

November 2021

Birding Observer



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

Calendar

- **Monday, November 1st, 6:00-7:45 pm:** Please join us at the Missoula Public Library for the Five Valleys Audubon Society Board Meeting.
- **Monday, November 8th, 7:00pm:** Please join us to hear Lee Silliman present his illustrated lecture on A History of the American Bison. We will meet in Room 110 of the Interdisciplinary Sciences Building (ISB) on the University of Montana campus.
- **Saturday, November 6th:** All-day trip to the Lee Metcalf NWR. Meet at 9:00 am in the northwest corner of the Adams Center parking lot. There will be 2 miles of level hiking.
- **Saturday, November 20th:** Bird walk at the Lee Metcalf NWR from 10 :00 am to 1:00 pm. Meet at the Refuge Visitors Center.
- **Sunday, December 5th:** All-day trip to the Mission Valley to look for raptors. Meet at 8am in the northwest corner of the Adams Center parking lot or at the Cenex gas station in Ronan at 9am. This is a driving trip with frequent stops to look for birds. We will spend some time outside the car, so be prepared for cold temperatures, wind and snow or rain.
- **Saturday, December 18th:** The Missoula Christmas Bird Count will be held on December 18th. Please see article on page 3 for details.

A History of American Bison

Join us at our chapter meeting on Monday, November 8th at 7:00 PM to hear Lee Silliman present his illustrated lecture on A History of the American Bison. Lee's talk will discuss the distant origins of the species in Asia, their subsequent migration to North America, and their expansion across the continent despite many natural enemies. He will also explore how buffalo were hunted in the pre-horse days and how hunting methods were adapted after the arrival of the horse in the eighteenth century. The talk will conclude with a discussion of the tragic slaughter of the bison by Euro-American hide hunters who nearly extirpated the species in the 1870s and 1880s. The lecture will be lavishly illustrated with artworks

spanning two centuries, utilizing many images drawn from Silliman's extensive Western Americana print collection. A selection of books on the American bison will be on display, and a bibliography of recommended reading will be distributed after the presentation.

Lee is a retired educator and museum employee living in Missoula, Montana. He holds an MS degree from the University of Illinois and was a secondary level physics, chemistry, and mathematics instructor for 43 years, as well as the part-time photo archivist for a county museum for 26 years. Since early childhood Lee has nurtured a strong interest in the art and history of the frontier American West. Utilizing his own photographs, the historic photos from the museum collection he managed, as well as vintage engravings that he purchased, Silliman has assembled and circulated numerous exhibits that have been displayed in more than one hundred venues throughout Montana and ten other states since 1988. His interests have spawned many articles and the editing of five books, the most recent being *A Ride to the Infernal Regions: Yellowstone's First Tourists* Riverbend Press, 2003. Lee is married and has two daughters.

The meeting will be held in Room 110 in the Interdisciplinary Sciences Building (ISB) on the University of Montana campus. The building lies on the south end of campus on Beckwith Avenue between Maurice and Mansfield avenues. We will continue to meet in-person unless increasing COVID numbers require us to switch to a virtual meeting. Please check your email regularly and monitor our website for updates. Masks will continue to be required, and social distancing will be practiced.



Peeps from the Board: Spring Birding at Isle Royale National Park By Scott Kluever

*The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down
Of the big lake they called Gitche Gumee
The lake, it is said, never gives up her dead
When the skies of November turn gloomy...*

At age 9, I informed my parents that my life's course was set. I knew how I would put food on the table for my future family, how I would make my first million and thus how I would build my own house out beyond the endless corn and tobacco fields of southern Wisconsin. All my folks needed to do was to buy me a guitar and throw in a few lessons. Life was so simple.

After three years of practice, I learned exactly one song on that guitar, *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*, by Gordon Lightfoot. (It only has four chords.) And although I played and sang with gusto and much fanfare, my father mentioned (on more than one occasion) that the music business just might not be ready for my musical style, and perhaps, I should take my school studies more seriously.

Since I always listen to my father, I finished my education and postponed my music career indefinitely. And so it was, after teaching middle schoolers for 30 years, and sitting on a boat next to my wife of 33 years, I found myself once again singing Lightfoot's song (and longing for my guitar) as we traveled by ferry across Lake Superior to Isle Royale National Park. Gitche Gumee sank no boats that day. In fact, for the nine days we were on the island, we encountered little to no wind and no more than six hours of rain! It was perfect weather for spring birding.

