

December 2016

Birding Observer



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

Calendar of Events

- **Sunday, December 4th:** All-day trip to the Mission Valley to look for raptors. Meet in the northwest corner of the Adams Center parking lot at 7:50am or at the Cenex Gas Station in Ronan at 9am.
- **Monday, December 5th, 6:45-8:45pm:** The December board meeting will be held in the Missoula Public Library's Board Room.
- **Monday, December 12th, 7:30pm:** Our December speaker will be avian biologist, William Blake. He will present on his research on Lewis's Woodpecker. The meeting will be on December 12th in GBB Rm L14.
- **Thursday, December 15th:** The deadline for the January edition of the *Birding Observer*.
- **Saturday, December 17th:** Bird walk at Lee Metcalf NWR from 10:00am-Noon. Meet the field trip leader at the Refuge Visitor's Center.
- **Saturday, December 17th:** Missoula Christmas Bird Count. See page 3 for details.

The makings of successful Lewis's Woodpeckers

North America's most unusual woodpecker is a fairly common breeding resident in all but the northeastern corner of Montana. But across the western U.S. Lewis's Woodpecker is declining and is a species of concern in Montana. On Monday, December 12 at 7:30 p.m. in room L14 (lower level) of UM's Gallagher Business Building, William Blake will describe what factors influence the nesting success and habitat selection of these charismatic birds in the Bitterroot Valley. Lewis's Woodpeckers occur most commonly at low to medium elevations in riparian cottonwoods, open stands of ponderosa pines, and burned pine forests.

After wintering in the southern U.S., Lewis's Woodpeckers return in late April to the Bitterroot Valley. William has monitored Lewis's Woodpecker nests and breeding habits for the past three years. His study sites are located throughout the Bitterroot Valley in order to compare the species' preferred habitat between burned ponderosa pine forests and riparian cottonwood forests. He will discuss some early findings and will share pictures and stories from his field work.

William Blake is an Avian Biologist at the MPG Ranch in the Bitterroot Valley and is also an M.S. candidate in the T.E. Martin lab in Wildlife Biology at UM. In 2013 he obtained a Federal Master Banding Permit and now leads various banding operations at the MPG Ranch, including the capture and tracking of Lewis's Woodpeckers, Northern Saw-Whet Owls, Northern Pygmy-owls and Common Poorwills.

William graduated with a B.S. in Wildlife Biology from UM in 2006. He spent the next 7 years working as a seasonal field technician, primarily banding and monitoring birds for several organizations. He worked extensively across the western US and abroad, leading songbird banding projects, handling and monitoring thousands of birds, including threatened species, species of concern, and in recent years focusing on the study of owls and raptors. In his spare time, he enjoys traveling abroad including returning to his native France, bird watching, hiking, camping, hunting, and playing most team sports.



~ *Birds of Montana* was the source for some bird facts in this article.

Painting of Lewis's
Woodpecker

**Peeps From The Board:
Missoula Valley Nesting Swans
By Jim Brown**

Who would have thought that we would see nesting Trumpeter Swans in the Missoula Valley? I certainly didn't and that thought had never crossed my mind. But in early June during the Montana Bird Festival, my group of 20 birders visited a ranch west of Frenchtown. We went there to look for variety of ducks and maybe a Sora on a wetland with a long shallow-water slough. When we left the vehicles and walked to the slough we were immediately serenaded by a pair of Sandhill Cranes that circled just above us, calling and scolding with their prehistoric sounding calls. It felt like they were attacking us. They landed close to us and kept up calling and walking around us. We were definitely being herded so we moved away to give them some space. The cranes then flew back to the middle of the slough. I looked up the slough past where the cranes had landed and to my surprise saw a swan, then two swans appeared both next to a muskrat house. Unbelievably it looked like a mated pair of swans protecting a nest site. Quickly, setting up a scope to get a better look, it became clear that indeed they were Trumpeter Swans and without neck bands. Somehow these wild swans had decided to set up housekeeping in this slough.

A few weeks later the nesting swans produced five cygnets. This was the first record of Trumpeter Swans nesting in the greater Missoula Valley. The first Montana breeding record was in 1842 by Pierre Jean DeSmet in the Flathead Valley. Other early records showed that during the mid 1800's Trumpeter Swans nested in the Flathead and Upper Blackfoot Valleys but not in the Missoula nor Bitterroot Valleys. Their populations plummeted throughout their range in the latter 19th and early 20th centuries due to hunting for meat and hides to make ladies hats, powder puffs and quills for export by the Hudson's Bay Company. Trumpeter Swans were nearly extirpated in the United States. But reintroduction efforts are paying off in parts of the United States including in Western Montana. It is a guess but our nesting Trumpeter Swans probably came from a swan reintroduction several years ago in the Flathead Valley by the Salish-Kootenai Tribe.



