



Oregon Coordinated Aquatic Bird Monitoring:  
Description of Important Aquatic Bird Site



## Silvies River Floodplain

BCS number: 48-23

### Site description author(s)

Gerald Hammon, Volunteer, Malheur NWR  
Kate Halstead, Field Technician, Klamath Bird Observatory

### Primary contact for this site

Rick Roy, Refuge Biologist, Malheur NWR. Phone: 541-493-2612. Email: [Richard\\_Roy@fws.gov](mailto:Richard_Roy@fws.gov)

### Site location (UTM)

Datum: NAD 83, Zone: 11, Easting: 350389, Northing: 4809950.

### General description

The Silvies River floodplain is located 20 miles southeast of Burns (Harney County), draining into Malheur Lake. “The floodplain is comprised of over 100,000 acres of seasonal wetlands in private ownership” (Ivey 2000). “This region is characterized by miles of privately owned grasslands and open pasture, with some sagebrush uplands scattered throughout” (Harney Co.).

### Boundaries and ownership

*Boundaries:* Southeast of Burns, north of Malheur Lake, and generally between Frenchglen Hwy and Steens Hwy.

*Ownership:* Private. See Figure 1 for Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Burns District ownership map.

### Water levels

Silvies River Floodplain appears to be dependent on annual precipitation and snowmelt, as well as use of water for irrigation by private landowners, but more information is needed.

**Focal species use and timing**

“Spring peaks of over 300,000 Snow Geese and Ross' Geese, 120,000 ducks, and over 12,000 Sandhill Cranes have been counted on the Silvies Floodplain. These valleys are important habitats for breeding Sandhill Cranes, waterfowl and shorebirds as well... Studies conducted by the Fish and Wildlife Service during the late 1970s showed about 15,000 ducks produced from the Silvies Floodplain during wet years, and only about 1,500 ducks produced during dry years (Littlefield 1983)” (Ivey 2000).

<b>Focal Guild/Species</b>	<b>Wintering</b>	<b>Breeding</b>	<b>Migration</b>
Secretive Marsh Birds*	Present	Present	Present (Spring)
Colonial Nesting Waterbirds	Absent	Present	Present (Spring)
Ground-based Aquatic Birds	Absent	Present	Present (Spring)
Migrating Shorebirds	Absent	Present	Present (Spring)
American White Pelican	Absent	Present	Present (Spring)
Barrow’s Goldeneye	Present	Absent	Present (Spring)
Black-necked Stilt	Absent	Present	Present (Spring)
Bufflehead	Absent	Present	Present (Spring)
Dusky Canada Goose	Absent	Unknown	Present
Franklin’s Gull	Absent	Present	Present (Spring)
Greater Sandhill Crane	Absent	Present	Present
Long-billed Curlew	Absent	Present	Present
Snowy Egret	Absent	Present	Present (Spring)
Red-Necked Grebe	Absent	Absent	Absent
Upland Sandpiper	Absent	Absent	Absent
Western Snowy Plover	Absent	Absent	Absent
Yellow Rail	Absent	Absent	Absent
Eastern Kingbird	Absent	Present	Present
Bobolink	Absent	Present	Present
Burrowing Owl	Absent	Present	Present

\*The focal species for Oregon’s aquatic secretive marsh bird monitoring are PBGR, LEBI, AMBI, VIRA, SORA, YERA. In general focal species above are present from late March through November.

### Location of type 1 and 2 habitat within the site\*

<b>Guild</b>	<b>Type 1 Habitat</b>	<b>Type 2 Habitat</b>
Secretive Marsh Birds	Tall emergent vegetation	Wet meadow/open water
Ground-based Aquatic Birds	Shoreline; mowed fields	
Migrating Shorebirds	Shoreline/ponds	Riverbank
Colonial Nesters	Dense veg./trees	Open water

\*See Figure 2 for USFWS National Wetlands Inventory (2008) layer in Google Earth (2008).

### Access to Type 1 and 2 habitat and visibility/audibility of birds

All private land; multiple owners must be contacted for surveys. Visibility of both Type 1 and Type 2 from roads is good. See Figure 3 for general road map of the area (Google Map 2009).

