

# December 2021

## Birding Observer



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

### Calendar

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- **Sunday, December 5<sup>th</sup>:** All-day field trip to the Mission Valley to look for raptors. Meet at 8AM in the northwest corner of the Adams Center parking lot or at 9AM at the Cenex gas station in Ronan. This is a driving trip with frequent stops to look at birds. We will spend some time outside the car, so be prepared for cold temperatures, wind and snow or rain.
- **Monday, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 6:00-8:00 pm:** Please join us in Cooper Room A, at the Missoula Public Library, for the Five Valleys Audubon Society Board Meeting.
- **Monday, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 7:00pm:** Attend our monthly chapter meeting to hear Larry Weeks and Rose Leach talk about the Christmas Bird Count. We will meet in Room 110 of the Interdisciplinary Sciences Building (ISB) at UM.
- **Saturday, December 18<sup>th</sup>:** The Missoula Christmas Bird Count will be held on December 18<sup>th</sup>. Please see article on page 3 for details.
- **Please note, the Beginning Bird Walk at Metcalf will not take place on December 18<sup>th</sup>, because it conflicts with the Missoula Christmas Bird Count.**

### Christmas Bird Count in Missoula & Statewide

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Each December, our Chapter participates in National Audubon's Christmas Bird Count (CBC). At our December 13<sup>th</sup> chapter meeting, at 7PM, Larry Weeks will talk about the Missoula count area and review some winter bird ID tips for our participants for this year's count, taking place on December 18, 2021. It is always a fun and rewarding experience, and you do not need to be an expert to join us. Anyone can participate. You just need to contact Larry and he will match you with an experienced group leader. You can also participate by being a feeder-watcher. Larry will have all the information to put you in a field group or to participate as a feeder-watcher.

Following Larry's presentation, Rose Leach, Montana's state CBC compiler, will describe unusual sightings and overall trends that can be gleaned from CBC data. All information is on-line

(<https://www.audubon.org/conservation/science/christmas-bird-count>) and available to anyone for review.

Unless you are new to the area, Larry Weeks needs no introduction. But you may not know that Larry is a retired pulp and paper mill specialist, who spent most of his career at the now-closed Smurfit-Stone Container mill near Frenchtown. Larry has been active in the Chapter since the 1990s and is currently in charge of Field Trips, Audubon Adventures, Christmas Bird Count, Community Naturalist, Museum Specimen Preparation, and Continuing Education. He won the Educator of the Year award from Montana Audubon in 2016. No one understands where he gets all his energy, but we are eternally grateful.

Rose Leach is a retired Wildlife Biologist and active birder. She is Chair of the Montana Bird Records Committee, President of Five Valleys Audubon, Montana CBC compiler, an eBird reviewer, a Board Member-Chapter Representative of Montana Audubon, and Board Member of Montana Bird Advocacy.

The meeting will take place in Room 110 in the Interdisciplinary Sciences Building (ISB) on the University of Montana Campus, located on the south end of campus, on Beckwith Avenue between Maurice and Mansfield Avenues. Masks are required, and social distancing will be practiced. We will zoom the meeting as well:

Time: Dec 13, 2021, 6:30 PM Mtn Time

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## Peeps from the Board: Bobolinks, Part I

By William Boggs



Bobolink

The natural history of Bobolinks is intriguing and sprinkled with mysteries. It is also distinctive in its relation to that which stands at the end of most natural histories: us—the makers of the Anthropocene.

Bobolinks evolved as colonial-nesting grassland birds and

very long-distance migrants. No one knows, but it could be that Bobolinks' ancestral migration from middle North America to south-central South America originally had to do with a resemblance between tallgrass prairies and the pampas and marshes of northeastern Argentina and southwest Brazil. At any rate, Bobolinks still traverse their ancient route twice a year, with the result that a two-year-old Bobolink has already traveled a distance roughly equaling the circumference of the globe.

Bobolinks display extreme sexual dimorphism. The breeding males are not only significantly larger than the females but look like totally different birds. Interestingly, though, after the young fledge, the flashy white-black-and-gold males molt and turn into streaked drab-yellowish sparrow-like birds, nearly indistinguishable from the females and juveniles. So, bold loud maleness is transmuted, for much of the year, into inconspicuous quiet femaleness—doubtless a great relief!

