

# MARCH 2012

## BIRDING OBSERVER



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

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### Calendar

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- \* **Monday, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 7pm:** Char Murray will host the March board meeting.
- \* **Sunday, March 11<sup>th</sup>:** Brian Williams, Montana Natural History Center Assistant Director of Education, leads a beginning birding field trip (birders of all levels welcome). Meet at Maclay Flat parking area at 9:30am.
- \* **Monday, March 12<sup>th</sup>, 7:30 pm:** Terry McEneaney will discuss Passenger Pigeons at our March meeting.
- \* **Thursday March 15<sup>th</sup>:** Submission deadline for the March edition of the *Birding Observer*.
- \* **Saturday, March 17<sup>th</sup>:** Beginning birdwalk at Lee Metcalf NWR from 10am-Noon. Meet the field trip leader at the Refuge Visitor's Center. Learn basic skills for bird identification, including use of binoculars and field guides, key field marks, and much more. Families with children and birders of all levels are welcome!
- \* **Saturday, March 24<sup>th</sup>:** All-day field trip to the Lee Metcalf NWR led by Terry McEneaney. Meet at 8:00 AM in the middle of the UM field house parking lot or 9:00 AM at the Metcalf Visitors Center.

### Board Update

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Five Valleys Audubon Society will hold its Annual Membership Meeting on Monday March 12<sup>th</sup> during the regular monthly meeting. We will elect four positions on the Board.

Two of our Directors—Bill Boggs and Joyce Nave—are stepping down, and their positions will be vacant. The Board's Nominating Committee has put forward two candidates for the two vacant Director positions—Clancy Cone and Betsy Griffing. Also, Alex Taft, our Treasurer, and Paul Loehnen, our President, have resigned. The Board has appointed Kit Stevens as Treasurer and Pat Little as President. They will be up for election for a full 3-year term at the Annual Meeting. Other nominations from the floor will be welcomed.

### Passenger Pigeons: Topic of March Program Meeting

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Passenger Pigeons: The World's Greatest Avian Numenon - Terry McEneaney will explain the word "numenon" when he presents the program on Monday, March 12 at 7:30 p.m. in room L14 of the Gallagher Business Building on the UM campus. Terry is the retired ornithologist of Yellowstone National Park. He worked throughout Montana (e.g. Red Rock Lakes NWR & Garnet Ghost Town) and has lived in 13 towns in Montana.

He is the author of three books (Birds of Yellowstone, Birding Montana, and Uncommon Loon) and many popular and scientific articles. His specialty is field biology, and has been studying birds for over five decades. In his spare time he is a guide for the world bird tour company Field Guides Inc. (Austin, Texas). The rest of the time he plays and travels and counts his lucky charms.



After Terry's presentation, Nora Carlson, a recipient of a 2011 Phillip L. Wright memorial research award, will tell us what she learned about techniques of recording bird songs at a Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology field course in natural sound recording. She is a UM student seeking a second B.S., this time in wildlife biology.

In previous issues of this newsletter I have written of names for birds and how they change as scientists become more and more able to make distinctions in bird taxonomy. Birders have a great deal of help (field guide books, birding classes, field trip leaders) with names, identification and, eventually, recognition of species, but birds are found in habitats and those who know the subtle differences between hawks or warblers often have an imperfect grasp of the distinctions between habitats and how to describe them. It is not a matter of being unfamiliar with names of all the plants because, in many cases, habitat differences are ones of structure rather than species composition and the critters will use habitats of similar structure but containing dissimilar plant species.

All too often I hear someone describing a habitat of "tall conifers and deciduous trees," or "mixed conifer and hardwoods" as if they were somehow different. But the words conifer, deciduous, and hardwood are distinctions without a difference. For example, the western larch and alpine larch in Missoula County are deciduous conifers. That is, they are cone-bearing trees that shed all their leaves each fall and grow new ones the following spring, as do the tamarack and bald cypress back east. To contrast evergreen with deciduous is equally erroneous because, just as all needle leaf trees are not evergreen, not all broadleaf trees are deciduous; i.e., holly, magnolia, and many tropical genera contain evergreen broadleaf trees. So, the proper words to describe the implied difference are "needleleaf" and "broadleaf" trees.

Attempting to classify trees as conifer versus deciduous is like trying to compare animals that lay eggs with those that hibernate over winter. In other words, comparing a method of sexual reproduction (cone bearing) with a habit of becoming dormant (loss of leaves). It just makes no sense. Never has, never will, and is probably something people learned in grade school or even high school, but that does not make it right.

In describing vegetation dominated by trees, the first order of distinction is on leaf character, i.e. needle leaf vs. broad leaf. The second order of distinction is then on persistence of those leaves, i.e. evergreen versus

deciduous. And that provides the following classification:

1. needleleaf
  - 1a. needleleaf evergreen (pine, fir, hemlock, etc.)
  - 1b. needleleaf deciduous (western larch, alpine larch, bald cypress, etc.)
2. broadleaf
  - 2a. broadleaf evergreen (hollies, live oaks, etc.)
  - 2b. broadleaf deciduous (cottonwoods, aspens, maples, etc.)



