

# September 2020

## Birding Observer



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

### Field Trips During the Pandemic

By Larry Weeks



On March 20th, all Chapter-sponsored field trips were cancelled for April and May, and later were cancelled through August due to the coronavirus pandemic. The scheduled field trips to Lee Metcalf, Ninepipes, Warm Springs Ponds, and Brown's Lake did not take place. However, by requiring people to

wear masks while driving and in the field, and doing social distancing, I continued to do field trips on my own\*. I had 4 people signed up for the field trip to Freezout Lake and the Rocky Mountain Front.

That field trip took place on May 24 – 25, with an overnight stay in Choteau. We observed 108 birds. The best birds were Clark's Grebe, American Bittern, Eurasian Wigeon, Ferruginous Hawk, Upland Sandpiper, Sanderling, Blue Jay, and Baltimore Oriole.

Steve Flood agreed to lead the Clearwater River field trip which involved a 4-mile hike from the Seeley Lake Ranger Station along the Clearwater canoe trail. Nine people participated. It was a wet day, but we did see 7 species of sparrows and a good diversity of other species. We stopped at the cliff by Bonner and saw the Peregrine Falcon. Some of the people witnessed a mid-air exchange of a prey by 2 falcons.

The coronavirus pandemic severely impacted the Glacier campout. The Blackfoot Nation prohibited non-essential travel on their reservation which prevented Glacier National Park from opening the entrances to Many Glacier, St. Mary's and Two Medicine. That prevented us from using the St. Mary's Campground and hiking into Grinnell Lake and hiking on the Red Eagle Lake trail. However, Glacier did open the Fish Creek Campground in time to honor our reservations for July 4th. Only 6 people out of the 16 that had signed up decided to do the 2-day, one-night trip. We visited McGee Meadow and hiked the

Forest and Fire Trail on July 4th and hiked the Howe Lakes and Camas Creek trails on July 5th. The best birds were a Spruce Grouse with 6 chicks at the Camas Creek trailhead and a Solitary Sandpiper at Howe Lake. We ended up with 54 bird species which included 8 warblers.

On August 1st, six people visited the ponds around Warm Springs to look for shorebirds. We ended up with 15 species that included Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, Wilson's Phalarope, Wilson's Snipe, American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Marbled Godwit, Semipalmated Plover, Killdeer, Spotted, Baird's, Semipalmated, and Western Sandpipers.

I continued doing the Beginning Bird Walks at Metcalf after cancelling the April walk. The May, June and July walks have been attended by 6 – 7 people, and most of these have been the same people. We have been getting anywhere from 45 to 58 bird species. We have watched the nesting Great Horned Owls go from the cavity, to the ground, to not being able to locate. We see a good mix of waterfowl, raptors, woodpeckers, swallows, and warblers.

I will continue to do the field trips on my own while requiring face masks and social distancing. If you are interested in participating, you need to call me directly to get the meeting times and locations for future trips. I am not planning to do the raptor banding field trip at Roger's Pass due to the crowded conditions in the blind.

**\* Please note that the trips described above are unofficial gatherings with Larry, and are not sponsored by Five Valleys Audubon. In light of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, all Five Valleys Audubon Society Chapter-sponsored meetings at the University and Chapter-sponsored field trips will be discontinued through 2020. We look forward to creating a calendar of field trips and events as soon as it is safe to do so. Until then, stay healthy and happy birding!**

## **Peeps from the Board: See the Bird. Be the Bird. By Jacob Glass**

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Missoula is a special place to bird. The variations in climate, elevations, and habitats keep the interest level high whenever we go out, never sure of what we might encounter. The area is compact enough that the favored patches are easily accessible to many. The community of bird watchers is avid, knowledgeable, and friendly. What's more, there is enough diversity throughout the year to have us always wanting to venture out for more. For precisely these same reasons, Missoula is also a special place to paraglide.

Paragliding is an adventure sport where the pilot uses a nylon wing, harness, and rescue parachute to glide through the sky. No engine is used to sustain flight. This is known as free flight. Rather, pilots leverage weather phenomena, rising air in the form of thermals or ridge lift from wind hitting slopes, to prolong their time in the sky. Access to the sky is either by foot launching from an elevation on the terrain, such as a mountain or sand dune, or by being towed up behind a vehicle. The world record for longest straight-line distance flown is 365 miles, which a team of three achieved in northern Brazil this past October 2019.