Speaking of sex (were we?), Bobolinks are among the most non-monogamous of birds. This was the very first species where modern DNA testing revealed that the four or five eggs typically laid by any one female were each fertilized by a different male. I suppose this is why the males, who arrive in their home fields a few days before the females each spring, get along so well, grouped together on fenceposts enthusiastically singing away, and floating one after the other in long gliding flights, singing some more on the wing. One never sees Bobolink males fight. (And, on the breeding fields, one hardly sees females at all, except in low short flights, being eagerly pursued by one of more males, and disappearing quickly into the grass).

Bobolinks' original breeding habitat was the tallgrass-prairie ecosystem that used to dominate the entire middle half of temperate North America. There, over eons, they

thrived, protected from the weather and predators by the tall, moist grass where they also found ready sustenance: insects and seeds located on, or no more than a yard above, the prairie floor. (You'll never see a Bobolink fly catch. It prefers the crawling insects and ripening seeds.) They also became colonial nesters, large groups returning again and again, generation after generation, to the same 100 acres where they were born and raised their young.

Colonial nesting, of course, has many advantages, especially in tall grass. For Bobolinks, one of its advantages turned out to be communal child-rearing—many different males helping many different females nurture the young, each of whom may or may not, in each case, be the biological child of the male feeding or warming or teaching the nestling that hour.

Another advantage is spectacular defense against predators, who, you'd think, should have an easy time getting to nests or nestlings right on the ground, but haven't an easy time at all when mobbed by seventy raucous, wildly swooping and diving black-white-and-gold males with sparks in their eyes.

It is a mystery why Bobolinks, unlike most other passerine migrants, make their 5000-mile spring and late summer journeys in myriad stages over many weeks, stopping often for a time on traditional feeding grounds (like the coastal plains of South Carolina). Perhaps it has to do with their earthbound dietary tastes. At any rate, the result is that each Bobolink spends most of its life...traveling. And the correlative of this mystery is that Bobolinks spend less than two months each year in the fields where the most intense part of their lives—musical courting, promiscuous mating, and cooperative child-rearing—occurs. From the time the first males arrive from South America at the familiar field where they were born, it's only 50 to 55 days until the young fledge. After this happens, mothers, fathers, and children together leave the breeding field and retire to obscure marshes to molt and prepare for the many-staged trip to the southeast, and then south to a different continent.

Of course, as most of us are aware, the tallgrass prairie ecosystem was virtually eliminated in the United States and Canada during the 19th and early 20th centuries (of all the major original North American ecosystems, there is less left of the tallgrass prairie ecosystem than of any other). So, Bobolinks are a species utterly displaced. Less than 1% of their native thousands-year-old breeding habitat remains, and it's hard to find—for us, and also for them. Yet they are far from extinct, nor are they yet reduced, like the Baird's Sparrow, to a meager dwindling fraction of their former vast numbers. And their range has expanded. Why? Find out in a future Peeps!

## Field Trip Summary

By Larry Weeks

**Saturday, October 23<sup>rd</sup>:** The focus of this field trip was loons and scoters at Brown's Lake. A pitstop at the Clearwater River yielded Hooded Mergansers and goldeneyes. As we approached Brown's Lake off highway 200,



we stopped for some bird activity in the shrubs and trees along the road. The birds identified included several Black-capped Chickadees, at least one Mountain Chickadee, Hairy Woodpeckers, a Townsend's Solitaire, and some Cedar Waxwings. At the shallow bay at the lake, we had 4 grebes; Horned, Eared, Pied-billed, and Western. We stopped several times along the edge of the lake to scope waterfowl which included Common Loons, Ruddy Ducks, Barrow's Goldeneyes and lots of American Coots. After reaching the picnic area, we searched for a Pacific Loon that had been reported the previous day, but the cool weather plus the wind made viewing difficult. We found some maybes but could never confirm the Pacific Loon. There were at least 10 Common Loons and Rose Leach did spot a scoter. The first stop at a pond on the Cut-Off Road had a hunting Northern Harrier that spooked a White-faced Ibis from the vegetation, but it dropped back into the habitat before everyone got to see it. It popped up several times but never stayed up long enough for good viewing. We could not locate the ibis in the thick vegetation. Rose Leach looked up the latest sighting of an ibis in Montana and it was October 26<sup>th</sup>. After the field trip ended, Thomas Kallmeyer, Diane Litz and Jacob Glass went back on the Cut-Off Road and saw a Northern Shrike, a Prairie Falcon and a Merlin catch a mouse. The field trip had just driven this road and didn't see either of these birds. Timing is everything. On the return trip to Missoula, Steve Flood, Rose Leach and Jean Duncan returned to Brown's Lake and confirmed the Pacific Loon. There were 14 people on the trip, and we tallied 41 species.

