

# *Saving the Platte River for Wildlife and People*

The Platte River Basin is one of North America's great wildlife resources. From its ice-cold trout streams high in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and Wyoming, to its wide, braided channels that host one of the world's great wildlife spectacles each spring in central Nebraska, the Platte River attracts wildlife enthusiasts from all over the world.

## Platte River: The Great Wildlife Spectacle

### Wildlife in the Basin

High in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and Wyoming are the headwaters of the South Platte and North Platte Rivers. National Forests and Rocky Mountain National Park protect gold medal trout streams, and provide habitat for elk, deer, beaver, bighorn sheep and other high-country wildlife.

Downstream, the section of the North Platte River known as the "Miracle Mile" boasts some of the best fishing on the planet. Fifteen major reservoirs throughout the Platte Basin provide fishing, boating, and recreation for millions of visitors every year.

In the arid parts of Colorado, Wyoming and western Nebraska, the river is an oasis of water for wildlife through the long, hot summers. Pronghorn, mule deer, elk, and jackrabbits are scattered across the shortgrass prairie, along with remnant populations of prairie dogs, burrowing owl, and mountain plovers.



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Each year vast numbers of ducks, geese, and cranes (like these sandhill cranes) migrate to and fly over the Platte.

### The Great Wildlife Spectacle

In the spring, the wide, open, sandy channels of the Central Platte and nearby wetlands and wet meadows provide ideal habitat for the massive annual migration of birds through the Central

Flyway. Ten million ducks and geese, a half-million sandhill cranes, and some 300 species of birds use the central Platte and Rainwater Basin wetlands.

For wildlife, the central Platte is a critical stopover, providing food and rest for the long journey north. For people, the spring migration is one of the top wildlife spectacles in the world. In the fall, hunters

come from all over the country to hunt ducks and geese winging their way south.

**"To ensure that sandhill cranes continue to thrive, we must work harder than ever to preserve the Platte River and all the last wild places...The river must not die. The river must be restored. It is incumbent on people today."**

**— Jane Goodall,  
renowned naturalist**

### Rare Species and the Platte

Despite the impact of development, the Platte continues to provide crucial habitat for a number of rare species. Bald eagles winter along the Platte, the western prairie fringed orchid grows in nearby wet meadows, and river otters have been restored to several reaches of the river. A variety of grassland birds use remnant prairies throughout the basin.

Four threatened or endangered species are the subject of the Platte River Cooperative Agreement, a joint effort between Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming and the U.S. Department of Interior. Under the Agreement, state and federal officials, water users and conservation groups are developing a basin-wide species recovery plan designed to improve the plight of the whooping crane, piping plover, interior least tern and pallid sturgeon. That plan could also improve habitat for other wildlife.



For More Information, visit [www.nwf.org/platte](http://www.nwf.org/platte)

## Whooping Crane

Standing more than five feet tall, the whooping crane is North America's tallest bird and among its rarest. In the spring, whooping cranes migrate 2500 miles between their wintering grounds along the Texas Gulf Coast to breeding grounds in northern Canada, often stopping along the central Platte to rest. Whooping cranes roost at night in the Platte's wide, shallow



waters, which provide some protection from predators. During the day, they forage in wetlands and cornfields along the river, hunting for worms and insects, which provide high-protein food.

## Pallid Sturgeon

The pallid sturgeon lives in the Platte River near Plattsmouth, where the Platte empties into the Missouri River. A large fish that can weigh up to 85 pounds, the pallid sturgeon is a bottom-dweller that eats small fish and insects.



Once a common catch of fishermen, the long-lived pallid sturgeon is now extremely rare.

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## Interior Least Tern and Piping Plover

The least tern evolved nesting on sandbars in major river systems with wide, open channels, eating small fish from the river. Least terns winter on coastal beaches in Central and South America. They defend their nests by dive-bombing intruders.

The piping plover is a small shorebird. Like least terns, piping plovers evolved nesting on sandbars, but plovers eat insects and other invertebrates that live in and near shallow water. When threatened, adult plovers use a broken wing act to lead predators away from their nests. They winter along the Texas Gulf Coast.



Many species of birds – including the endangered **interior least tern** (above) and the threatened **piping plover** (left) – rely on the Platte as a vital stopping and nesting ground.

Historically, the Platte's high spring flows scoured vegetation and built sandbars in the river's mile-wide channels. Those sandbars, protected from all but the highest flood, provided ideal nesting sites for terns and plovers

## Protecting Platte River Wildlife

A century and a half of development has brought major change to the Platte Basin. Many species were nearly wiped out by early hunters and trappers. Millions of acres of prairie were plowed under for cropland, and irrigation canals, dams and water projects followed to provide water for thirsty crops and growing cities.

Those changes have left their mark on wildlife and its habitat. A strong recovery program under the Platte River Cooperative Agreement could be a good first step toward undoing some of the damage.

### What You Can Do

For more information on the Platte River, and ways you can help protect Platte River wildlife, visit the National Wildlife Federation's web site,  
[www.nwf.org/platte](http://www.nwf.org/platte).