - Winter: mid-November through February

S - Spring: March through mid-May

S - Summer: mid-May through mid-August

F - Fall: mid-August through mid-November

	Status	W	S	S	F
___ Common Loon	t	r	u	r	u
___ Pied-billed Grebe	t	r	r	r	r
___ Horned Grebe	t		u	r	u
___ Red-necked Grebe	B		r	r	r
___ Eared Grebe	B		c	c	c
___ Western Grebe	B	r	c	c	c
___ Clark's Grebe	b		r	r	r
___ American White Pelican	B	r	c	c	c
___ Double-crested Cormorant	B	r	c	c	c
___ American Bittern	t		r		r
___ Great Blue Heron	B	r	c	c	c
___ Great Egret	t				v
___ Snowy Egret	t		r	r	
___ Cattle Egret	t			r	r
___ Black-crowned Night-Heron	t			r	r
___ White-faced Ibis	t		r		
___ Tundra Swan	t	r	a		c
___ Trumpeter Swan	t	r	u	r	u
___ Greater White-fronted Goose	t		r		r
___ Snow Goose	t	r	u		u
___ Ross's Goose	t		r		r
___ Canada Goose	B	a	a	a	a
___ Wood Duck	B	r	u	u	u
___ Green-winged Teal	B	r	c	c	c
___ Mallard	B	a	a	a	a

	Status	W	S	S	F
___ Northern Pintail	B	r	c	c	c
___ Blue-winged Teal	B	r	c	c	c
___ Cinnamon Teal	B	r	c	c	c
___ Northern Shoveler	B	r	c	c	c
___ Gadwall	B	u	c	c	c
___ Eurasian Wigeon	t		r		
___ American Wigeon	B	r	c	u	c
___ Canvasback	B	r	c	r	u
___ Redhead	B	r	c	u	c
___ Ring-necked Duck	B	r	u	r	u
___ Lesser Scaup	B	r	c	u	c
___ Harlequin Duck	t		r		r
___ Long-tailed Duck	t	r			r
___ Surf Scoter	t				r
___ White-winged Scoter	t	r			r
___ Common Goldeneye	t	c	c	r	c
___ Barrow's Goldeneye	t	u	u	r	u
___ Bufflehead	b	u	u	u	u
___ Hooded Merganser	b	r	u	r	u
___ Common Merganser	B	u	c	u	c
___ Red-breasted Merganser	t	r	u		u
___ Ruddy Duck	b	r	u	u	u
___ Turkey Vulture	B		u	c	u
___ Osprey	B		u	c	u
___ Bald Eagle	B	c	u	u	c
___ Northern Harrier	B	r	u	u	u
___ Sharp-shinned Hawk	b	r	r	r	r
___ Cooper's Hawk	b	r	r	r	r
___ Northern Goshawk	B	r	r	r	r
___ Broad-winged Hawk	t		v		
___ Swainson's Hawk	b			r	
___ Red-tailed Hawk	B	r	c	c	c
___ Ferruginous Hawk	t			r	r
___ Rough-legged Hawk	t	c	u		u
___ Golden Eagle	B	u	r	r	r
___ American Kestrel	B	r	u	u	u
___ Merlin	B	u	u	u	u
___ Peregrine Falcon	B	r	r	r	r
___ Gyrfalcon	t	r			
___ Prairie Falcon	b	r	r	r	r
___ Gray Partridge	t	r	r	r	r
___ Ring-necked Pheasant	b	u	u	u	u
___ Blue Grouse	b	r	r	r	r
___ Ruffed Grouse	b	u	u	u	u
___ Virginia Rail	t				r
___ Sora	B		u	u	u
___ American Coot	B	u	a	c	a
___ Sandhill Crane	B		c	c	c
___ Black-bellied Plover	t		r		r
___ Killdeer	B	r	c	c	c