As practiced here in town, we pilots foot launch our gliders off of Mount Sentinel and Mount Jumbo year-round, except during the months of the Elk closure on Mount Jumbo. Hiking to the launches and flying over the terrain features afford unique opportunities to view and interact with the local avian residents in each of the seasons.

### **Autumn**

Daylight hours dwindle and some of our favorite seasonal visitors depart for warmer climes. On the ground, as we hike our way to the launches, yearlong residents make themselves known through their calls and harried flights. Northern flickers, Black-billed magpies, Dark-eyed juncos, and American robins remind us of their steadfast loyalty. We leave them below as we prepare to take flight ourselves. The thermals that lift us into the air are wide, smooth, and cold. From above, one may catch a glance at a group of retreating American white pelicans, or the appearance of a returning Rough-legged hawk.

### **Winter**

The air may be cold, but that does little to discourage. Hiking up to the Sentinel Summit via the M trail, I often find Snow buntings and Gray-crowned rosy finches. They are delightful to see in their small numbers hopping along the ground in search of seeds. Gliding down through the still, dense air, I will scan the larger boulders along the grassy slopes for solemnly perched Red-tail hawks. Common ravens, Northern flickers, and the occasional Merlin will watch from their perches in the barren trees of the University golf course as we pack up our gliders atop the crisp snow.

### **Spring**

Like birders, pilots covet this part of the year above the rest. The same sun that signals the return of feathered familiars also starts to heat the terrain. The daily contrast in low and high temperatures results in what are known as "booming thermals." These high rising parcels of air create the chance for distance flying, with the goal most often being to fly down the Bitterroot Valley to Hamilton. This is when I notice the greatest number of soaring raptors in between Mount Sentinel and Deanstone. There is the chance of sharing a thermal and being wingtip to wingtip with juvenile and adult Bald eagles, Red tailed-hawks, Ospreys, and Turkey vultures, and even Golden Eagles.

### **Summer**

The season that the majority Missoulians crave the most. The day begins early and ends late, which makes for a lot of flying potential. Parking at the ASUM Community Garden lot, we often begin our hike to access the South Summit of Mount Sentinel just as first light kicks off. In lieu of a hot cup of coffee to energize our ambitions, the metallic song of Western meadowlarks, hidden in the tall grass, will encourage us onward and upward. The flat section that used to be the shoreline of Glacial Lake Missoula is normally a buzz with flitting Vesper sparrows and Mountain bluebirds. In late June and early July, Bitterroot flowers dot the sides of the trail. There is a copse of conifers around the switchback before the final push to launch. Here, there is sometimes a Dusky grouse or two that will give the unexpected passerby quite a startle. Later in the day, we will head to Mount Jumbo for a smooth evening soaring session. Lazuli buntings sing and dart about conspicuously anywhere there is shrubbery along the trail. An assortment of raptors will join us as we surf the west wind being pushed upwards as it collides with the mountains. However, my favorite experience occurs when



floating above the summit of Jumbo during the last hour of light, when Hermit thrushes sing from the forest below.

For me, free-flight and birds are inextricably intertwined. In 1889, the German aviation pioneer Otto Lilienthal, nicknamed the “Father of Gliding Flight,” published his famous book entitled *Birdflight as the Basis of Aviation*. The work covers Lilienthal’s numerous and extensive observations concerning the details of how birds fly, the aerodynamics of wing shapes of different birds, and their ability to alter dihedral and curvature dependent on various flight situations. His object of study is most often the white stork (*Ciconia ciconia*). He writes, “The observation of nature constantly revives the conviction that flight cannot and will not be denied to man forever.” He and his brother went on to essentially start manned flight by building and flying the first rudimentary gliders. More than a century later and in a different part of the world, people are still fascinated and inspired by the flying creatures around them.

## Why Document Your Bird Sightings

### By Rose Leach

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I recently saw an exchange on a Facebook page about a potential record of a White-tailed Ptarmigan from outside of its known range in Montana, which is limited to areas above treeline in Glacier National Park, the Swan and Mission Mountains, and areas in the Bob Marshall complex south to at least Scapegoat Mountain (*Birds of Montana* page 117). The observer did not want to report the details to the Montana Bird Records Committee—he knew what he saw and did not feel like justifying it to the list police.