Our backpacking adventure began at Rock Harbor on the east end of the island. While onboard the ferry, visitors give their itinerary to park rangers who log the trip into the computer and issue permits. Once the ferry drops you off, there are options for lodge and cabin rentals, campgrounds, or backcountry travel. We chose the latter, which put us into prime warbler country within a ten-minute walk from the dock.

Per Ranger Mindy, there were an estimated 16 species of warblers expected on the island during our visit. Most species were new to us which was super exciting. Unfortunately, I had only my iPhone for taking pictures. (My ginormous birding lenses were way too heavy for a 60-mile hike. There was, after all, chocolate to be packed.)

Magnolia and Tennessee Warblers were foraging in the trees surrounding the waters of the numerous kettle lakes

found on the island. Caterpillars by the thousands hung from the spruce trees giving both birds plenty of good groceries to feed their young. And although great warbler nesting habitat could be found across the entire island, these little fellas were all business when it came to defending their turf.

In the higher and drier ground of Isle Royale we found ourselves surrounded by warblers we could clearly hear but could not see. The 'pleased pleased pleased to meetcha' song seemed to come from every direction, but the full foliage on the trees made identification a challenge. With kinks in our necks from looking skyward, we finally got a clear view of several of these mystery birds... they were Chestnut-sided Warblers! What beautiful birds. These songsters were clearly my favorite of the trip... until, of course, we saw the Black-and-white Warbler.



Wood Lily
Photo by Scott Kluever

Found moving up, down, and around tree trunks foraging for insects, the Black-and-white Warbler is the only member of the genus *Mniotilta* (Moss-Plucking). We were fascinated by their flying abilities. And, as it turns out, the Black-and-white Warbler is an avian ninja. It will aggressively attack pretty much any other birds entering their territory. Chickadees, Nuthatches and Redstarts beware! (So much for cuddly bundles of feathers). Oh, and since they nest on the ground, humans can also feel their wrath if one treads too close to their nest. Getting face to face with an attack-warbler makes one rethink required birding equipment. Guide... check, Binoculars... check, Hockey Mask... check.

Sharing the forest floor with the Black-and-white Warbler was the extremely common Ovenbird. This chunky fella seemed to be under our feet the entire 60-mile trek. In Robert Frost's poem, *The Ovenbird*, Frost writes in the second line how loud the Ovenbird sings. Well... let me tell you... after 60 miles and seemingly hundreds of birds blaring 'Teacher, Teacher, Teacher' at us, I was looking forward to the relative silence of the six-hour ferry ride back to the mainland. The mournful wail of the ship's foghorn every three minutes was oddly relaxing.

Of the 16 species of warblers on the island, we identified eight. Although the teacher in me doesn't care for the 50% identification rate, the birder in me was satisfied. So, get your hikers cleaned, pack bug repellent, and bring your water purifier so you don't pick up a tapeworm common to all inland waters and sail out onto Lake Gitche Gumee for a birding adventure on Isle Royale National Park.

Field Trip Summary

By Larry Weeks

Sunday, September 12th: The primary destination for this field trip was Pablo Reservoir. On September 9th, I did a scouting trip and was disappointed to find that the reservoir was being filled and the shorebird habitat was being flooded. The backup locations were a pond along highway 93 where I found some Baird's Sandpipers and Ninepipes Reservoir where I found a Great Egret. Even though the birding at Pablo would only be for waterfowl, I decided to proceed with the original plan. Our first stop was the scenic pull-off about three miles south of Ronan. The only shorebirds present were some Killdeer along with some ducks. We noticed a pair of Trumpeter Swans and some shorebirds in a pond across the highway. We moved across the highway and got as close as we could to the birds. Although the distance was great, we were able to identify Wilson's Phalaropes and Baird's and Least Sandpipers with spotting scopes. After a pit stop at the Cenex gas station, we drove to the Pablo Reservoir and found that the water level had increased from my earlier visit. The birds identified included Redheads, Ruddy Ducks, Wood Ducks, Great Blue Herons, Sandhill Cranes, Western, Horned and Pied-billed Grebes, and lots of American Coots. On the south end of the dike, some American Pipits created a lot of interest. And then a diving cormorant close to the dike got some attention. I then suggested that we go to Ninepipes and look for the Great Egret. The water level was low at Ninepipes and we walked out onto the mud flat and found the Great Egret but no shorebirds. Then the discussion turned to the cormorant, and it was suggested that it was different and might have been a Neotropic Cormorant. Also, one of the cars had stopped at a grassy pond south of the Pablo Reservoir and found some shorebirds. So, we decided to return to Pablo. The grassy pond had Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Baird's and Pectoral Sandpipers, and Wilson's Snipes. We were unable to relocate the cormorant. There were 14 people on the trip, and my bird list included 47 species.

