

CROWN
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CONTINENT
and the
GREATER
YELLOWSTONE

MAGAZINE

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Winter/Spring 2018

Montana is beckoning me...

Mia McPherson



Spring 2017

As the weather warms up, I admit that I'm itching to hit the road to go camping, to get away from the city, the news, and to immerse myself in natural surroundings.

One of my favorite avian photography locations is Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in the Centennial Valley of southwestern Montana, which was established in 1933 to help save and restore trumpeter swans.

There are some that say the state can better care for these lands. I'd call them fools, but we humans are all distant cousins, so I'll tame that down a bit and call them misled instead... intentionally and deliberately misled.

I eagerly await returning to this wild and lovely place. It is yet another location where I feel at "home." As crazy as it may sound, every time I visit the state of Montana I feel taller. I can't explain why I feel that way, I just do. Perhaps it is because of the "Big Sky" Montana is so well known for. I won't spend much time trying to figure that out while I am here though, because I'd much rather use my time to savor and photograph the incredible beauty found within and outside of the Refuge.

Pronghorn lead the way to Red Rock Lakes. NWR



From I-15 at the tiny town of Monida, you enter the Centennial Valley. Getting to the Refuge can be quite an adventure when the 29-mile gravel road is dry; but when it has rained, the road can be nerve wracking, slippery, and will seem twice as long.



For flora photographers, springtime is great: lupines are just one of the flowers that seem abundant. At the Lower Lake Campground, I was delighted to see shooting star flowers in large numbers, sunny dandelions' heads, and more.

Spring comes later here than it does in my home state of Utah. It's June, the Refuge is a riot of color from wildflowers, the grasses form lush carpets of green that encroach on the shorelines of the lakes, and the willows must be tasty, as you can observe moose browsing along the creeks.



This is when the young of many animals can be seen. One of my favorites is the pronghorns, which appear to be delicate, though they can run like the wind to keep up with the adults and to escape predators.





There are times when I feel that the sunset paints the sky with vibrant colors; and, although the earth seems muted at twilight, it still anchors me.

A female short-eared owl has her nest under the sagebrush near the Lower Lake Campground. The sagebrush camouflages her chicks well.



This male short-eared owl hunted for voles to feed the chicks. Flying onto a perch with the food grasped in his talons, he transferred the prey to his beak, and flew to the nest to hand it off to the female.

In the 1930s, trumpeter swans were thought to be extinct due to overharvesting for food, the use of their skins for ladies powder puffs, and their feathers for use in millinery. These huge birds nearly went the way of the passenger pigeon, Carolina parakeet, and the dodo.