**Saturday, November 6<sup>th</sup>:** It was raining on the drive to the Lee Metcalf NWR but fortunately, it stopped when we assembled at the visitor's center. We started by scoping the waterfowl on pond 5 which included several Trumpeter Swans and 2 Tundra Swans. We ended with 10 species of ducks on ponds 5,6 and 8. Raptors included Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harriers, a Sharp-shinned Hawk, a falcon that couldn't be identified, and 2 Great Horned Owls. One of the Great Horned owls was at the north end of the Kenai Trail and the other was at the visitor's center. There was a very cooperative Northern Shrike on the trail next to pond 8. It never flushed when

we hiked by, and it was still there when we returned 45 minutes later. At the Wildlife Viewing Area, we had Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches, a Hairy Woodpecker and 2 porcupines. When we returned to the parking lot, we spotted a Short-eared Owl perched on a wooden structure in the grassy field to the east. There were 11 people on the trip, and we had 41 species.

## Christmas Bird Count

By Larry Weeks

The Missoula CBC will take place on Saturday, December 18<sup>th</sup>. Due to the on-going pandemic, we recommend face masks while carpooling and social distancing in the field. If you want to participate in the field count or be a feeder watcher, contact Larry Weeks at [bwsgene@gmail.com](mailto:bwsgene@gmail.com), (406) 549-5632 or (406) 540-3064 (cell). Larry will provide different options for you to choose from or instructions on how to tabulate your bird sightings at your feeder. We will also tally unusual birds not seen on Count Day that are seen during Count Week. Count Week includes the three days before and the three days after Count Day.

The Count Day will end with a potluck dinner at the home of Larry Weeks, 2428 West Kent, which is near Rosauers. Potluck guests are welcome to arrive at 6:00 pm. Dinner will commence at 6:30 pm. Please bring your favorite potluck offering, 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. Please note, anyone eligible for vaccination must be fully vaccinated to attend

## Holiday Silliness

What is a parent's favorite Christmas carol?

~ Silent Night

What did the gingerbread man put on his head?

~ Cookie sheets

What do snowmen eat for breakfast?

~ Frosted Flakes

What do you call people who are afraid of Santa Claus?

~ Claustrophobic!

Why is it always cold on Christmas?

~ Because it's in Decemberrrrr!



## How Do Birds Cope with Cold in Winter?

Reprinted from [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org)

*From feathers to fat, birds have multiple strategies for keeping warm when the mercury dips.*

Each autumn as many birds begin epic journeys to warmer climates, there are always some species that stay put for the winter. These winter birds have a better chance of maintaining their territory year-round, and they avoid the hazards of migration. But in exchange they have to endure the cold.



Like us, birds are warm blooded, which means their bodies maintain a constant temperature, often around 106 degrees Fahrenheit. To make enough heat, and maintain it, they have evolved many different strategies—some similar to our own.

Sparrows, for example, seek out shelter in dense foliage or cavities to avoid the elements. They also huddle, bunching together to share warmth, and try to minimize their total surface area by tucking in their head and feet and sticking up their feathers. Cardinals, impossible to miss against the snow, and other smaller birds puff up into the shape of a little round beach ball to minimize heat loss.

"Big birds, like geese and grouse, do what we do," says physiologist David Swanson at the University of South Dakota. "They put on insulation." Their insulation often involves growing an extra set of insulating downy feathers.

Birds can also put on fat as both an insulator and energy source: More than 10 percent of winter body weight may be fat in certain species, including chickadees and finches. As a result, some birds spend the vast majority of their daylight hours seeking fatty food sources, making feeder food even more precious for surviving a frosty night.

When asked which birds are toughest winter survivors, Swanson points to little ones like chickadees. These small creatures can't put on too much bulk for aerodynamic reasons. Instead, explains Swanson, they are experts in shivering. This isn't the familiar tremble that mammals use to generate heat. Birds shiver by activating opposing muscle groups, creating muscle contractions without all of the jiggling typical when humans shiver. This form of shaking is better at retaining the bird's heat.