*“For each new morning with its light,
For rest and shelter of the night,
For health and food, for love
and friends,
For everything Thy
goodness sends.”*

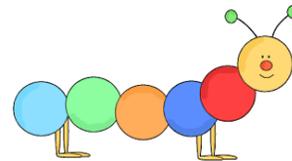


~ Ralph Emerson

Audubon Adventures

By Larry Weeks

Three paper copies of the Audubon Adventures classroom kits have been ordered for three teachers in the Missoula area. The teachers are Kelli Maheny, 3rd grade teacher at St. Joseph, James Quigley, 3rd grade teacher at Target Range, and Lesa Homer, who teaches a Montana Living Class for grades 6th, 7th and 8th at Bonner. Audubon Adventures is an environmental program for children in grades 3–6 that present scientifically accurate facts about birds, wildlife and their habitats and the interplay of forces that affect all living things.



Advanced Birding Workshop

By Larry Weeks

There are three classes of the Advanced Birding Workshop scheduled in November. The classes will be held on Thursday evenings from 7:00 – 9:00 pm at the Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Regional Office at 3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula. We will in FWP's new meeting room which is adjacent to the old meeting room. The date and subject for each session are as follows:

- November 4 – sparrows
- November 11 – forest birds
- November 18 – shorebirds

The cost is \$15 per session or \$30 for all three sessions. UM students can attend at half price. To sign up, please contact Larry Weeks at (406) 549-5632 or (406) 540-3064 (cell) or bwsgenea@gmail.com. Due to the on-going pandemic, we recommend face masks when indoors and carpooling and social distancing in the field.

Christmas Bird Count

By Larry Weeks

The Missoula Christmas Bird Count will be held on Saturday, December 18, 2021. Due to the on-going pandemic, we recommend face masks when carpooling, and social distancing should be practiced in the field. Last year, some of the group leaders split up their participants by groups and areas, which resulted in a more complete coverage. I suggest that the same approach be followed where appropriate this year. A decision to hold an in-person potluck gathering to tabulate the results will be made in December. If you would like to take part in the field count or be a feeder watcher, contact Larry Weeks at bwsgenea@gmail.com, (406) 549-5632 (phone), or (406) 540-3064 (cell).

Field Update: The Search for Cuckoos

By Peter Dudley, Big Sky Watershed Corps

Montana Audubon was back on the Missouri and Madison Rivers for Black-billed Cuckoo and avian surveys this summer, after a great pilot year in 2020. For nearly a decade, we carried out land bird monitoring in partnership with the University of Montana Bird Ecology Lab (UMBEL) Montana, Fish & Wildlife and Parks (FWP), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Every year we try to both refine the project and increase its scope to gain a better understanding of Black-billed Cuckoo, as well as other species, and their distribution in the state.



This summer, we worked with the UMBEL, FWP, and Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute to use a new tool, Automated Recording Units (ARUs). The ARUs, microphones that periodically record throughout the day, can record cuckoos from up to 150 meters away. The audio data is then run through a program trained to detect cuckoo calls within the audio recordings. With 43 of the 44 ARUs along the Missouri River retrieved (someone may have run off with one unit), we expect to gain a much better understanding of cuckoo populations in Montana.

Along with the ARUs, Montana Audubon staff and research technicians set out to conduct our riparian bird surveys and "call-back" surveys in late May. At each survey point, we conduct a 10-minute bird survey followed by a vegetation assessment, with an emphasis on important riparian species that appear to be in decline, such as the plains cottonwood, and noxious species that unfortunately are not declining. Black-billed Cuckoos are known to prefer cottonwood galleries with dense understory, so survey points in that habitat also included playback surveys, where we broadcast Black and Yellow-billed Cuckoo call recordings with a speaker. Cuckoos are very territorial birds, so if they are present anywhere within hearing distance of our playback, they typically respond and make themselves known very quickly.

