

# December 2013

## Birding Observer



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

### Calendar

- **Monday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 7pm:** Betsy Griffing will host the October board meeting at her office. The address is Axilon Law Group, 257 W Front St, Suite B in downtown Missoula.
- **Sunday December 8<sup>th</sup>:** Full day field trip to the Mission Valley led by Jim Brown. Meet in the middle of the Adams Center parking lot at the UofM for departure at 8:00am or at the Cenex Station on the south end of Ronan at 9:00am. Dress warmly and bring your lunch.
- **Monday, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 7:30pm:** Past FVAS President, Paul Loehnen will present on wildlife of Madagascar at our December meeting.
- **Saturday, December 14<sup>th</sup>:** The Missoula Christmas Bird Count will be held on Saturday, December 14, 2013. 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@centric.net](mailto:bwsgenea@centric.net). 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 of the field count.
- **Sunday, December 15<sup>th</sup>:** Submission deadline for the January edition of the *Birding Observer*.

Montana Audubon's 2014 Bird Festival is coming to the spectacular Gallatin Valley! With their partner, Sacajawea Audubon, they are planning diverse field trips, a fun Friday evening kick-off event, dynamic speakers, and more activities to engage bird enthusiasts. The festival will be headquartered at Bozeman's Best Western GranTree Inn. Mark your calendars for June 6-8th, and stay tuned for details!

### Madagascar Wildlife Comes to December Meeting

The next chapter meeting will take us to Madagascar, an island about twice the size of Arizona off the east coast of Africa. Madagascar has some of the highest biodiversity on the planet: of roughly 200,000 known species on the island, about 150,000 are endemic. Join us on **Monday, December 9<sup>th</sup> at 7:30 p.m.** when Paul Loehnen describes his recent trip to this unique island. We will meet in the **Gallagher Business Building, room L14 (lower level) on the University of Montana campus**. Paul, the former chapter president, is a retired physician originally from South Africa. He has been an active birder for about 15 years. He and his wife, Beth, love to travel and bird.



Schlegel's Asity

Photo by Paul Loehnen



Verreaux's Sifaka

Photo by Paul Loehnen

## Peeps From The Board: Searching for the Bicknell's Thrush

By Jim Brown



Bicknell's Thrush

Luck was with me this summer. It began when my wife, Sue, announced that visiting Maine was on her bucket list. Knowing that our good friends, Ned and Jean, lived in New Hampshire made the idea of a visit to New England even more compelling. Right away the wheels started to turn realizing that helping Sue get Maine off her bucket list could be finagled in such a way that I might get a chance to see a rare or certainly uncommon species of conservation concern, the Bicknell's Thrush.

This elusive bird is a small to medium sized thrush that was previously thought to be a sub species of the Gray-cheeked thrush. A botanist and amateur ornithologist, Eugene Bicknell discovered the species in the Catskill Mountains in 1881, but it took until 1995 before it was recognized as a species. It is a neotropical migrant that breeds in forests dominated by balsam fir usually above 3000 feet elevation. It prefers recently disturbed areas containing standing dead conifers and dense patches of regenerating balsam fir and red spruce. About 90 percent of the Bicknell's Thrush population winters in Hispaniola, the large Caribbean island, comprised of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Its breeding and wintering ranges differ significantly from that of the Gray-cheeked Thrush. Even though the slightly smaller Bicknell's Thrush looks very similar to the Gray-cheeked Thrush their songs have different endings, which can be recognized in the field. Interestingly, unlike all other thrushes in North America, Bicknell's Thrush males and females mate with multiple partners. This means that several males may help feed young at a single nest.

After arriving in New Hampshire, our conversation quickly turned to the Bicknell's Thrush. Ned had already done homework on where we might focus a search. So a plan was made which meant getting up at 3:30am and driving to a trail head in the White Mountains. We needed to hike up the mountain into the birds' likely habitat by first light. Sue and Jean decided that this was

way beyond their idea of pleasure so they would meet us later. By 4:00am Ned and I had found an all night service station where we loaded up on coffee and granola bars. We arrived at the trail head with just enough light to make our way about 2 miles up a rocky trail. Shortly after entering an area of dead conifers and dense balsam thickets we saw a thrush sitting on a snag, but we could not be sure whether it was a Bicknell's or Swainson's Thrush. The thrush flew down into cover. Then in a few minutes it reappeared and sang the characteristic Bicknell's song. We hiked further up the trail and found a nest site with an adult busy feeding young. Our quest had paid off. Adding to our exciting find was seeing a number of other breeding song birds in the same disturbed forest niche including Myrtle, Black-throated Green, American Redstart, Magnolia, Pine and Blackpoll Warblers; Yellow-bellied Flycatcher; Winter Wren and White-throated Sparrow. They all seemed to enjoy the same niche.