That is one way of looking at it. Another is to realize—hey if you had a ptarmigan in Montana south of its known range, that would be an interesting and valuable observation, because White-tailed Ptarmigan have not been documented there before. (In fact, the map in the online database, *Birds of North America* is incorrect, and shows an occupied area near the corner of Yellowstone National Park. These records lack supporting evidence and are thought to be other species. More on that later.) Submitting your documentation would help us to understand the distribution of this bird, and perhaps help in conserving it. So, why not supply the details to the records committee?

I know it can seem daunting, but documenting your sightings is valuable to conservation and science. One way to start the process is to enter your lists into eBird. That process can help you to understand if your record may be unusual, because you may trip a filter when entering the observation. If so, simply let the reader know what you

saw that suggested the identification you made—and probably more importantly—describe how you eliminated similar species. If you start to do this mentally and routinely as you are recording commonly seen species, I can guarantee that you will become a better birder. It means that you need to look at the whole bird and consider all possibilities, and not just look at the usual field mark and conclude that this must be the species you observed. That is, you are simultaneously ruling out and concluding what it likely is, at the same time.

Here is one example for you to think about. I recently saw a photograph of a woodpecker with a yellowish-orangish crown. It was identified as a Three-toed Woodpecker. We know that yellow on the crown means it has to be either a Three-toed or Black-backed, right? Well, no. In this case, the bird was an immature, and the observer failed to notice that the flanks were a clean white. That is, the flanks were not barred black-and white—which is diagnostic for Three-toed and Black-backed Woodpeckers. So, this was actually a Hairy Woodpecker.

In this example, looking at just 1 field mark—the yellow crown—led us astray. We quit looking at the bird, instead of looking at the flanks to make sure if they were clean white or barred. If we had considered the flanks, we would have said— ‘Wow, there is a weird looking Hairy Woodpecker’. Don’t feel bad about this—I learned this tip from a professional guide in the last 15 years or so, which is relatively recently as far as my birding goes. In fact, I have birded so long that I have made probably most every mistake possible, so I am happy to share with you the many times I have steered myself (and others!) wrong.

Back to our ptarmigan example. Next time you happen to spot this species, make a mental note to be sure to rule out female Dusky Grouse (the species most often confused with ptarmigan). In this case, double check to make sure that the tail is white. Also, see if you can spot any white on the wing. You will be glad you made the extra effort.

Next month, I will give you some further tips on how to describe and document your sightings, so that you can practice now, before you encounter an unusual record. You just might be the next person to properly document a ptarmigan in an as-yet unreported Montana mountain range.



## Remembering Bill Gabriel

By Jim Brown

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Bill Gabriel, a long time Five Valleys Audubon board member, passed away this April. Bill's interesting and fascinating life was guided by a strong desire to understand natural systems and an urge to explore the many facets of natural science. He spent his professional career helping manage wild lands in a wide variety of locations. He had an amazing memory as shown in his memoirs that hopefully will be published. Here are a few highlights about his life. His early childhood was spent growing up on a farm in the Allegheny Mountains of rural Virginia. He was very active in Boy Scouts where hiking, camping and canoeing furthered his interest in exploring and understanding nature. Birds particularly captured his interest. Time spent on the Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico and the unforgettable aroma of sagebrush sold him on the West.

Bill earned a degree in Forest and Wildlife Conservation from Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI). His college summers were spent being a smoke chaser and doing timber measurements in forests of the West. This led to a lengthy career with the U.S. Forest Service where he was a forest inventory specialist and timber management planner on several National Forests in the Rocky Mountains. Early in his career, serving in the military seemed wise so he joined the Army. His first assignment was with the Mountain and Cold Weather Command where he learned to ski. Next, he transferred to the Fort Bragg, NC military base where he was assigned to the forestry branch helping to manage their southern pine forests. Bill's military background, beginning with his high school academy followed by college at VPI and the Army, produced an interesting tension between the need to conform and his desire to explore. Perhaps some of his exploring desire was met by pursuing hobbies such as photography. As a kid, Bill liked taking pictures especially of things he observed in nature. He began with a Kodak Brownie camera and progressed over the years to using the newest photographic equipment. Mountain grouse were probably his favorite subject as he often saw them while doing field work. He became a professional photographer selling wildlife pictures to magazines such as National Wildlife, Audubon, Ranger Rick and Natural History. As a kid he was also fascinated with airplanes. He built model planes and flew miniature planes. During his Forest Service career, he became a licensed pilot and as a hobby, piloted gliders experiencing what hawks do in rising with thermals.