### Past and current surveys

Not known.

### Conservation issues

“The biggest problem for wetland birds nesting on the floodplain is a shortage of summer brood water. Ranchers begin drying their meadows in early June to allow mower access for haying in late June. Mallard broods are about half grown at this time and most gadwall nests are unhatched. The remaining water available for broods is often limited to the Silvies River channels and a few deep ditches. Because of their depth and the presence of carp, these areas are poor brooding sites. Waterfowl and waterbird production on the floodplain could be enhanced by construction of large impoundments to provide brooding habitat. Provision of landowner incentives to delay dewatering and hay harvest would also lead to increased bird production” (Ivey 2000).

Other conservation issues may include:

- Private ownership
- Ephemeral water
- Changes in land use
- Increase in water usage, particularly increased mechanical sprinklers

### **Conservation measures taken, in progress, or proposed**

“Ducks Unlimited is working with two private landowners, the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service and other partners to restore 2,244 acres along the West Fork Silvies River to natural stream and wetland habitat. The land, enrolled in the Wetland Reserve Program, has mostly been leveled and ditched for agricultural purposes. Of the five miles of stream in the project site, 3.5 miles are a completely straight ditch with a dike on both sides and completely void of riparian habitat. The project proposes to excavate five miles of historical river channel and divert the river back into this restored channel. Removal of the dikes will also allow a more natural floodplain, permitting the restoration and management of over 1,000 acres of wetland habitat within the project area. Approximately 500 acres will be restored to native grassland and 2,500 willow cuttings will be used to jump-start the re-vegetation process. Proposed restoration work will benefit migratory and breeding birds, improve water quality, aid fish migration, and help control invasive carp populations” (Oregon Habitat Joint Venture, 2002).

Recommended Actions from Ivey (2000):

- Protect and restore at least 10,000 acres of wetland habitats (throughout the Harney Basin) through Wetland Reserve Program, conservation easements and cooperative efforts with private land owners.
- Work with private landowners to maintain flood irrigation practices to conserve wetland habitat and develop locally coordinated habitat management guidelines for landowners to enhance wildlife production and use on private lands.
- Enhance at least 25 miles of stream in the Silvies River and its tributaries through restoration of riparian habitats and installation of adequate fish passage and screening facilities by working with landowners through incentives and cooperative programs.