On the way down the mountain we reflected on the future of the Bicknell's Thrush. It is proposed for listing as an endangered species with a decision by the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service expected in 2013. Its limited population of approximately 50,000 faces a number of threats on both its breeding and wintering grounds. Unrelenting loss of montane forest habitat from intense human population pressures, introduced rats and hurricanes threaten its wintering population in Hispaniola. In the New England Mountains and adjacent Canada, pollution from acid rain and mercury and climate change are probably the biggest threats. Recreational development and telecommunications also threaten the species. Climate models show balsam fir and red spruce habitat shrinking dramatically, thus it is a species that could be pushed up and off the mountain. We know that other neotropical migrant species face the same set of threats. Efforts currently underway by conservation organizations to save threatened birds and other biodiversity will hopefully be successful. But is an enormous challenge so we certainly need to support those efforts.

Oh yes, we did visit Maine, stay in a remote hut, and bike the carriage roads in Acadia National Park, so working on the bucket list was a huge success.

## October Field Trip

By Cynthia Hudson

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Rob Domenech hosted a group of seven people (plus me) on the October 5th and another group of seven (plus me) on October 6th. It was great to have four University of Montana Wildlife Biology students on our Sunday trip. Early snows had prevented Rob and his crew from working at the Nora Ridge site earlier in the week - with six inches falling on that Friday. Fortunately, wind and sun cleared enough snow to allow access on Saturday. It was quite a learning experience to see all the prep work that needed to be done to repair weather and rodent damage to the trap lines. In fact, the ice continued to affect the lines, causing two early misses on raptors that obligingly came in for the pigeons. We did have good looks as several Sharp-shinned Hawks and Golden Eagles harassed the plastic owl (placed near the blinds to encourage the raptors to veer off their migration line and move closer to the traps). Rob said that generally the birds that intently focus on the owl rarely are interested in the live bird attractant. As the day warmed up, the lines worked more smoothly, which allowed the capture of a 5+year-old Golden Eagle female. A lucky few in our group were able to assist in banding this bird. Rob had hoped to put a transmitter on a Harlan's, but the few we saw did not show much interest in the lure birds. Sunday's weather and winds seemed to portend a great raptor day. Unfortunately, what seemed ideal to us was not what the raptors found ideal. Very few birds flew near us, with many sliding between or to the west of the blinds. Raptors seen over both days: Osprey, Golden Eagle, Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Prairie Falcon, Northern Harrier and Merlin. Non-raptors were few: Steller's Jay, Mountain Chickadee, Common Raven, Clark's Nutcracker, and unspecified waxwings. Not all birds were seen by everyone and there were some birds that eluded identification. Just as we were ready to call it a day, an adult Sharp-shinned Hawk was caught at the upper blind. As this bird was being released, the carcass crew (trapping/banding is also done on roadkill relocated to a private ranch) called to say they had captured a 2nd year Golden Eagle male; so we hotfooted it down the mountain and arrived in time to see final measurements, take photos and watch the bird's release. Our thanks to Rob and his great crew for two memorable days. More information about Rob's work can be found at <http://www.raptorview.org>.

## November Field Trip

By Terry Toppins

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On Sunday, November 10th, six people joined Carole and I for a birdwalk at Maclay Flats west of Missoula. The weather was good and we saw 15 species. The most interesting to me were two Pileated Woodpeckers calling and flying; a Great Horned Owl; a Northern Pygmy Owl; two distant Bald Eagles, and a large winter feeding flock with Chickadees, three species of Nuthatches, and several Brown Creepers.