The term "conifer," has been used as a slang term meaning "needle leaf" to some people, but meaning "evergreen" to other people with an imperfect grasp of the distinctions.

Another problem is the concept of "vegetation" and the idea of animals eating "vegetation." Not possible, unless maybe the animal is larger than Godzilla, because vegetation refers to the mosaic of plant communities in the landscape, or to the sum total of plant life in an area. It does not refer to individual plants or plant material uprooted by a bulldozer, run down by an off-road vehicle, or eaten by a deer. Here we have another deficiency in breadth of scientific education—possibly reinforced by unwillingness to open a dictionary. The zoological term corresponding to the botanical term vegetation is "faunation," that is, the assemblage of animal species, or the total of animal life, in an area. Would you refer to a carnivore as eating faunation?

"Vegetative" is another frequently misused word. It refers to the non-sexual tissue, growth, and reproduction of plants and has nothing to do with vegetation or types of vegetation. There is no such thing as a "vegetative type" despite the continued use of that term by employees of various government agencies. "Plant," "plant material," or "organic matter" would be appropriate in place of both "vegetation" and "vegetative" as commonly used by many people today. Getting to know the proper terms will, as in bird identification, improve communication about the places where birds live.

## Searching for Hedwig, the Snowy Owl

By Rebecca Sills

In December 2011, my grandmother gave me a newspaper clipping that mentioned the abundance of Snowy Owls in Montana and other “southern” states this winter. The closest I had come to a Snowy Owl was when Hedwig made her appearance in the Harry Potter films, so the idea of seeing one in real life was thrilling. I called Denver Holt, of the Owl Research Institute in Charlo, to ask if he would lead an Audubon trip to search for Hedwig and her cousins. Denver was enthusiastic, and he generously offered a second trip after over seventy people signed up within two days of posting the announcement on Facebook and email.

The Mission Valley was sunny and gorgeous the weekend of January 21st and 22nd, despite the dismal forecast of bad weather and driving conditions. Denver led us through a maze of back roads just south of Polson. He stopped near a subdivision, jumped out of his vehicle, and had us focus our optics on several white lumps atop the snow-capped roofs. Success!

We peppered Denver and his field crew with questions: “Why are they sitting on houses?” “Are their eyes always yellow?” “What do they eat?” “Do they face any threats?” “Why don’t they come here every year?” “How can you tell the males from females?” “Do they live in groups?” “How far south do they go?”

Once everyone had a good look at the owls through a scope, snapped a few pictures, and had every question answered to their satisfaction, we drove off to look for hawks. Rough-legged and Red-tailed Hawks were abundant. Denver stopped the caravan at several spots to allow us to set up scopes on individual birds. Bald Eagles made a few star appearances while crows and ravens tried to steal the spotlight from all--to no avail. We got a nice look at a Prairie Falcon, and someone saw a Gyrfalcon--but that one eluded the rest of us. The Gyrfalcon is a desirable sighting, because it is the largest of the five falcon species in Montana--females are about two feet long, with a wingspan of four feet.

We demonstrated our support of the local economy by eating lunch afterwards at Ninepipes Lodge to chat with Denver and get to know the other trip participants. Eleven people signed up for Audubon membership and

received a Snowy Owl plush toy—as well as satisfaction that they are helping to conserve birds, other wildlife, and their habitat. It was a magical weekend, and if you missed it, you can still search for Hedwig on your own—just look up Snowy Owl sighting locations on eBird (<http://bit.ly/yTPWCp>) to find potential viewing areas.



Evelyn gets a lift from her dad, Ben Ferencz, while mom, Julie Pavlock coaches her on viewing through the scope.  
Photo by Rebecca Sills.

See more photos, and join our Facebook page, at <http://www.facebook.com/fvamissoula>.

### A message from the National Audubon Society

It's in the Air. The Environmental Protection Agency is poised to take a bite out of carbon pollution through proposed standards for new coal-fired power plants. With the unlovely name of New Source Performance Standards (NSPS), this draft rule is nevertheless our next best shot at reducing greenhouse gas emissions and slowing climate change.

Leading scientists warn that climate change poses a grave threat to the world's biodiversity. With legislative climate solutions mired in bipartisan gridlock in Congress, this new draft standard offers a way to make progress on one of the biggest polluters - coal-fired power plants. If this rule goes well, dirty, older plants are next in line for pollution reductions.

Getting comments in to EPA to support this standard is a top priority for Audubon. You can help by sending in the postcard you'll find in the March/April of Audubon Magazine. Look for the snowy owl -- one of the many birds whose habitat is being impacted by our warming climate. We'll also be sending chapters a supply of cards -- let's get an avalanche of support into EPA to reduce carbon pollution!

## 2012 Wings Across the Big Sky Bird Festival Greening the Festival, Saturday Presentations, and Festival Registration



Montana Audubon

Montana Audubon is dedicated to lessening our impact on the planet and the annual bird festival is no exception. We continue our efforts to become a carbon neutral organization, and in doing so, we plan to both reduce and “offset” the impacts from this year’s festival.