### **Potential survey methods**

*a. Description:*

*b. Selection Bias:*

*c. Measurement error and bias:*

### **Potential pilot studies**

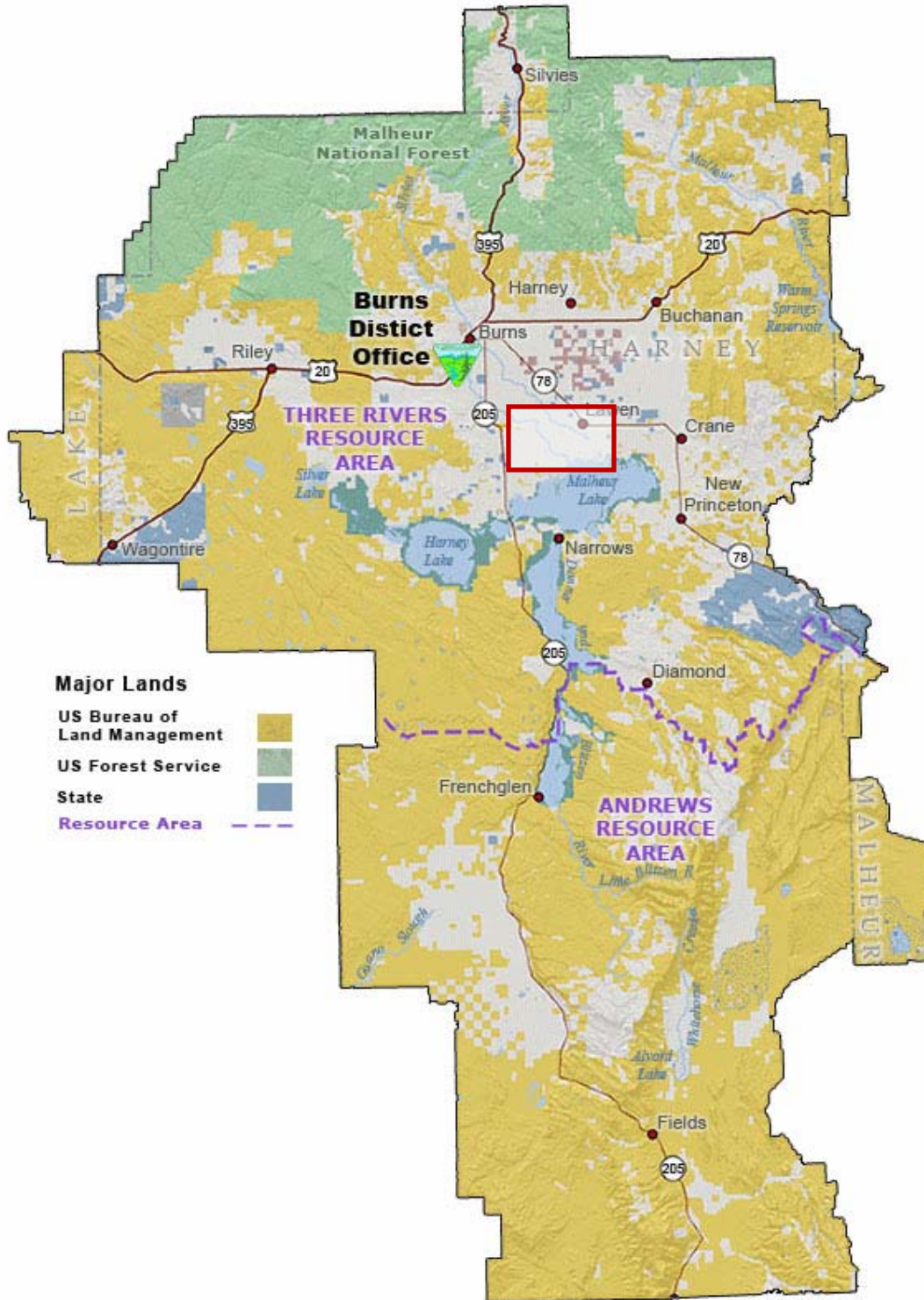
Manning and Hartley (2006) suggest that determining whether a migrating shorebird survey, a secretive marsh bird survey, and/or a colony survey would be beneficial would be valuable.

Another potential pilot study would include a water usage survey focusing on increases in irrigation for hay.

## Literature cited

- Bureau of Land Management, Burns District ownership map.  
<http://www.blm.gov/or/districts/burns/images/BurnsDetailedMap.jpg> . Accessed March 20, 2009.
- Google Earth version 4.3. 2008. Image: Silvies River Floodplain, Oregon. Accessed October 10, 2008.
- Google Map. 2009. Map of Silvies River Floodplain, Oregon.  
<http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=43.418704,-118.9044&z=11&t=h&hl=en>  
Accessed March 20, 2009.
- Harney County Chamber of Commerce. John Scharff Migratory Bird Festival: 2008 Tours. <http://www.migratorybirdfestival.com/Tours.htm>. Accessed December 4, 2008
- Ivey, GL. 2000. Oregon Closed Basin: Joint Venture Implementation Plans for Eastern Oregon", Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and Ducks Unlimited Inc., Lake Oswego , Oregon, 28 September 2000.
- Manning, Ann and Laura Hartley. March 2006. Important sites for aquatic birds in Eastern Oregon. Version 2.0
- Oregon Habitat Joint Venture. Basin & Range Projects: Silvies River. 2002.  
[http://www.ohjv.org/projects/basin\\_range.html#silvies](http://www.ohjv.org/projects/basin_range.html#silvies). Accessed December 3, 2008.
- U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). 2008. National Wetlands Inventory website. U. S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C.  
<http://www.fws.gov/wetlands/>. Accessed October 10, 2008.