His urge to explore led him to apply for an FAO job with the United Nations in undeveloped nations. This took him

to Ecuador for a year where he helped design an inventory system for their tropical forests. Returning to the Forest Service meant an office job in the Regional Office. Bill believed what Ed Abbey wrote in a Voice Crying in the Wilderness: "the indoor life is the next best thing to premature burial." So, he decided to become a graduate student at the University of Montana and begin work on a PhD program in wildlife. For the next three years he taught a wildlife course and spent his summers living in a tent in the Bob Marshall Wilderness studying the effects of fire exclusion on elk habitat in the Danaher Basin. His work at the University led to one final career move, a three-year position in Alaska with the Corps of Engineers as an ecologist to help the Corps comply with the newly passed National Environmental Policy Act. Bill mused that perhaps his greatest achievement there was in convincing the Corps that a large flood control dam slated for the Chena River should be built with a hole in it to allow water flow without obstructing fish passage.

Bill's long period of serving on the Five Valleys Audubon Board was immensely helpful to our educational efforts. He had a strong belief in the importance of education and led the Phil Wright Research Awards program, helping the endowment grow from about \$10,000 to \$90,000. Now, several thousand dollars are awarded annually to deserving students who make presentations at Chapter meetings about their studies. Nearly 100 students have received awards since the program began. Many of these students have gone on to professional careers in wildlife management. One of Bill's favorite activities was leading birding trips to observe drumming Ruffed Grouse and dancing Sharp-tailed Grouse east of the mountains. Bill was also a voracious reader and possessed an enormous collection of books. Some of his bird-oriented books will be made available to attendees at future Chapter meetings. Bill's quiet demeanor somewhat hid his interesting life, but his dedication to supporting education and conservation is a legacy that will be remembered.



## Virginia Vincent

{September 25, 1930 - August 10, 2020}

By Connie Bauer

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Virginia Vincent was an enthusiastic birder and lover of Nature from her early youth; a meticulous observer of birds and native plants, she has left us years' worth of observations of birds in various habitats, most notably from her 39 years as a fire lookout on Stark Mountain overlooking the Ninemile Valley and environs. Over the years she regularly documented birds at places like Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, Maclay Flats, as well as those sheltered under her dense spruce trees on Kern Street in Missoula. In 2003, she was the first person in Montana to identify a White-Tailed Kite at Metcalf, a highly unusual bird for this region; and among the "dickie birds" in her yard, she identified a Tan-Striped Sparrow (a variation of the White-throated Sparrow) and a Hermit Thrush which are very unusual for this area. She kept longitudinal records of birdlife on the 7100' Stark Mountain peak on the Ninemile Ranger District, and those records of over 100 species of birds likely include some great opportunities for research for an interested scholar.

Over the years, Virginia led field trips to Brown's Lake, Metcalf and around the Missoula area, sharing her love for fieldwork and field observations. She was glad to share her knowledge in her characteristic slow and easy East Coast drawl. Folks who dared to drive the narrow mountain road to the lookout or to climb the steep trail to Stark enjoyed her observations and stories; perhaps you met her cats with whom she shared the lookout and who were objects of great interest of the hawks and eagles that soared above and below her perch. She reported a most unusual visitor, a sandpiper that spent the day picking for insects in the rocks (you will have to sift through her records to know which kind it was!). And she delighted in watching the fall migration of waterfowl sail by her 15x15' windowed cabin.

Virginia moved to Missoula from New Jersey after graduating from the University of Vermont with a degree in zoology, attended Cornell University's ornithology summer program, and worked as a research assistant at Princeton University before accepting a position at the University of Montana's Natural History Department in 1956. She held a variety of positions until becoming a lookout, and in addition to Audubon was a founding member of the Montana Native Plant Society and was an expert observer of plants and flowers in the region, notably on Stark Mountain where she also kept detailed records.

Her expertise as a lookout was highlighted in Montana's PBS Back Roads of Montana program and in the July 2001 issue of National Geographic. She was well known to those who knew her at the Village Senior Residence the past several years where she lived in assisted living and later in memory care. Virginia will be fondly remembered as a true character, and a devoted chronicler and lover of Nature who shared her knowledge, skills, and delight in Nature with any who showed interest.