One of the best ways to reduce our carbon footprint is by carpooling. The festival transportation committee is working diligently toward that aim so that field trips and pre-festival workshops are covered by group transportation (vans, buses, or SUVs). This committee will also facilitate carpooling once festival participants have registered and confirmed their field trips. We’d very much like to hear from anyone who wishes to volunteer their minivan/SUV as a lead field trip vehicle, or recommend a person or organization with an available van or bus. Please contact Kathy Ross at [mtkat@montanaport.net](mailto:mtkat@montanaport.net). If we could halve the number of cars coming to the festival, we would cut ~20 tons of carbon dioxide from the festival’s footprint!

In order to “offset” the waste we cannot reduce outright, we support carbon sequestration programs. What better place to embark on afforestation than at our Audubon Conservation Education Center in Billings? For a \$15 donation we will plant two trees that will sequester more and more carbon dioxide as they mature. The more trees we plant, the more carbon we can offset. Look for that option when you register.

At the hotel we plan to offer shade-grown coffee and compostable plates and cups when washable dishes are not available. Please, remember to bring from home your refillable water bottle and coffee to-go mug!

Saturday presentations. We have a diverse lineup of speakers and topics for Saturday afternoon. We’re very excited to bring Cornell’s Brian Sullivan to the festival to talk about the eBird program. Brian will kick off the sessions with a presentation to all festival goers about how we can share our bird sightings and help conservation in Montana and beyond. He’s a magnificent photographer and brings a truly compelling program to life. Then we’ll offer two sessions of concurrent talks. Choose topics ranging from ...

- raptor migration projects in Montana
- seeing tangible results when teaching kids about the natural world
- colonial nesting waterbirds on the Flathead Indian Reservation
- Montana Audubon’s Gambia birding tour
- recording bird sounds

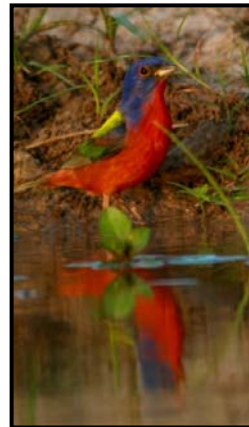
No doubt, it’ll be hard to choose. Ponder your options after reading more via our website at <http://www.mtaudubon.org/birdwatching/festival.htm>.

**Festival registration begins the first week in April.** Look for the registration brochure to arrive in your mailbox at the end of March.

### SOUTH TEXAS BIRDING

Sunday, April 22nd – Sunday, April 29th

Because of its southern latitude, diverse mix of habitats



and unique position along a major migration corridor, South Texas offers a nearly unparalleled opportunity to observe birds in North America. The first part of this trip will involve birding the spectacular King Ranch (825,000 acres), which encompasses a whole range of habitats from coastal grassland to thorn-scrub brush to stands of live oak that

are home to nearly all of the South Texas specialty birds. The second part of the trip will be in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, home to more birds that have slim U.S. ranges. Throughout the trip we’ll likely see between 175 and 200 species on this tour, possibly more if conditions are good. Brian Williams and Steve Hoffman will be your expert guides.

The cost is \$1795/person, which includes double occupancy lodging (single supplement \$350), meals, and transportation from Harlingen, Texas. A \$425/person deposit reserves your place. All tours are on a first come, first served basis. Complete trip itineraries and bird species lists are available upon request or visit: <http://mtaudubon.org/birdwatching/tours.html>. For reservations call the Montana Audubon office 406-443-3949 or email [norane@mtaudubon.org](mailto:norane@mtaudubon.org)



**Welcome New Members:**

Walt Bollen  
Kristin Freeman  
Katie Heath

Linda Bowman  
Viola Fuhrmann  
Jared Robinson

Nancy Cooper  
Robert Gappert  
Becky White



**Thanks to our Returning Members:**

Jill M. Alban  
Anita Aronofsky  
Diana L. Clark  
Lou Herritt  
Kay Johnston  
Sandra J. Miller  
Dirk Sol

Janet Allison  
Guy Bingham  
Sophy Hagey  
J. R. Hoem  
Evy O. Leary  
Arlie G. Peterson  
Pat & Sharon Sweeney

Pat & Jeff Aresty  
Christine Brett  
Kathy Heffernan  
Michael Hoffer  
Amy & Andrew Martin  
Eric Sells  
Sara & Bill Towle

Monte Turner

**Hi Friends! Go Green!**

Save paper and postage by **viewing your *Birding Observer* newsletter online**. Five Valleys Audubon Society now gives members two different options to view the newsletter electronically. We can email you once a month, letting you know when the latest edition is **available on our web site ([www.fvamissoula.org](http://www.fvamissoula.org))**, or we can **email the newsletter directly to you** – it's your choice. Just send an email request with your name to Vick Applegate at [k7vk@arrl.net](mailto:k7vk@arrl.net), and let us know you if you wish to be added to one of the lists. We do not share our email lists with others. Please keep us updated with your email address changes.

**Join National Audubon Society  
and 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 OZ**

**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 (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

\$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.

# Five Valleys Audubon Society

PO Box 8425, Missoula, MT 59807

<http://www.fvamisoula.org>

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Dan Sullivan, Board President

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