**Figure 1:** BLM Burns district ownership map. The red box indicates the Silvies River Floodplain.





**Figure 2:** USFWS National Wetlands Inventory (2008) layer in Google Earth (2008).

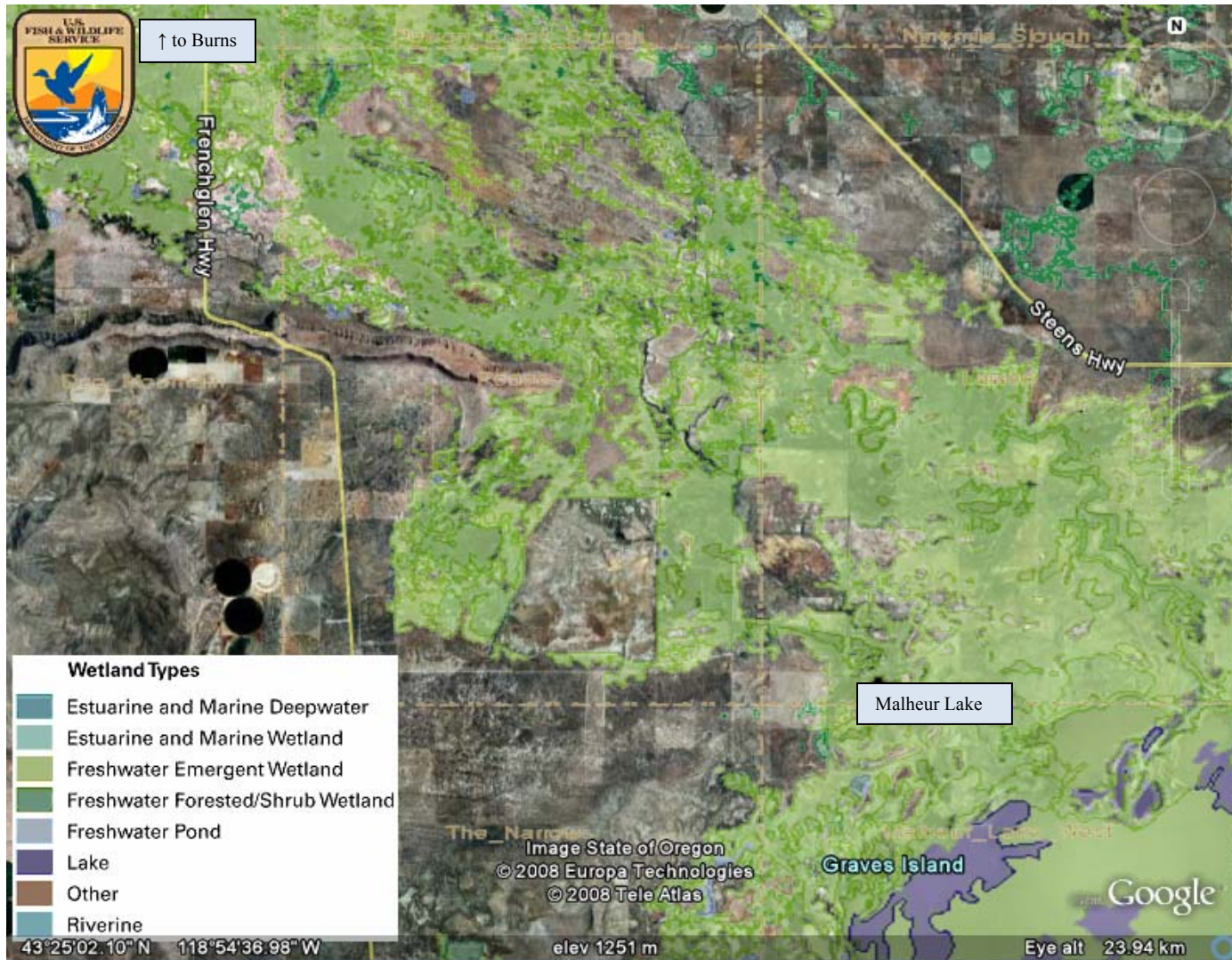


Figure 3: Google Map (2009) of Silvies River Floodplain.

