

December 2012

Birding Observer



Five Valleys Audubon Society, a Chapter of the National Audubon Society

Calendar

- **Sunday, December 2nd:** All-day field trip to the Mission Valley led by Jim Brown. Meet in the middle of the UM field house parking lot at 8am or at the Cenex Gas Station in Ronan at 9am.
- **Monday, December 3rd:** Betsy Griffing will host the December board meeting at her office. The address is Axilon Law Group, 257 West Front Street, Suite B, Missoula, MT.
- **Monday, December 10th:** Montana Audubon's Amy Cilimburg will discuss boreal forest birds at the December program meeting.
- **Saturday, December 15th:** Submission deadline for the January edition of the *Birding Observer*.
- **Saturday, December 15th:** Christmas Bird Count. Please see details on page 3.

Board Update:

We are seeking volunteers for the following positions: Secretary, Director, and Membership Promotion Chair. Please contact Pat Little, if you are interested.



Boreal chickadee

Voices from the North: Boreal Forest Birds, Energy, and Us

Just north of Montana lies the rich boreal forest, home to a plethora of birds and a critical forest in so many ways. What Montana birds also rely on these lands to the north? What are the key threats and why do they matter to us? How is the boreal forest linked to the raptors that were featured at the November Audubon meeting? Join Montana Audubon's Amy Cilimburg on Monday, December 10 for a slide show presentation that highlights not just answers to these questions, but the voices of the people and the birds. We will meet at the usual place and time: the Gallagher Business Building, room L14 (lower level), on the University of Montana campus at 7:30 p.m.

The story of birds and wildlife impacted by energy development here in Montana is connected to the boreal forest, and we'll circle around to our state with voices from the east and west. We won't leave the talk in despair, however. Much can be done locally for bird conservation with our own voices — to create a better future for all.

Amy Cilimburg is the Director of Bird Conservation and Climate Policy for Montana Audubon, where she works to educate and inspire action around issues related to climate change, birds, wildlife, and energy both here in Montana and nationally. Amy spearheads the Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program in Montana and collaborates with others to protect Montana's birds and their habitat. Prior to coming to Audubon, Amy was the Assistant Director of the University of Montana's Avian Science Center. She has an M.S. in Wildlife Biology from the University of Montana. She lives and strives to reduce her carbon footprint in Missoula with her husband and daughter.

Peeps from the Board

by Lynn Tennefoss



Northern pygmy owl
Photo by National Park Service

A couple of days ago, from the second story window of our office at Fort Missoula, my co-worker Rebecca spotted a very upset flock of chickadees in a nearby conifer. Looking more closely, she saw they were mobbing what looked like a small raptor. Going downstairs to the back door for a closer look, we saw instead that it was a beautiful Northern Pygmy

Owl, perched about 15 feet off the ground and easily visible through a small opening in the branches. Looking uncomfortable with all the attention from the mob of small passerines, it turned its head 180 degrees away from us, allowing us to see the small two black “eye spots” on the back of the head of this small raptor. Shortly thereafter, it flew away to a distant screen of tall cottonwoods, followed by complaining chickadees.

Though broadly distributed throughout western North America, Northern Pygmy Owls are one of the least studied of the owl species in North America. Secretive during the breeding season, they nest in tree cavities with a preference for mixed spruce and fir forests though can also be found in cottonwood bottomlands, aspen stands and mixed pine forests.

Northern Pygmy Owls are a harbinger of winter in Missoula. Starting in early November, they are more readily seen at lower altitudes and are often attracted to urban backyards. A diurnal species, their reputation as fierce predators results in large part from the habitat of frequenting feeders to prey on small birds, though they also eat small mammals. If you put out seed during the winter, keep your eyes open for a small, plump owl, about six inches long, with striking yellow eyes, a round head and grey-brown plumage dotted with small white spots on the head, nape and mantle and down the sides of the wings. The distinguishing marks of two black ovals on the back of the head can resemble a false face. Relatively slow to fly around humans, you may see one perched in nearby trees or bushes, or overhead on telephone lines. If you’d like to learn more, visit

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Pygmy_Owl for details on the life history and photos of this beautiful owl. Birders frequently learn to mimic their song as it can be an instant draw of small birds on the alert for this diminutive predator.