	Status	W	S	S	F
___ Black-necked Stilt	t		r		r
___ American Avocet	B		c	c	c
___ Greater Yellowlegs	t		u	r	u
___ Lesser Yellowlegs	t		u	r	c
___ Solitary Sandpiper	t		r	r	r
___ Willet	t		c	u	u
___ Spotted Sandpiper	B	r	c	c	c
___ Upland Sandpiper	b		r		
___ Whimbrel	t			v	
___ Long-billed Curlew	B		c	c	u
___ Marbled Godwit	t		r		r
___ Sanderling	t		r		r
___ Semipalmated Sandpiper	t		r		r
___ Western Sandpiper	t		r		r
___ Least Sandpiper	t		u	r	u
___ Baird's Sandpiper	t		u		u
___ Stilt Sandpiper	t				r
___ Long-billed Dowitcher	t		u	r	c
___ Common Snipe	B	u	c	c	c
___ Wilson's Phalarope	b		c	c	c
___ Franklin's Gull	t		u	c	c
___ Bonaparte's Gull	t		r	r	r
___ Ring-billed Gull	B	r	a	a	a
___ California Gull	B	r	c	c	u
___ Herring Gull	t	r	r		r
___ Glaucous Gull	t	v			
___ Black-legged Kittiwake	t	v			
___ Sabine's Gull	t				v
___ Caspian Tern	B		u	u	r
___ Common Tern	t		r	r	r
___ Forster's Tern	B		u	u	u
___ Black Tern	t		r	r	
___ Rock Dove	B	a	a	a	a
___ Mourning Dove	B	r	c	c	r
___ Black-billed Cuckoo	t		r	r	
___ Flammulated Owl	B		r	r	r
___ Great Horned Owl	B	u	u	u	u
___ Snowy Owl	t	r			
___ Northern Pygmy Owl	B	r	r	r	r
___ Great Gray Owl	t	r	r	r	r
___ Long-eared Owl	t	r	r	r	r
___ Short-eared Owl	t	r	r	r	r
___ Northern Saw-whet Owl	t	r	r	r	r
___ Common Nighthawk	B			c	r
___ White-throated Swift	b			u	
___ Black-chinned Hummingbird	t		r	r	
___ Anna's Hummingbird	t				v
___ Calliope Hummingbird	B	r	u		
___ Broad-tailed Hummingbird	t		r		
___ Rufous Hummingbird	B	r	u		

	Status	W	S	S	F
___ Belted Kingfisher	B	u	c	c	c
___ Lewis's Woodpecker	B		r	r	r
___ Red-naped Sapsucker	B		r	u	r
___ Williamson's Sapsucker	b		r	r	
___ Downy Woodpecker	B	u	u	u	u
___ Hairy Woodpecker	B	u	u	u	u
___ Three-toed Woodpecker	t	r	r	r	r
___ Black-backed Woodpecker	t	r	r	r	r
___ Northern Flicker	B	u	c	c	c
___ Pileated Woodpecker	t	r	r	r	r
___ Olive-sided Flycatcher	t			r	
___ Western Wood-Pee-wee	B			c	r
___ Willow Flycatcher	B			c	r
___ Least Flycatcher	B			c	
___ Hammond's Flycatcher	B			u	
___ Dusky Flycatcher	B			c	
___ Cordilleran Flycatcher	B			r	
___ Say's Phoebe	t		r	r	
___ Western Kingbird	B		r	u	r
___ Eastern Kingbird	B			c	u
___ Horned Lark	B	u	u	u	u
___ Tree Swallow	B		c	c	r
___ Violet-green Swallow	B		u	c	
___ Northern Rough-winged Swallow	b		u	u	
___ Bank Swallow	B		u	u	r
___ Cliff Swallow	B		a	a	
___ Barn Swallow	B		u	c	u
___ Gray Jay	b	r	r	r	r
___ Steller's Jay	b	r	r	r	r
___ Blue Jay	B	r	r	r	r
___ Pinyon Jay	B	u	u	u	u
___ Clark's Nutcracker	B	u	u	u	u
___ Black-billed Magpie	B	c	c	c	c
___ American Crow	B	u	c	c	u
___ Common Raven	B	c	c	c	c
___ Black-capped Chickadee	B	c	c	c	c
___ Mountain Chickadee	B	c	c	c	c
___ Red-breasted Nuthatch	B	c	c	c	c
___ White-breasted Nuthatch	B	u	u	u	u
___ Pygmy Nuthatch	b	r	r	r	r
___ Brown Creeper	b	r	r	r	r
___ Rock Wren	B	r	r	u	r
___ Canyon Wren	b	r	r	u	u
___ House Wren	B		u	c	u
___ Winter Wren	t	r			r
___ Marsh Wren	B	r	u	u	u
___ American Dipper	B	u	u	u	u
___ Golden-crowned Kinglet	B	u	u	u	u
___ Ruby-crowned Kinglet	B	r	c	c	u
___ Western Bluebird	b		r	r	