Trumpeter Swans
Photo by Gerhard Knudsen

To make the swan discovery in the Missoula Valley even more exciting, the pair of Sandhill Cranes raised a young bird (called a colt) on that same slough. What makes this nesting success story even more important is that the wetland chosen by the swans and cranes on the Boyer ranch was recently protected by a conservation easement held by Five Valleys Land Trust. It is significant that this wetland occurs on a working ranch and will be protected by the voluntary conservation easement assuring that in the future swans, cranes and other water birds can breed successfully in their needed habitat free of excessive disturbance.

Five Valleys Audubon contributed \$5,000 toward purchase of the conservation easement. Although not a large sum it was significant in demonstrating citizen support for using open space bond funds to procure the conservation easement. The City and County open space bonds, approved in 2006, have been wisely used as matching funds to leverage additional dollars to protect landscapes including other critically important bird habitat in Missoula County. These funds have been essential for conserving wildlife habitat, agriculture and open space to be appreciated and enjoyed by future generations. But little funds remain in the open space bonds. Looking ahead, continued conservation will depend on the willingness of citizens to approve additional open space funding. In the face of growing population pressures it is increasing important to pursue conservation opportunities made possible by open space bond funding. The Trumpeter Swans will certainly agree to that.

Field Trips

By Larry Weeks



October 29, 2016: The objective of this field trip to Brown's Lake was to look for loons and scoters. Because there was a Pacific Loon and a Surf Scoter hanging around the gravel pits west of the Fort, we thought that the field trip should start there.

However, the day of the trip, most of Missoula was blanketed with fog and there was only a 100 foot of visibility at the gravel pits. Therefore, the trip went directly to Brown's Lake. When we arrived at the lake, the viewing conditions were excellent for late October; sunshine, mild temperature and no wind. The lake surface was smooth and you could tell where the birds were diving by the circles that remained on the surface. We ended up with incredible views of both Pacific Loon and Surf Scoter. The loon was in the bay when you first approach the lake from highway 200. It was close to the road, posed for the group and gave everyone as many satisfying looks as they wanted. And when we moved to the picnic area, there was a Surf Scoter close to the shore that stayed there all the time we were at the picnic area. We also spotted 2 more Surf Scoters on the other side of the lake. There were at least 4 Common Loons, 4 species of grebes (Horned, Eared, Pied-billed, and Western), several species of ducks, and many American Coots. After leaving Brown's Lake, we traveled to the Cut-Off Road. The ponds along the road produced a wide variety of ducks, at least a dozen Trumpeter Swans and a Tundra Swan. Other birds included a Northern Shrike, a Marsh Wren and an American Tree sparrow. There were 16 people on the field trip and we had 38 species.

"I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields, that it kisses them so gently? And then it covers them up snug, you know, with a white quilt; and perhaps it says, "Go to sleep, darlings, till the summer comes again."

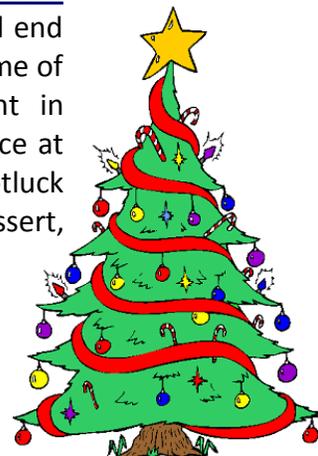
~ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*

November 5, 2016: Eleven people car pooled from Missoula to the Lee Metcalf NWR. Deb Goslin joined the group at the Visitor's Center. We started by looking at the usual assortment of ducks on Ponds 5 and 6. A female goldeneye created considerable discussion about it's identification. It had a pale bill but the slope of the forehead was not very steep. We finally concluded that it was a Barrow's Goldeneye. A Northern Shrike along with a Northern Flicker and a Great Blue Heron were spotted in the trees at the heron rockery. The riparian area along the Kenai trail produced Song Sparrows, Black-capped Chickadees and one American Tree Sparrow. There were 2 Tundra Swans in Pond 8 along with Canvasbacks and a Pied-billed Grebe. We progressed to the Potato Cellar Pond and then returned to the Visitor's Center. During lunch, a flock of Canada Geese flew by along with a lone Snow Goose. On the walk-in trail that goes straight west to the river, we found a very vocal Pileated Woodpecker, Red Crossbills, White-breasted Nuthatches, and Downy Woodpeckers. On the paved trail to the river, we had 3 porcupines. We ended up with 41 bird species.