As I left the office at dusk that day, a loudly calling Hairy Woodpecker caught my ear. Sure enough, it was signaling the Northern Pygmy Owl’s return, perched again about 15 feet up but this time in a cottonwood over the road. Passing underneath and using my car as a blind, I was able to observe it closely for a few minutes and to hear its “toot-like” song before it again flew off with an unmistakable chunky, broad-winged and relatively long-tailed silhouette against a pink sky. This sighting was a great reminder of how lucky we are to live in Missoula, where there are still enough open spaces and native species to grant us the privilege of seeing very special birds!

Field Trips by Larry Weeks

Saturday, November 3, 2010: Terry Toppins and myself lead the field trip at Maclay Flat. While we were getting organized in the parking lot, Terry noticed a small group of people with some odd-looking equipment. He inquired and found out it was a bird research project being carried out by UM student Nora Carlson. Nora then explained her research project. She was studying red-breasted nuthatches’ response to predator threats. Their apparatus included a pair of turkey pans mounted on a coat rack that housed the threat such as a great horned owl. Once they encountered a flock of red-breasted nuthatches in the field, the turkey pans would be released, expose the threat and then record their response. Following this discussion, the group headed towards the boat ramp where we located 2 bald eagles and a red-tailed hawk sitting in some Douglas fir trees on the hillside. As we progressed upstream, we had belted kingfisher, great blue heron, 3 western grebes, and a ruddy duck. I saw a ruby-crowned kinglet with a flock of chickadees but unfortunately, I was not able to get the kinglet to reappear for the rest of the group. We hiked the long trail and did manage to find all 3 nuthatches and 3 different woodpeckers. There were 19 people on the trip and had 19 species.

The Land of the Sandhill Cranes

By Judy Bungarz



In Southeast Arizona there is a wonderland called Sulphur Springs Valley. It lies between the Chiricahua and Dragoon Mountains, and it's a treasure for bird enthusiasts. The sleepy little town of Wilcox is situated in the center of this valley that serves as headquarters for the Wings

Over Wilcox Bird Festival held in mid January every year. This is truly a snowbird haven as a great variety of avian species winter in the area.

There are great flocks of lark buntings in their winter colors, yellow eyed juncos in the Chiricahua Mountains where the infamous Apache warrior Geronimo hid from the U. S. Army for several years. A wide variety of raptors can be found in the open spaces where red tailed hawks, Harris's hawks, kestrels, prairie falcons, sharp-shinned hawks, ferruginous hawks, merlins, and both bald and golden eagles abound in great numbers. However, the greatest attraction is the sandhill cranes.

As dawn begins to break you can view great flocks in their V formation flying out to their feeding grounds calling out to each other along the way as their flight path fills the sky. The cranes begin to arrive in Arizona in October and stay until late February. They fly from roosting areas to feeding areas and feed for about three hours then fly to loafing places that may be the roost, wetland areas, fallow fields or grasslands. At this time of the year they feed mostly on grain left in fields after harvest. The adult greater sandhill crane weighs from 11 to 13 pounds. The Arizona record is 15 pounds. The lesser crane weighs from 6 to 7 pounds.

There are two populations of cranes in the Sulphur Valley, the Rocky Mountain (RMP) and the Mid-Continent (M-C). The RMP is the greater subspecies, *Grus Canadensis tabida*, whose nesting area centers around Grays Lake NWR in Idaho. The M-C includes three subspecies; the lesser *Grus Canadensis*, the Canadian *Grus Canadensis rowani* and the greater *Grus Canadensis tabida*. The M-C population nesting range

includes central and northern Canada, Alaska and northeaster Siberia. The wintering crane here are estimated to have a population of around 30,000. A map shows the winter range around southeastern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico and an area south of this going into Mexico. The summer range for the RMP is shown covering southeastern Idaho, western Wyoming and southwestern, western and central Montana. Winter range for the M-C covers almost all of Texas, the very south of New Mexico, the tip of southeastern Arizona and a great part of Mexico to the south. (Arizona Fish and Game Department)

There are areas around Wilcox, where one can watch the cranes in action. The most convenient places are in the corn fields near Wilcox Playa. It is a great sight to see them go to their roosting places around sunset. The V formations are intact and then they set their wings to descend around ponds that have high dry grasses for them to settle into. There is again much calling back and forth, probably communicating which is the best spot to land, or saying "that's my spot you're in". These are such stately graceful birds in flight and on the ground that it is a pleasure to watch them in their natural surroundings.