	Status	W	S	S	F
___ Mountain Bluebird	B	r	c	c	c
___ Townsend's Solitaire	B	c	u	u	u
___ Veery	B		u	u	r
___ Swainson's Thrush	B		u	u	u
___ Hermit Thrush	B		u	u	u
___ American Robin	B	u	c	c	c
___ Varied Thrush	t	r			r
___ Gray Catbird	B			c	r
___ Northern Mockingbird	t		v	v	v
___ Sage Thrasher	B			u	
___ American Pipit	t		u		u
___ Bohemian Waxwing	t	a	c		a
___ Cedar Waxwing	B	r	u	c	c
___ Northern Shrike	t	u	r		u
___ European Starling	B	c	a	a	a
___ Cassin's (Solitary) Vireo	b			r	r
___ Warbling Vireo	B			c	u
___ Red-eyed Vireo	b		r	r	r
___ Orange-crowned Warbler	b		u	u	u
___ Yellow Warbler	B		c	c	u
___ Magnolia Warbler	t			v	
___ Yellow-rumped Warbler	B		c	c	u
___ Palm Warbler	t				v
___ American Redstart	B			u	
___ Ovenbird	b			r	
___ Northern Waterthrush	B			u	
___ MacGillivray's Warbler	B			u	u
___ Common Yellowthroat	B			c	u
___ Wilson's Warbler	b		u		u
___ Yellow-breasted Chat	b			r	
___ Western Tanager	B			u	u
___ Rose-breasted Grosbeak	t			r	
___ Black-headed Grosbeak	B			u	
___ Lazuli Bunting	B			u	r
___ Indigo Bunting	b			r	
___ Green-tailed Towhee	B			u	
___ Spotted Towhee	B		c	c	
___ American Tree Sparrow	t	c	u		c
___ Chipping Sparrow	B		c	c	c
___ Clay-colored Sparrow	b			u	
___ Brewer's Sparrow	B		u	u	
___ Vesper Sparrow	B		c	c	c
___ Lark Sparrow	B		u	u	u
___ Lark Bunting	B			r	
___ Savannah Sparrow	B		c	c	c
___ LeConte's Sparrow	t				v
___ Song Sparrow	B	u	c	c	c
___ Lincoln's Sparrow	b		u	r	r
___ White-throated Sparrow	t	r			r
___ White-crowned Sparrow	b	r	u	r	c