Missoula Christmas Bird Count

By Larry Weeks

The Missoula Christmas Bird Count will be held on Saturday, December 17, 2016. If you would like to participate in the field count, contact Larry Weeks at 549-5632 (540-3064 cell) or bwsgenea@gmail.com. If you are interested in being a feeder watcher, contact Rose Leach at 370-1999 or rleach-2@bresnan.net. The Count will end with a potluck dinner at the home of Larry Weeks, 2428 West Kent in Missoula. 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. We look forward to seeing you!



Is Every Snowflake Really Unlike Any Other?

Reprinted from eNature, January 25, 2016

Snow is falling in many parts of the United States—and countless kids are catching snowflakes on their tongues as they play outside. And almost without fail, one question comes up.... Is it true that no two snowflakes are alike?



How Do Snowflakes Get Made?

A snowflake forms inside a cloud when a droplet of water freezes around a tiny particle of dust, salt, bacteria, smog, or some other substance.

Most snow forms in supercooled water-droplet clouds of the middle and upper atmosphere, such as nimbostratus, cumulus congestus, or cumulonimbus clouds. Supercooled water has interesting qualities. For instance, it can exist at subfreezing temperatures without freezing, but will freeze when it comes into contact with a particle. In the supercooled atmosphere within a cloud, liquid water droplets and free ice crystals cannot coexist for long periods of time. The ice crystals rob the liquid droplets of their moisture and thereby grow continuously and rapidly.

Some of these sizable ice crystals stick to each other to create a collection of ice crystals known as a snowflake.



Shape Changes With Temperature

The shape that an ice crystal takes depends on the temperature and moisture content in the cloud. The colder the air, the less water it contains. Warm air contains more moisture than cold air, allowing larger crystals to grow.

Crystals that grow from the meager water supply at -20 degrees F or below form pencil-shaped hexagonal (six-sided) columns. At temperatures from -10 to 0 F, most crystals are flat, hexagonal plates. At temperatures of 0 to 20 degrees, crystals become large, delicate, six-pointed shapes called dendrites, a word derived from the Greek word for “branched.”

Warmer cloud-level temperatures (20-32 degrees) yield splinter-shaped crystals called needles.

So Is Each Snowflake Different?

Most ice crystals form as six-sided plates, as they replicate the shape of water molecules, but all snowflakes don't retain this shape. During their “lifetime” they may crash into other ice crystals and break; partially melt and refreeze; or they may be misshapen by dirt or other impurities.

By the time the millions of snowflakes in a snowstorm reach the ground, they may be shattered, half-melted, or fused with others. Under such circumstances it would be difficult to find two that are completely identical. But considering the billions upon billions that have fallen in the history of the world, there remains a chance that over all of time, two identical snowflakes may have fallen.



In 1986, a scientist with the National Center for Atmospheric Research is reported to have photographed a pair of column-shaped snowflakes that looked exactly alike. But whether they were truly identical remains the question.

So it seems safe to stick to the classic answer — no two snowflakes are alike!

Help Wanted Volunteer Opportunity

A volunteer is needed to work with and at the Lewis and Clark Elementary School to enhance the birding activity in their habitat garden. Approximately, three to four hours a month is required to work with one of the classes and help children be responsible for keeping feeders clean and filled. We will also educate them as needed with regard to being better birders. If you are interested, please contact Jerry Dirnberger by email (dirnberger@aol.com) or phone (406-360-5133). Thank you for your support and consideration!



Welcome To Our Newest Chapter Members

Ana Aronofsky	Anne Black
Karen Cates	Barbara Cieslewicz
Don Dolese	Denise Espinoza
Teri Fellon	Vanessa Mason
Melissa J Rocek	Inge Rudbach
Sharon Rose Thompson	Mysta Ward
Ray Willms	



Go Green and Save!

Do you want to help Five Valleys Audubon Society save money, paper and volunteer time? Please consider reading your *Birding Observer* online. Your online copy will contain content in color, and you will receive your newsletter much earlier than the mailed hard copy! If you wish to receive your *Birding Observer* via email, just send us a request with your name to Vick Applegate at k7vk@arri.net. You can also find your current newsletter on the Five Valleys Audubon Society website at 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 for a 1-year, 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 *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: _____

City: _____ **State:** _____ **Zip:** _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

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

___ \$20 for a 1-year membership
Chapter Code: N53

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