Missoula Christmas Bird Count by Larry Weeks

The Missoula Christmas Bird Count will be held on Saturday, December 15, 2012. If you would like to participate in the field count or are interested in being a feeder watcher, contact Larry Weeks at 549-5632 or bwsgenea@onlinemt.com. The Count will end with a potluck dinner at the home of Ruth & Russ Royter, 520 Highland Park Dr. (telephone # 728-7984). Dinner will commence at 6:30 PM. Bring your favorite potluck dish, or A-L, bring a salad or dessert, and M-Z, a hot dish. After the potluck, we will tabulate the results from the field count.



With the 2013 Montana Legislature starting in January, many important issues impacting wildlife, wildlife habitat, and our environment are at stake. The passionate and reasoned voices of Auduboners across the state can make such a difference.

We anticipate that most of our work at Legislature will be defensive. Our priorities are:

- **Fighting for Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat** by supporting wildlife program budgets—and fighting legislation that prohibits the purchase of any new public land, including for wildlife habitat.
- **Advocating for Climate Change Solutions** by ensuring that Montana's energy development remains as wildlife-friendly as possible—and that the state continues to make progress on energy efficiency, renewable energy, and other climate change solutions.
- **Defending our Environmental Laws**, including the Montana Environmental Policy Act (which requires a review of environmental impacts before they developing new mines, large subdivisions, oil and gas wells, timber sales, etc.), land use laws designed to regulate uncontrolled development (from subdivisions to gravel pits), and laws that protect our clean air and water.

Please lend your voice to help Audubon in Helena! You can do this by signing up for our action alert program at the Audubon chapter meeting or at www.mtaudubon.org.

We limit the use of our action alert program to the most critical times! And if you are not sure if you are signed up, just sign up again—we make sure that duplicate email addresses are weeded out.

Bird Synonym Quiz - courtesy of Professor Avian Guano

Can you unravel these synonyms and figure out the names of these 20 birds? They are all North American species. Answers will be in the January newsletter.

1. Conventional maniac
2. Girded angling monarch
3. Yankee ditch-digger
4. Decoy
5. Getting venison
6. Larger jaundiced lower limb
7. Rosy gathers-no-moss
8. Scarlet rope kink
9. Walnut rooster
10. Weeping pacifist



11. Saffron-nosed fruitcake
12. Generic nocturnal hustler
13. Fast stovepipe
14. Flippant demon
15. Livestock shed eater
16. Sunburned acorn brooder
17. Ashen avian tabby
18. Bejeweled little monarch
19. Hungarian paraffin airfoil
20. Country-western singer

I stopped believing in Santa Claus when I was six. Mother took me to see him in a department store, and he asked for my autograph. ~ Shirley Temple

Christmas is like a day at the office. You do all the work and the fat guy in the suit gets all the credit. ~ unknown

Welcome New Members:

Doug Bonham
Dan Crockett
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Ryan Marchand
Jamie Rogers
Clifford A. Smith
H. Westenfelder

Betty Brackney
Jerry Dirnberger
Allison Kupar
Peter Metcalf
Anne M. Shaw
Lauren Sullivan



GO GREEN and SAVE



Want to help Five Valleys Audubon Society save money, paper and volunteer's time? Please consider viewing your **Birding Observer** newsletter online. In addition your online copy will have 'color' content and you will receive your newsletter much earlier than the mailed hard copy!

If you can **Go Green** and wish to receive your **Birding Observer** only via email, just send us a request with your name to Vick Applegate at k7vk@arrl.net. You can also always find your current newsletter on the Five Valleys Audubon Society's website at: <http://www.fvamisoula.org/>. Thanks!

Join Five Valleys Audubon Society

Please enroll me as a Chapter member of the Five Valleys Audubon Society. I will receive the *Birding Observer* and may participate in all local Chapter activities. I understand that my dues remain entirely with the Chapter.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

\$15 is enclosed for Chapter-only membership

An additional sum of \$ _____ is also included to support Chapter activities.

Please make check payable to the Five Valleys Audubon Society and mail to: Five Valleys Audubon Society, PO Box 8425, Missoula, MT 59807.

Join National Audubon Society & Five Valleys Audubon Society

Please enroll me as a member of the National Audubon Society and my local Chapter. I will receive the *Audubon* magazine and the *Birding Observer*, as well as participate in all local Chapter activities. I understand that my dues are shared between NAS and my local Chapter.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

\$20 for a one-year membership for an individual or family

Please make the check payable to National Audubon Society and mail to: National Audubon Society, Membership Data Center, PO Box 422250, Palm Coast, FL 32142-2250. **C2Z N53 0Z**

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