Another adaptation shared by many species is the ability to keep warm blood circulating near vital organs while

allowing extremities to cool down. Take gulls. They can stand on ice with feet at near-freezing temperatures while keeping their body's core nice and toasty.

Keeping warm when the sun is up is one thing, but few winter challenges are more daunting than nightfall, when temperatures drop, and birds must rely on every adaptation they have to survive their sleep. Some birds save energy by allowing their internal thermostat to drop. Hummingbirds are a famous example of this, undergoing torpor nightly as their body temperature drops close to outside temperatures. But torpor is not too common in winter birds, because the morning warm up would take too much extra energy. Instead, black-capped chickadees and other species undergo a more moderate version of this, reducing their body temperature as much as 22 degrees Fahrenheit from their daytime level in a process called regulated hypothermia.

One simple way to help birds when the weather outside is frightful is to hang feeders. To attract a diversity of birds, select different feeder designs and a variety of foods. A tube feeder filled with black oil sunflower or mixed seeds, for example, will attract chickadees and finches. Woodpeckers devour suet feeders. And a safflower or sunflower-filled hopper feeder entices the usual visitors plus larger birds like cardinals and red-winged blackbirds. (Check out the [Audubon Guide to Winter Bird-Feeding](#) for tips.) The birds benefit from the backyard buffet, and you'll have a front-row seat to numerous species flocking to your plants and feeders.



### I Heard a Bird Sing By Oliver Herford

I heard a bird sing  
In the dark of December.  
A magical thing  
And sweet to remember.

"We are nearer to Spring  
Than we were in September,"  
I heard a bird sing  
In the dark of December.

# Thanks & Welcome to New Members!

Richard Alverson	Jim Cusker
Betty Freudenberg	Keith Graham
Vladimir Kovalenko	Joseph Moran
Sarah Ogden	Caryn Ross
Carl Schiess	Janice Vanriper



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## Five Valleys Audubon Society Membership Application

Please support Five Valleys Audubon Society (FVAS). There are several ways to donate. Any method ensures that you will receive our *Birding Observer* newsletter and may participate in all chapter activities. \*Please help us reduce our \$3,700 annual newsletter cost by signing up for email delivery. FVAS is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit.

Make checks out to Five Valleys Audubon Society and mail to: PO Box 8425, Missoula, MT 59807  
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Please note: FVAS does not share email addresses with anyone except Montana Audubon. Your email address is safe with us!

Please be aware that membership in Five Valleys Audubon Society (FVAS) alone does not confer membership in the National Audubon Society (NAS). FVAS and NAS are separate 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations. To become a new member of NAS and receive Audubon magazine (or to renew a current or lapsed membership) visit the website: [fvaudubon.org/nas](http://fvaudubon.org/nas). Using this website will ensure that FVAS receives a \$20 one-time credit for your NAS membership. All NAS members become members of FVAS. A third organization, Montana Audubon (MTA), is also an independent organization and receives no financial support from NAS. MTA handles statewide issues and is responsible for its own fundraising. To assist in this important statewide work, you may contact MTA through their website: <http://mtaudubon.org/>. Please give generously to each organization. Although independent, we work together to protect what we all love.

**Five Valleys Audubon Society**  
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**OFFICERS:**

President, 2021-2024	Rose Leach	(406) 721-0779	<a href="mailto:rleach-2@bresnan.net">rleach-2@bresnan.net</a>
Vice President, 2020-2023	Jeffrey Ipsen	(406) 493-2586	<a href="mailto:jeffaipen@gmail.com">jeffaipen@gmail.com</a>
Secretary, 2021-2024	Andrea Stierle	(406) 782-6419	<a href="mailto:andrea.stierle@mso.umt.edu">andrea.stierle@mso.umt.edu</a>
Treasurer, 2020-2023	Jean Duncan	(406) 396-1171	<a href="mailto:treasurer@fvaudubon.org">treasurer@fvaudubon.org</a>

