

Saving the Platte River for Wildlife and People

From its world-class trout streams high in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and Wyoming to its wide, braided channels that boast one of the world's great wildlife spectacles each spring in central Nebraska, the Platte River is a ribbon of life through America's Great Plains. But overuse of water is destroying much of the Platte's precious wildlife habitat. A practical and constructive recovery plan created through the Platte River Cooperative Agreement could give Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming and the Department of the Interior the chance to keep the Platte alive.

The Platte River: A Ribbon of Life

Wildlife in the Platte Basin

The Platte River begins high in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and Wyoming, where National Forests guard gold-medal trout streams and habitat for high-country wildlife.

Meandering across the arid Great Plains of Colorado,

Wyoming and western Nebraska, the Platte River is an oasis for wildlife during the long, hot summers. Pronghorns, mule deer and jackrabbits live in the Platte Valley, as do remnant populations of prairie dogs, burrowing owls and mountain plovers.

Each spring, the skies over the central Platte and its surrounding wetlands darken as ten million ducks and geese, half a million sandhill cranes and many other species of birds fly in to rest during their long trek through the Central Flyway. The concentration of birds and the diversity of species - over 300 - make the Platte stopover one of the world's great wildlife spectacles.



Change in the Basin

Although the Platte River remains a unique wildlife resource, decades of development have dramatically compromised the quality and quantity of its habitat.

Pioneers described the Platte River as a mile wide and a foot deep. The river's broad, unvegetated channels once stretched for miles, giving migratory birds protection from predators. The Platte's sandbars were an important nesting ground for shorebirds.

In time, settlers would plow millions of acres of prairie and drain vast wetlands in and around the Platte. Later, irrigation canals, dams and water projects would be built to provide water for thirsty crops and growing cities. The 1900s would see the drilling of thousands of wells hydrologically connected to the Platte, further parching the river.

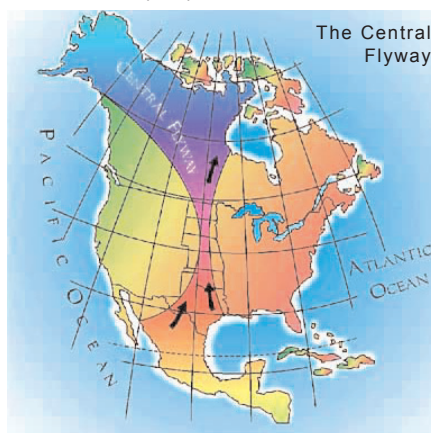


U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Whooping cranes

Today, Platte River wells and surface water projects irrigate millions of acres of farm land. More than three million people get their drinking water largely from the Platte or nearby wells.

As a result, water flow in the central Platte has fallen by two-thirds. The river has narrowed in many places to one-tenth of its historic width. Starved of the scouring sediments the water once carried, many of the river's open, sandy channels are now overgrown with vegetation.



University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service



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Rare Species Along the Platte

Despite the impact of development, the Platte continues to provide crucial habitat for a number of species, including four that are threatened or endangered.

The **whooping crane**, North America's tallest bird and one of its rarest, migrates through the central

Platte on its way from wintering grounds along the Texas Gulf Coast to nesting grounds in Canada. The **interior least tern** and the **piping plover** nest along the Platte's sandbars.

The **pallid sturgeon** uses the river near Plattsmouth, where the Platte empties into the Missouri River.



Piping plover

An Economic Resource

Besides its natural value, a wildlife-sustaining Platte River carries economic value. A recent EPA study found that Platte birdwatching generates between \$25 million and \$53 million annually for Nebraska in tourism. With birdwatching one of the fastest-growing outdoor recreational activities in the United States, that figure is likely to increase in the future.

The Platte River Cooperative Agreement

Restoring and protecting what is left of the Platte's habitat demands a long-term, cooperative plan. The Platte River Cooperative Agreement represents an unprecedented opportunity to enact such a plan. A joint effort between Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming and the Department of Interior, the agreement has culminated in the examination of proposed Platte recovery programs that could:

- Protect and restore 10,000 acres of habitat along the central Platte;
- Provide water to maintain critical river flows that benefit wildlife;
- Ensure that future water development does not further harm critical river flows; and
- Implement a research and monitoring program for Platte wildlife habitat.

What You Can Do

The Platte River recovery plan was supposed to be completed by December 2000. Missed deadlines have pushed the new completion date to December 2005. In the coming months, the specifics of this recovery plan will be proposed and scrutinized.

You can help ensure that a good recovery program



for the Platte River is implemented by visiting www.nwf.org/platte to send an electronic comment letter to decision-makers. We need your help to generate as many of these comment letters as possible so please share this website with friends.

The Platte River Cooperative Agreement provides an unprecedented opportunity to protect and to begin to restore what is left of the central Platte's wildlife habitat.

Duane Hovorka, Nebraska Wildlife Federation



Cranes fly over the Platte in huge flocks in March.

Duane Hovorka, Nebraska Wildlife Federation



A wet meadow along the Platte River.

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