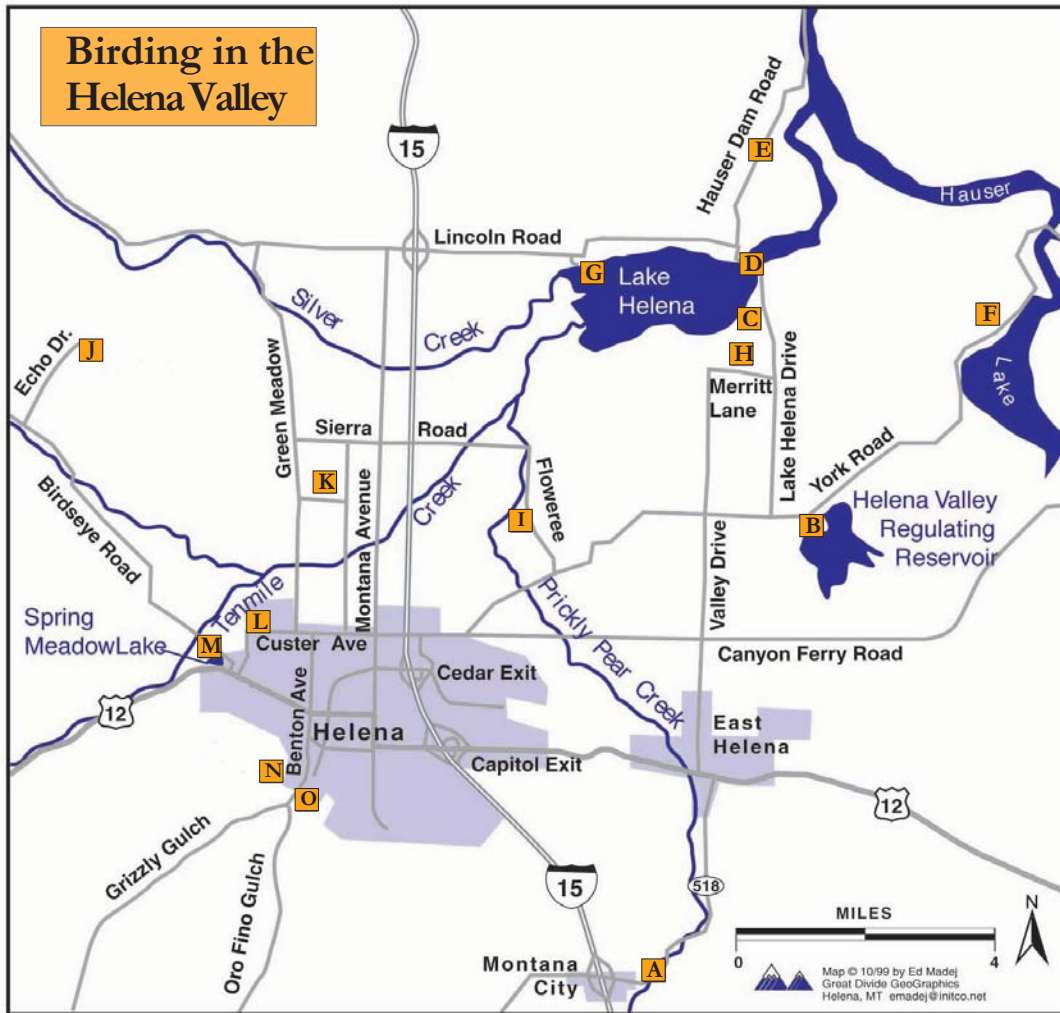
	Status	W	S	S	F
___ Harris's Sparrow	t	r	r		r
___ Dark-eyed Junco	B	c	c	c	c
___ Lapland Longspur	t	r			
___ Snow Bunting	t	r	r		
___ Bobolink	B			u	
___ Red-winged Blackbird	B	u	c	a	a
___ Western Meadowlark	B	r	c	c	u
___ Yellow-headed Blackbird	B		u	u	u
___ Rusty Blackbird	t	r			r
___ Brewer's Blackbird	B		u	a	a
___ Common Grackle	B		u	c	r
___ Brown-headed Cowbird	B		c	c	
___ Bullock's Oriole	B			u	
___ Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch	t	r			
___ Pine Grosbeak	t	r			r
___ Purple Finch	t	r	r	r	r
___ Cassin's Finch	B	u	u	u	u
___ House Finch	B	c	c	c	c
___ Red Crossbill	B	u	u	u	u
___ White-winged Crossbill	t	r			r
___ Common Redpoll	t	u	u		
___ Hoary Redpoll	t	r			
___ Pine Siskin	B	u	c	c	c
___ American Goldfinch	B	r	u	c	u
___ Evening Grosbeak	B	u	u	u	u
___ House Sparrow	B	c	c	c	c

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grebes, Tundra Swan, mergansers, Double-crested Cormorant, and Bald Eagle can be viewed at various times of the year. The mudflats attract many shorebirds. Great Blue Herons have a rookery here.