**DIRECTORS:**

2020-2023	Jim Brown	(406) 549-8052	<a href="mailto:brownjs2@bresnan.net">brownjs2@bresnan.net</a>
2021-2024	Larry Weeks	(406) 549-5632	<a href="mailto:bwsgenea@gmail.com">bwsgenea@gmail.com</a>
2019-2022	Ed Monnig	(406) 549-0580	<a href="mailto:emonnig01@gmail.com">emonnig01@gmail.com</a>
2019-2022	Rose Stoudt	(406) 880-8060	<a href="mailto:ras120656@yahoo.com">ras120656@yahoo.com</a>
2020-2023	Jacob Glass	(609) 929-3023	<a href="mailto:jacobpglass@gmail.com">jacobpglass@gmail.com</a>
2021-2024	William Boggs	(406) 274-3880	<a href="mailto:boggsandfoleylaw@gmail.com">boggsandfoleylaw@gmail.com</a>

**COMMITTEES:**

Archivist	Barbara Ross		<a href="mailto:bjmross@gmail.com">bjmross@gmail.com</a>
Audubon Adventures	Scott Kluever	(907) 854-3192	<a href="mailto:sjkluever@gmail.com">sjkluever@gmail.com</a>
Christmas Bird Count	Larry Weeks	(406) 549-5632	<a href="mailto:bwsgenea@gmail.com">bwsgenea@gmail.com</a>
Education	Larry Weeks	(406) 549-5632	<a href="mailto:bwsgenea@gmail.com">bwsgenea@gmail.com</a>
Field Activities	Larry Weeks	(406) 549-5632	<a href="mailto:bwsgenea@gmail.com">bwsgenea@gmail.com</a>
Habitat Protection	Jim Brown	(406) 549-8052	<a href="mailto:brownjs2@bresnan.net">brownjs2@bresnan.net</a>
Habitat Protection	Gerhard Knudsen	(406) 251-2765	<a href="mailto:gmk@bresnan.net">gmk@bresnan.net</a>
Membership Promotion	Scott Kluever	(907) 854-3192	<a href="mailto:sjkluever@gmail.com">sjkluever@gmail.com</a>
Newsletter Circulation	Hedwig Vogel-Wright	(406) 549-7251	<a href="mailto:hedwigvw@fastmail.fm">hedwigvw@fastmail.fm</a>
Newsletter Editor	Beverly Orth	(303) 944-0183	<a href="mailto:orthbev@hotmail.com">orthbev@hotmail.com</a>
PL Wright Endowment	Andrea Stierle	(406) 782-6419	<a href="mailto:andrea.stierle@mso.umt.edu">andrea.stierle@mso.umt.edu</a>
Program	Susie Wall	(406) 274-0548	<a href="mailto:susiewall2@gmail.com">susiewall2@gmail.com</a>
Publicity	Cathy Nolan	(206) 920-2288	<a href="mailto:canolan4@outlook.com">canolan4@outlook.com</a>
Social Media & Website	Thomas Kallmeyer	(406) 214-2971	<a href="mailto:thomas@tarns.net">thomas@tarns.net</a>
University Liaison	Chad Bishop	(406) 243-4374	<a href="mailto:chad.bishop@umontana.edu">chad.bishop@umontana.edu</a>

**Montana Audubon**  
**PO Box 595, Helena, MT 59624**  
**(406) 443-3949**  
[www.mtaudubon.org](http://www.mtaudubon.org)

Larry Berrin, Executive Director  
[lberrin@mtaudubon.org](mailto:lberrin@mtaudubon.org)

Heather Bilden, Master Naturalist  
Coordinator [hbilden@mtaudubon.org](mailto:hbilden@mtaudubon.org)

Boaz (Bo) Crees, Avian Specialist  
[bcrees@mtaudubon.org](mailto:bcrees@mtaudubon.org)

Cathie Erickson, Accounting Specialist  
[cerickson@mtaudubon.org](mailto:cerickson@mtaudubon.org)

Robin Larson, Office Manager  
[info@mtaudubon.org](mailto:info@mtaudubon.org)

Amy Seaman, Director of Policy & Science  
[aseaman@mtaudubon.org](mailto:aseaman@mtaudubon.org)

Gabi Morey, Audubon Center Director  
[gmorey@mtaudubon.org](mailto:gmorey@mtaudubon.org)

Emily Chilcoat, Audubon Center Volunteer  
Coordinator [echilcoat@mtaudubon.org](mailto:echilcoat@mtaudubon.org)

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