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### Mama never forgets her birds

Poem 164

By Emily Dickinson

Mama never forgets her birds,  
Though in another tree—  
She looks down just as often  
And just as tenderly  
As when her little mortal nest  
With cunning care she wove—  
If either of her "sparrows fall,"  
She "notices," above.

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## The Great American Outdoors Act Benefits Birds, People, and Parks in Every State

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

*The historic bipartisan conservation law will bring parks and public lands the protection and care they deserve.*

WASHINGTON – “There couldn’t be a more important time than now to improve parks, protect birds and wildlife, and create jobs in every state across the country,” said Sarah Greenberger, senior vice president for conservation policy, National Audubon Society. “By providing full and permanent funding for the 50-year-old Land and Water Conservation Fund, we will fully realize the law’s intent to conserve natural landscapes, enhance recreation, and protect wildlife while creating jobs and driving investment in local communities.”

**HOORAY!**



In a bipartisan vote today, the House of Representative passed the Great American Outdoors Act, providing permanent, mandatory funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) at the authorized amount of \$900 million annually

at no additional cost to taxpayers. The program will help national parks, local parks, public lands, and athletic fields in every county across the country. The bill was passed by the Senate in June in a 73-25 vote and will move to President Trump next, who has indicated his support.

“This is the kind of bipartisanship the country needs,” said David Yarnold, president and CEO of the National Audubon Society.

The bill also creates a new fund (\$1.9 billion annually for five years) to address deferred maintenance projects at the National Park Service, Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Indian Education schools. These public lands and spaces provide critical bird habitat, protect endangered species, support the capture of carbon emissions, and connect people with birds across the country, but have struggled to keep up with repairs for buildings and infrastructure even as visitation has increased.

“Our parks and public lands are sanctuaries for people and birds alike and now we can do more to provide the protection and care they deserve,” added Yarnold.

## Court Strikes Down Trump Administration Policy That Let Companies Kill Birds

Reprinted from [Audubon.org](http://Audubon.org)

*In a major victory for conservation groups, a federal judge ruled that the Migratory Bird Treaty Act covers unintentional but avoidable avian deaths.*

“The decision strikes down a 2017 legal opinion issued by Daniel Jorjani, Interior’s top lawyer, which claimed the MBTA did not prohibit “incidental take,” a term for the unintentional but foreseeable and avoidable injury or killing of birds, often through industrial activity. “

Further, the judge wrote-- “It is not only a sin to kill a mockingbird, it is also a crime. That has been the letter of the law for the past century. But if the Department of the Interior has its way, many mockingbirds and other migratory birds that delight people and support ecosystems throughout the country will be killed without legal consequence.”

### Attention Audubon Friends!

Now you can bird virtually, with local ornithologist Dick Hutto and biologist Sue Reel on their recently crafted podcast, called “Bird Notes.” They have covered topics, such as local species, the importance of burned forest habitats, and tricky ID tips. Just click this link to get started!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbp7d788xuQ&list=PLYJGMeDtUZTjPwE8jpiPmDo8HjtBIU0Sy&index=1>



## Welcome New Members

Alexandria Albers	Jan Anderson	Trey Banbury
Lola Bergseng	Caroline Boyce	Daphne Bradford
Richard Buller	Nancy Crosby	Isaac Edikauskas
Teresa Frankfurth	Susan Gumm	Dottie Herring
Eric Hutchins	Lindy Jones	Nancy Kirkpatrick
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Phyllis Musicar	Faye Olsen	Ron Pettis
Howard Reinhardt	John Eric Schleicher	Kathleen A. Settevendemie
Corinne Tribe	Thomas Triehy	Jonathan Wagner
Mysta Ward	Clint Whittle	

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Lee Ballard in memory of  
Eleanor Weidman - \$50

Carol Odom in memory of  
Bill Gabriel - \$50

Katherine Heath in memory of  
Nina Van Rensselaer - \$1,000

Five Valleys Audubon greatly appreciates those who renewed their membership this past month. We generally encourage members to receive their newsletter via email (to conserve resources and our expenses), which is the default mailing option if provided by new members. If you want to change how your newsletter is delivered or have any changes to your mailing preferences, please contact the Membership Chair, Poody McLaughlin, at [pmcregan@bresnan.net](mailto:pmcregan@bresnan.net).

## 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](http://fvaudubon.org/join)

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ \$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: \_\_\_\_\_

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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](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.

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Position Vacant

Rachel Van Wingen, Board President