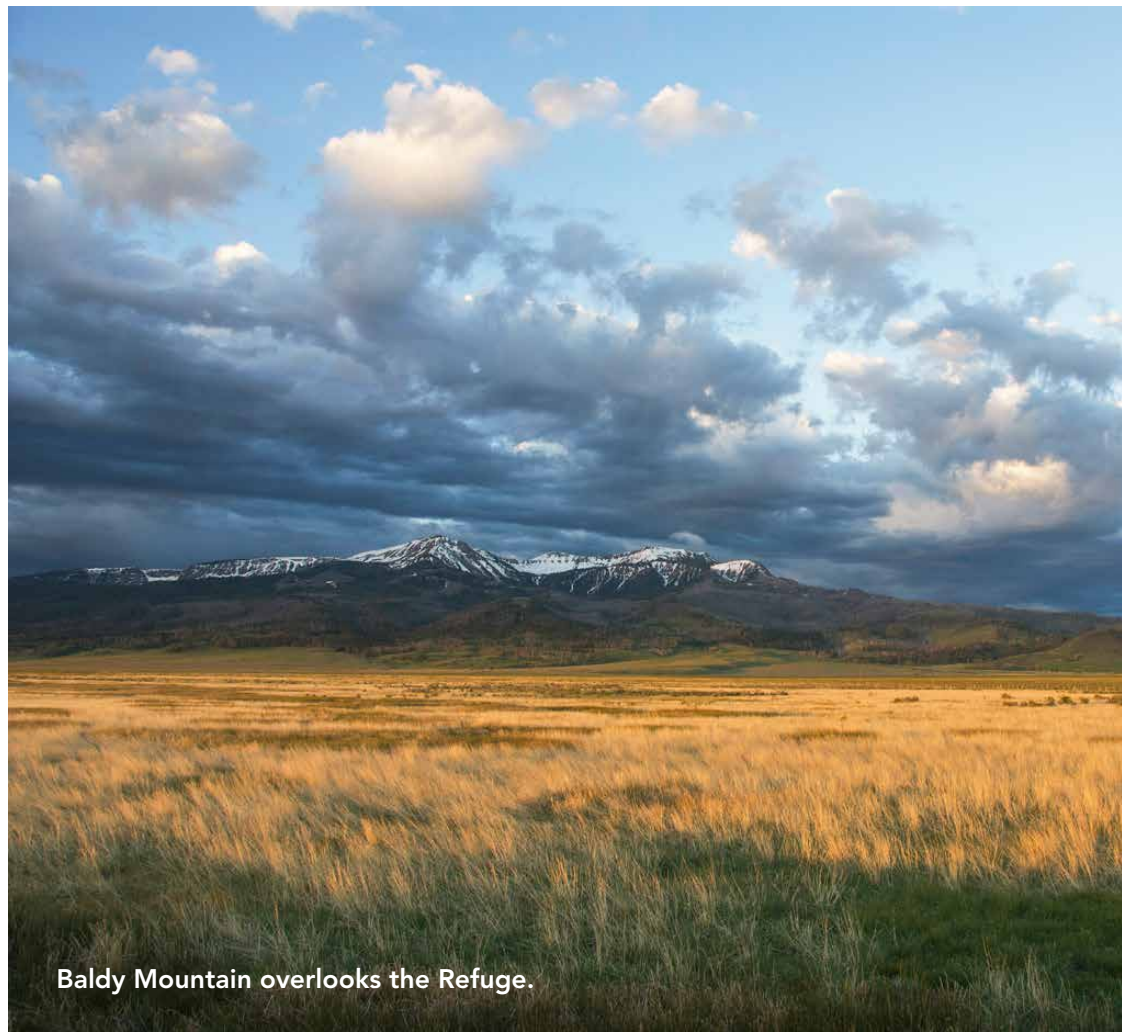
From the Lower Lake Campground to the Refuge headquarters, I look for mountain bluebirds. They are very numerous, but challenging to photograph because they are skittish.



Fall 2017

Mornings are made even more spectacular by the sounds of calling coyotes. There may be people who don't like that sound, but I love it.

The sight of a western tanager will always put a smile on my face, and catching a glimpse of American kestrels hovering overhead in search of prey, or perhaps hearing the cry of a bald or golden eagle, or spotting red-tailed hawks soaring directly above will take my breath away.





On the narrow road to MacDonald Pond, chipmunks scurry alongside, sit on lichen-covered rocks, and peer out from behind sagebrush leaves. You might see a Swainson's hawk gazing over the valley floor.



I am a part of the wild things. Even though my outsides might be adorned with the trappings of civilization, my heartbeat still tells me I am wild.



American avocets in a driving rain.

The air is crisp, everything is changing color, and the Aspen leaves are turning golden. As I went to sleep last night I could see the stars twinkling in the dark velvety sky.

Yesterday was bright and sunny and after hearing this white-crowned sparrow singing, I felt like breaking out in song too.



I almost always hear cedar waxwings before I see them, which isn't to say they are loud; in fact their calls are more of a soft whistle.

If you have never been to Red Rock Lakes NWR and decide to go, whether you are a photographer, a bird watcher, or a nature lover, you will lose a bit of your heart to this incredibly wonderful place. I know... I did.

Mia

All photos by Mia McPherson of onthewingphotography.com

Mia McPherson is a nature lover, wildlife watcher and bird photographer. Self-taught, she prefers to leave her images as close as possible to what they looked like as created, using only minimal contrast, saturation, levels adjustments, and sharpening. She doesn't believe in baiting or calling and prefers photographing "birds doing what birds do and where they want to do it."

We recommend that you visit Mia's blog onthewingphotography.com for more photos, quotes, and photography tips for shooting wildlife.