## Board Update

By Pat Little

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- Sue Reel and Lynn Tennefoss have resigned from the board due to pressure of work. Thank you, Sue and Lynn, for all your contributions to the chapter.
- We appointed Scott Hampton and Rose Leach to the board.
- The Missoula Conservation Roundtable honored our long-time board member Jim Brown with the Don Aldrich Award for longtime service in environmental protection. Congratulations, Jim!
- Many of our board members took part in a trip to the Rock Creek confluence land which was recently acquired by Five Valleys Land Trust. At the Land Trust's request we toured the property to see where we might recommend a nature trail be built. This was our first Board field trip in recent memory, so we took a group photo.



Photo by Kristi DuBois. From left to right: Pat Little, Clancy Cone, Terry McEneaney, Jim Brown, Scott Hampton (Standing), Rose Leach, Kit Stevens, Barbara Ross, Ed Monnig (standing), Andrea Stierle, and Carolyn Goren.

## Nexrad Ornithology

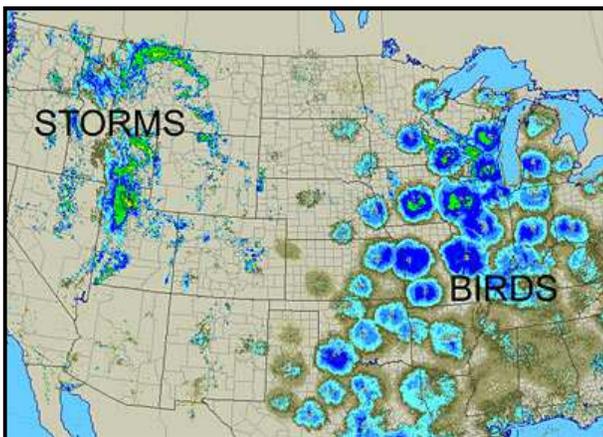
By Mike McDowell, Eagle Optics.

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By now most birders have heard about Nexrad (Next-Generation Radar) and how it can be used as a tool to view and track nocturnal bird migration. During spring and fall migration, I use Nexrad as an indicator of how “good” the birding might be the following morning in terms of numbers of individuals. However, keep in mind that a lack of Nexrad activity doesn’t necessarily mean birding will be slow the next morning. Inclement weather may keep birds from migrating, so the woods might still be filled with neotropical migrants from the previous day.

Amateur and professional ornithologists use Nexrad to track migratory birds. Density estimations give ornithologists the ability to count the number of birds involved in migratory movements, specific direction routes, timing, speed, elevation, and correlation with weather patterns. Birds can detect storms by sight, smell, sound, humidity, and pressure, and often attempt to fly around the storm cell, reverse direction, or are forced to land. All of this can be detected and viewed live on Nexrad. My favorite online Nexrad website is the National Center for Atmospheric Research/Research Applications Program - [Real-time Weather Data or NCAR/RAP](#).

To see live Nexrad maps, I change the “Product” to “Regional Reflectivity” and leave the “Background” set to the default “black” option. For a quick snapshot, I leave the “Loop Duration” set to “Single image.” At this point you can either click on an individual radar station (three-letter codes across the states), or to see an entire map of US Nexrad data, select “Contiguous U.S.” at the top.



How do you tell the difference between migrating birds and storm systems on Nexrad? The precipitation density of a storm is higher, so they often appear as massive, spinning, amoeba-like shapes. Because of how radar works, and the comparatively even distribution and lower density of flocks, birds show up as concentrated, circular donut shapes centered on a radar station. The gaps between the donuts are just an indicator of the Nexrad station’s range for that density. Migratory birds are still present in those gaps.

Nexrad can be a fairly useful prognosticator of expectation when combined with phenological knowledge of arrivals and departures of birds. Spring migration is nearly upon us. Soon our backyards and local natural areas will be filled with the songs sung by colorful birds. Studying Nexrad maps doesn’t really compare to the undiluted joy of birdwatching, but as an adjunct to the pastime, viewing actual bird migration on a macro scale certainly enhances one’s appreciation of the phenomenon.

### Montana Audubon Offers Grants for Wildlife

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Montana Audubon will be offering grants totaling more than \$1,700 to fund projects that benefit wildlife. Preference will be given to research and education projects benefiting nongame wildlife and their habitats. The funds can be used for mileage, supplies, equipment, printing, and communications.