C Lake Helena Drive

This road offers a vantage point overlooking the lower end of Lake Helena. Be sure to find a safe parking place out of the traffic lanes. In the pastureland below the road, Western Meadowlark, Sandhill Crane, and Northern Harrier are sometimes seen. A spotting scope is useful for viewing birds on the lake. Huge flocks of American White Pelican, Northern Pintail, Snow and Canada Goose, and Tundra Swan can be seen during migration. In March, Bald Eagles sit on the edge of the melting ice, attracted by winter-killed fish.

D Causeway

With open water even in the coldest weather, the Causeway attracts diving birds including Western, Eared and Horned Grebe, Common Loon, and Common Goldeneye. Yellow-headed Blackbirds frequent the lone tree and shallow-water bullrushes on the west shore.

A James P. Sunderland Park

Developed by Ash Grove Cement Company, this park and trail are located directly across from the cement plant east of Montana City on Route 518. The stream grade trail follows a narrow riparian corridor about 1.5 miles downstream from the trailhead. Common bird sightings include swallows, American Dipper, Cedar Waxwing, Gray Catbird, Veery, and Song Sparrow.

B Helena Valley Regulating Reservoir

When there is open water, many species of waterfowl are found here including uncommon migrants and regular summer nesters. Common Loon,

E Road to Hauser Dam

Heading north from the Causeway, this road crosses a dry upland of ponderosa pine savannah and then follows the edge of Hauser Lake ending at Hauser Dam. The variety of habitat provides good birding. Walk across the dam to start the trail that goes north along the Missouri River to Beaver Creek. The river often has mergansers, goldeneyes, Bald Eagle, and American Dipper during the winter. A variety of forest edge and riparian birds nest here during the summer.

F Road to York

The road to York passes close by Hauser Lake and water birds can often be seen. The low, sparsely vegetated hills provide habitat for Brewer's and Vesper Sparrow and Horned Lark.

G Lake Helena Wildlife Management Area

This state-owned area overlooking Lake Helena and the marsh is a good place to see waterfowl. Canada Goose, Mallard, grebes, and teal nest here. (See Lake Helena Drive for other waterfowl).

H Merritt Lane

Accessed from Lake Helena Drive, this lane crosses a small stream with a cattail marsh. Birds in this marsh setting can be viewed easily from the road. Red-winged Blackbirds can be seen often and a careful look might reveal Marsh Wren, Sora Rail, or Common Snipe. Sandhill Cranes nest in this area.

I Floweree Drive to Sierra Road

This road passes through pastureland and along a meandering stretch of Prickly Pear Creek. Birds of the open field, roadside and riparian habitats can be seen along this route. Brewer's Blackbird, Eastern Kingbird, Song and Savannah Sparrow, and Black-capped Chickadee are regulars.

J Scratchgravel Hills

These dry, rocky hills on the west side of the Helena Valley are managed by BLM and provide good hiking and nice views. Look for nuthatches, Chipping Sparrow, Pinyon Jay, Townsend's Solitaire, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Cooper's Hawk.

K Odd Fellows and Forestvale Cemeteries

The cemeteries, located south of Sierra Road on Forestvale Road, provide a small island of mature trees and shrubs. Northern Flicker, Downy Woodpecker, American Robin, Yellow Warbler, Cedar Waxwing, House Wren, and American Kestrel can be found here.

L Fairgrounds

The pond at the edge of the fairgrounds parking lot generally has Mallard, Canada Goose, Wood Duck, and Ring-billed Gull as well as domesticated waterfowl. The west half of the fairgrounds has shrub/aspen thickets, with Gray Catbird, Clay-colored Sparrow, and warblers in migration. Look for Red-winged Blackbird, Common Snipe, and other marsh birds in the cattails just across Custer Avenue.