Although results from our ARU's will not be available until later this fall, the season is already a success. We found two Black-billed Cuckoos at the end of our first multi-day survey float on the Missouri River! Two individuals of this highly elusive species are great, but it did not end there. One playback survey on a small Missouri River Island between Loma and Coal Banks yielded a territorial Black-

billed Cuckoo to our surprise; they are more likely to be found further east. This individual stayed and coo-cooed for about 20 minutes, allowing us to get several good photos and video recordings. Several days later we went on another beautiful multi-day float from Coal Banks to Judith Landing, finding an incredible total of five Black-billed Cuckoos along the way. The ARU's we left around that area will hopefully record the vocalizations of these individuals and may give us insight into how, and for how long, they use that great stretch of habitat before leaving the area in fall. It will be even more interesting to see how many ARU's will capture the calls of this unique species in areas where we did not detect Cuckoos in person. Now we must be patient and hope our data was well-recorded.

As usual, work like this would not be possible without the help of our partners and even the BLM, who took us out on their boat to pick up the last group of ARUs. We look forward to working with these organizations in the future on this important work.

Special Art Exhibit for Bird Lovers

The Montana Museum of Art and Culture opened "[Avis marvelous: Ornithology in 19th Century Art and Science](#)," on Friday, September 24, 2021. The exhibit will run through January 8, 2022, in the Paxson Gallery of UM's Performing Arts and Radio/TV Center.

This exhibition, about one of the most popular and fertile areas of study in the 19th century, will explore the convergent interests of artists and scientists. It combines prints from the Lee Silliman Collection and specimens from the University of Montana's Philip L. Wright Zoological Museum.

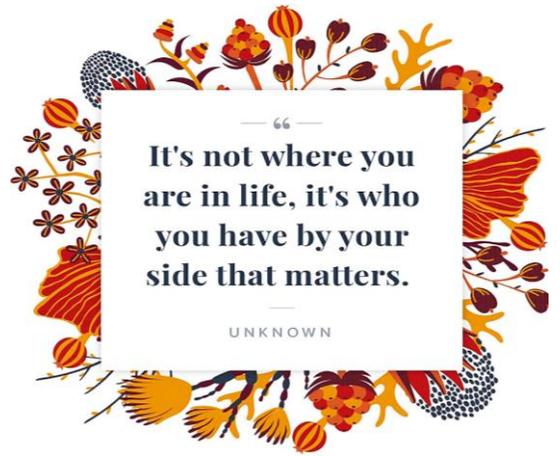


"This exhibition presents the ways artists and scientists analyzed, documented, and celebrated avian life in the 19th century and explores the various strategies employed by artists and scholars of the natural sciences to create visual representations for works of art, publications and other printed works. It also recreates museum displays meant to educate and enlighten the public about bird life in the Americas," said H. Rafael Chacón, Museum Director.

The Paxson Gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday, 12 noon - 6:00 pm. Admission is free, but the museum accepts donations at the door to help cover expenses. For more details, visit the museum's website at: <https://www.umt.edu/montanamuseum/>.

A Big Thanks & Welcome to Our New Members!

Winona Bateman	Kimberly Bell	Jane M. Billstein
David Branch	Louise Cameron	Diane C. Conner
Nancy Crosby	Carolyn Gard	Richard Hoskins
Jerry Lipka	Michelle Lower	Kathleen Mclaughlin
Joseph Moran	Caryn Ross	Kim Sol
Deborah Snyder	Sharon Rose Thompson	



Please sign up for emailed newsletters!

If you subscribed to Audubon through National Audubon, we may not have your email address. To receive our newsletter and other bird news by email, saving trees and reducing FVAS newsletter expenses, please send your email address to Treasurer, Jean Duncan at treasurer@FVAudubon.org or Membership Promotion Chair, Scott Kluever at sjkluever@gmail.com.

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
Or donate on our website: fvaudubon.org/join

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| \$_____ \$15 FVAS membership only, includes newsletter sent via email. | \$_____ Legacy Fund, creating and supporting local urban bird habitats for citizen enjoyment without leaving the city. |
| \$_____ \$25 FVAS membership only, includes newsletter sent via USPS. | \$_____ Total contribution |
| \$_____ General Fund, use as needed for conservation, field trips, education and outreach. | _____ Volunteer - Please contact me. I would like to know more about how I may help birds and FVAS. |
| \$_____ Phillip L. Wright Fund, small grants for student research. | |

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Email: (Required to receive the newsletter and birding alerts via email.) _____

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. 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.

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