**Applications must be postmarked on or before Friday, December 13, 2013.**

Grant recipients will be announced by February 7, 2014. Project guidelines and the grant application can be requested from: Audubon Wildlife Fund, P.O. Box 595, Helena, MT 59624; by phone: (406) 443-3949; or from our website at:

<http://www.mtaudubon.org/about/grants.html>.

**Welcome to Our New Members**

**Dale Bagnell  
Robert Deal  
Ginny Fay**



**Go Green and Save !**



Do you want to help Five Valleys Audubon Society save money, paper and volunteers' time? Please consider viewing your **Birding Observer** 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](mailto:k7vk@arrl.net). You can also always find your current newsletter on the Five Valleys Audubon Society's website at: [www.fvaudubon.org](http://www.fvaudubon.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:** \_\_\_\_\_

*Please note: The newsletter will be delivered electronically unless requested otherwise.*

\$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*, and I may participate in all local Chapter activities. I understand that my dues are shared between NAS and my local Chapter.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

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*Please note: The newsletter will be delivered electronically unless requested otherwise.*

\$20 for a 1-year individual or family membership

**C3Z N53 0Z**

Please make the check payable to National Audubon Society and mail to:

**National Audubon Society  
PO Box 422250  
Palm Coast, FL 32142-2250**



TO:

Five Valleys Audubon Society Board of Directors

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| 2013-2016 | Ed Monnig       | 950 Rankin Road, Missoula, MT 59808        | 549 – 0580 | emonnig01@gmail.com    |

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|                              |                    |  |                |                        |
|------------------------------|--------------------|--|----------------|------------------------|
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| Membership Promotion Program | Vacant             |  |                |                        |
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| Field Activities             | Jim Brown          | 1504 Woods Gulch Rd, Missoula, MT 59802                  | 549 – 8052     | brownjs2@bresnan.net   |
| Publicity                    | Terry Toppins      | 1210 Tower St, Missoula, MT 59804                        | 214 – 1194     | tertop@aol.com         |
| Education                    | Poody McLaughlin   | 1629 Douglas Dr., Missoula, MT 59808                     | 543 – 4860     | pmcregan@bresnan.net   |
| PL Wright Endowment          | Larry Weeks        | 2428 W Kent Ave, Missoula, MT 59801                      | 549 – 5632     | bwsgenea@centric.net   |
| University Liaison           | Bill Gabriel       | PO Box 520, Florence, MT 59833                           |                | biograf@earthlink.net  |
| Newsletter Editor            | Winsor Lowe        | University of MT, Missoula, MT 59812                     | 243 - 6364     |                        |
| Newsletter Circulation       | Bev Orth Geoghegan | 310 W. 73 <sup>rd</sup> St., Apt. 1A, New York, NY 10023 | (406) 750-0149 | orthbev@hotmail.com    |
| Web Site                     | Sarah Tarka Baer   | 1039 Palmer Street, Missoula, MT 59802                   | (717) 422-3453 | sarah.tarka@gmail.com  |
| Archivist                    | Pat Little         | 1710 34th St., Missoula, MT 59801                        | 493 – 7115     | roughleg@gmail.com     |
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Montana Audubon

PO Box 595, Helena, MT 5962 — (406) 443-3949 — [www.mtaudubon.org](http://www.mtaudubon.org)

Steve Hoffman, Executive Director: [shoffman@mtaudubon.org](mailto:shoffman@mtaudubon.org)  
 Janet Ellis, Program Director: [jellis@mtaudubon.org](mailto:jellis@mtaudubon.org)  
 Norane Freistadt, Development Director: [norane@mtaudubon.org](mailto:norane@mtaudubon.org)  
 Amy Cilimburg, Director of Bird Conservation: [amy@mtaudubon.org](mailto:amy@mtaudubon.org)  
 Darcie Vallant, Center Director: [dvallant@mtaudubon.org](mailto:dvallant@mtaudubon.org)

Mihail Kennedy, Land Stewardship Coordinator: [mken尼迪@mtaudubon.org](mailto:mken尼迪@mtaudubon.org)  
 Heather Bilden, Education Director: [heather@mtaudubon.org](mailto:heather@mtaudubon.org)  
 Abby Weimer, Office & Program Support Coordinator: [abby@mtaudubon.org](mailto:abby@mtaudubon.org)  
 Amy Seaman, Bird Conservation Associate: [aseaman@mtaudubon.org](mailto:aseaman@mtaudubon.org)  
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