M Spring Meadow Lake

Formerly a gravel pit, this site is now a state park and can be reached by following the signs from U.S. Hwy 12. Although the western edge is an urban park, the south and east sides offer good birding during quiet morning and evening hours via a path around the lake. Mallards, and a number of songbirds nest here including Cedar Waxwing, Eastern Kingbird, Red-winged Blackbird, Western Wood-Pee-wee, and Bullock's Oriole. Common Loons and various waterfowl rest here during migration.

N Mount Helena City Park

Main access is at the south end of Park Avenue through Reeder's Village subdivision. Several trails enter the park from the parking area. Western Meadowlark, Vesper Sparrow, and Mountain Bluebird can be found on the lower north slopes of the park in the grassland areas. In the shrubby draws and brushy slopes Rufous and Calliope Hummingbird, Lazuli Bunting, Spotted and Green-tailed Towhee, and Chipping Sparrow are usually present. Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatch, Hermit Thrush, Western Tanager, and Yellow-rumped Warbler inhabit the conifer forest areas surrounding the upper half of the mountain.

O Grizzly and Orofino Gulches

These gulches are characterized by brushy creek bottoms with some cottonwoods and tall shrubs flanked by slopes covered with Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, and dry grassland. Look for Spotted and Green-tailed Towhee, Rock Wren, Warbling Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Dark-eyed Junco, Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned Warbler, Dusky Flycatcher, and Calliope and Rufous Hummingbird.

— Birding Spots Outside the Map Area —

Little Prickly Pear Creek

Take Lincoln Road 12.5 miles north and west from Helena toward Canyon Creek. At the power station just 0.2 miles before the Canyon Creek Store, turn east on Duffy Lane. Wetlands occur along Duffy Lane between Lincoln Road and the Prickly Pear canyon. Long-billed Curlew, Common Snipe, Willow Flycatcher, Common Yellowthroat and Bobolink are reliable sightings. At the junction of Duffy Lane and the canyon road, there are two possible routes: 1) turning north takes you to the Sieben Ranch and Interstate 15 along a corridor supporting diverse riparian vegetation. Common bird sightings here include swallows, Gray Catbird, Warbling Vireo, Veery,

American Redstart, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Lazuli Bunting; or 2) turning south takes you to Silver City along a dirt road bordered by grassland and sagebrush where Western Meadowlark, Sage Thrasher, and Vesper and Brewer's Sparrow can be found.

Lower Skelly Gulch BLM Area

Take Birdseye Road north and west from Helena 4.3 miles and turn left on Austin Road. Follow this dirt road 2.2 miles until you reach a small parking area on the right. This fenced area of 140 acres has riparian habitat along Skelly and Greenhorn Creeks that attracts warblers, flycatchers, Warbling Vireo, and Veery during spring and summer. Watch for Yellow-rumped Warbler and Western Tanager in stands of conifers. Upland grasslands and shrub communities usually provide viewing of a variety of raptors.

Canyon Ferry Wildlife Management Area

The 5,000-acre state-owned area at the south end of Canyon Ferry lake has a rich diversity of habitat. Dikes have created four 400 to 500-acre ponds which have some 350 small artificial islands for waterfowl nesting. Canada Goose, several species of duck, Double-Crested Cormorant, American White Pelican, California and Ring-billed Gull, Caspian Tern and Red-necked, Eared and Western Grebe nest here. The riverbottom and upland plant communities provide habitat for raptors and songbirds. Nesting species include Osprey, Bullock's Oriole, Least Flycatcher, Clay-colored and Lark Sparrow, and Western Kingbird. To reach the wildlife management area, take U.S. Hwy 12 toward Townsend. West shore access, including Pond #4, is reached from several gravel roads off U.S. Hwy 12 beginning 4 miles north of Townsend. Access to the east shore is reached by going through Townsend on U.S. Hwy 12 and turning north on Hwy 284. Ponds #1, #2, and #3 are reached by roads going west from Hwy 284: Lower Dry Gulch Road goes to Pond #1 (the one farthest north), and Lower Ray Creek Road goes to portions of Ponds #2 and #3. Going west on Delger Road and north on Canton Lane leads to a parking area and trail going to the south end of Pond #3.

