
The Continuation of an Innovative and Collaborative Program

Colorado's Role in the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program

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The [Platte River Recovery Implementation Program](#) is a story of success and collaboration – and Colorado has played a major role in the Program's creation and ongoing efforts. Now, it is time to continue the accomplished work of this Program for another 13 years.

The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program

For decades, water in the South Platte Basin has supported Colorado's booming economic growth. In the 1990s, an increasing number of water projects required compliance with the Endangered Species Act to replace depletions. This prompted Colorado, its water users, and other partners in Wyoming and Nebraska to pursue a programmatic approach to compliance. The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program provided the answer. The Program is a partnership that brings regional interests together to support both species recovery and economic growth.

The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program was established in 2007 with an agreement signed between the governors of Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, and the Secretary of Interior. The Program supports the recovery of four threatened and endangered species by improving and maintaining habitat in the Platte River in Nebraska. The target species are the whooping crane, piping plover, interior least tern, and the pallid sturgeon.

A Programmatic Approach to Species Recovery and Water Development

The Program embodies the goals of Colorado's Water Plan by simultaneously supporting a productive economy and a strong environment. The Program is vital for allowing water users to continue to pursue water projects in Colorado's growing North and South Platte Basins, where the Program provides Endangered Species Act compliance for existing and new water-related activities.

These remarkable benefits to Colorado occur through a programmatic approach to environmental permitting which allows for streamlined Section 7 Endangered Species Act consultations for Program participants. Colorado has successfully permitted its projects using this approach for the past 13 years. In fact, Colorado sees the most benefits from this approach – 147 out of the 188 total Program-affiliated consultations took place in Colorado. This has decreased the regulatory burden for water developers in the booming Front Range corridor as well as small scale agricultural water users in Colorado's productive northeastern farming community.

Target Species

The whooping crane, piping plover, interior least tern, and the pallid sturgeon all utilize habitat in the Platte River in Nebraska. Over a decade of collaboration and conservation through the Program has supported recovery. As a result, the species now show improved indications of breeding in many cases.

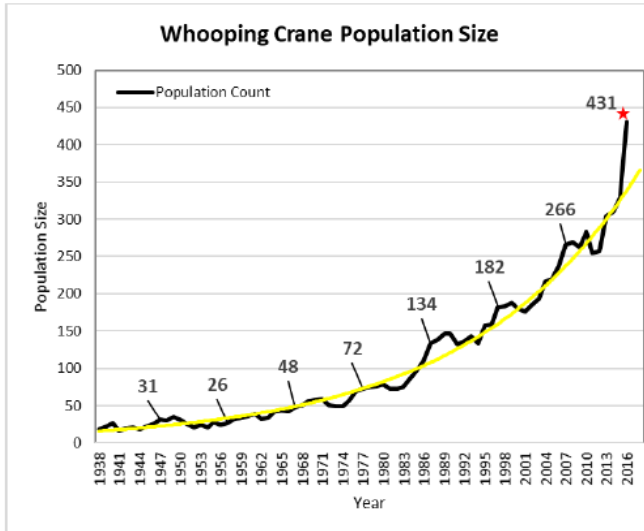


Figure: The number of whooping cranes in the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population (the population that stops in the Central Platte) has increased since 1941. Photo credit: Platte River Recovery Implementation Program.

[Whooping cranes](#) use Program habitat as a stop-over during their seasonal migration. In 1941, the once-prevalent species had declined to only 16 individuals in the migratory population and was listed as endangered in 1967. The current population is around 400 individuals, of which a record 120 were observed in Program-associated habitat areas in spring 2018.

Figures: Top right: Endangered whooping crane. Bottom right: Endangered interior least tern. Bottom left: Threatened piping plover. Photo credit: Platte River Recovery Implementation Program.



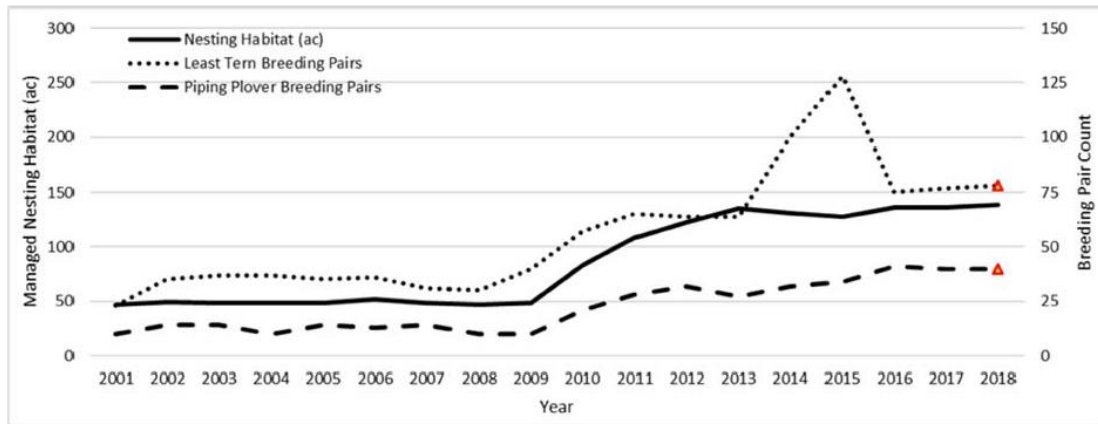


Figure: The number of plover and tern breeding pairs have increased since the inception of the Program in 2007. Photo credit: Platte River Recovery Implementation Program.

[Piping plovers](#) nest along the Central Platte. The northern Great Plains population of piping plovers was listed as threatened in 1986. Reproductive success along the Central Platte River depends greatly on nesting habitats and protection of nesting birds.

[Interior least terns](#) also nest along the Platte. The interior least tern was federally listed as endangered in 1985. A recent five-year review from the US Fish and Wildlife Service recommends delisting the interior least tern due to positive indicators of recovery.



[Pallid sturgeon](#) populations rapidly declined during the late 20th century and the species was listed as endangered in 1990. In Nebraska, a small number of pallid sturgeons have been captured along the lower reaches of the Platte River.

Figure: The endangered pallid sturgeon. Photo credit: Platte River Recovery Implementation Program.

Program Milestones

The Program is a collaboration in which the cost – in terms of cash, water, and land – is shared between the federal government and the states. The overarching goal of the Program is to utilize federal- and state-provided land, water, and scientific monitoring and research to secure defined benefits for the target species and their habitats in the Central Platte River.

The milestones for the 13 years of the Program included initial state water projects and state and federal depletion plans focused on attaining the water objective of retiming and improving flows to reduce target flow shortages by an average of 130,000-150,000 acre-feet per year; and a land milestone of protecting and maintaining 10,000 acres of habitat in Nebraska.

The Program has met 8 of 10 milestones in the 13 years. Two of the Program water milestones have not been met and will not be met by the end of 2019. Thus, Program partners are pursuing an extension of the Program for another 13 years.

Continuation of the Program for Another 13 Years

The Program operates in increments to accomplish milestones related to water and land objectives. The First Increment is from 2007 to 2019. The Program is congressionally-authorized through September 2020. The Program partners want to achieve all of the Program milestones and have reached an agreed-upon approach to extend the program for another 13 years (from 2020-2032).

Colorado has contributed significantly to the Program during the First Increment through time, financial resources, and retiming of water for habitat benefits through operation of recharge ponds at the Tamarack State Wildlife Area. During the first 13 years of the Program, Colorado has contributed \$24 million to the Program. In the upcoming 13 years, Colorado will continue to financially support the Program. Colorado will not have additional water obligations, but will continue its commitment to water retiming operations at the Tamarack State Wildlife Area. The Program will seek to meet the water objectives set in the First Increment by developing water projects near the species' habitat. The extension will provide greater flexibility in meeting those objectives, committing partners to provide up to 120,000 acre-feet of water to reduce shortages to target flows while conducting additional research to determine whether the additional 10,000 acre-feet is justified. The Program will also seek to acquire an additional 1,500 acres of habitat.

Securing congressional reauthorization and state funding for the Program is a top priority for the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB). The CWCB and Program partners have made tremendous progress towards extending the Program for another 13 years. The Program partners have completed a specific plan for the Program extension, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has completed NEPA compliance on that plan with a Finding of No Significant Impact for the extension, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has updated its Endangered Species Act Biological Opinion to cover the extension.

The CWCB and Program partners are committed to initiating the congressional reauthorization early this year. Colorado is confident that the success of this Program will speak for itself during the congressional reauthorization process.

About the author: Jojo La serves as the CWCB's Endangered Species Policy Specialist and manages the CWCB's participation in all interstate and federal endangered species recovery programs. In this role, she is the CWCB's primary representative to the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program where she has focused on congressional reauthorization, funding, and technical aspects of the Program. She also serves as the primary representative to the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program. Other duties include participating in the San Juan River Recovery Program and the Upper Colorado River Wild and Scenic Stakeholder Group.