

September 2022

Birding Observer



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

Calendar

Tuesday, September 6, 2022, 6pm-8pm: The FVAS Board Meeting will be held in the Missoula Public Library Blackfoot Room (the large one). Note, because the library closes at 8pm, we must start promptly at 6pm.

Saturday, Sept. 10, 2022, 8am-10am: Town Bound Birding at Council Grove State Park, 11249 Mullan Rd. Meet in the parking lot. Apres-bird hangout at Black Cat Bake Shop.

Sunday, September 11, 2022, 8am: Attend an all-day field trip to Pablo and Ninepipes Reservoirs to look for shorebirds. The trip will involve 1-2 miles of level hiking. Meet the group in the west side of the Adams Center parking lot at 8am.

Monday, September 12, 2022, 7pm: Kate Stone and Mary Scofield of MPG Ranch will present on Common Poorwills. The meeting will be held in Room 110 in the Interdisciplinary Sciences Building (ISB) on the University of Montana campus.

Saturday, September 17, 2022, 10am-1pm: Beginning Bird Walk at the Lee Metcalf NWR from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm. Meet the field trip leader at the Refuge Visitor's Center.

The Secret Lives of Common Poorwills in Montana

Please attend our meeting on Monday, September 12, 2022, at 7pm to hear Kate Stone and Mary Scofield present their talk: The Secret Lives of Common Poorwills in Montana.



Illustration by David Allen Sibley

You may have heard of the dawn chorus, but have you heard of the midnight choir? Have you ever wondered what these nocturnal singers get up to during the day? Join us for a presentation about a lesser-known species of nocturnal birds, the Common Poorwill! Learn about the natural history of one of Montana's nightjar representatives, and some of Kate and Mary's fascinating research on MPG Ranch in the Bitterroot Valley.

Together we will explore breeding behaviors, diet studies, and migratory movements of Common Poorwills in western Montana. And do not worry, they'll be sure to bring lots of pictures of adorable Poorwill chicks and their stoic parents!

Kate Stone is a research ecologist at the MPG Ranch. She got her B.A. in Environmental Studies and Conservation Biology at Middlebury College, and M.S. in Forestry from the University of Montana. Kate's research focuses on a variety of topics that range from scavenger ecology to nocturnal insectivores to migratory songbirds. She is on the boards of both Bitterroot Audubon and Wild Skies Raptor Center, and she serves on the Montana Bird Records Committee.

Mary Scofield is a field biologist at the MPG Ranch. She got her B.S. in Biology at Pacific Lutheran University. She works on the avian science team on the nocturnal insectivore project, the Lewis's Woodpecker project, and the migratory owl project. She has also worked with Golden Eagles in Montana and California Condors in southern California.

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. Due to our membership being composed of many older adults, masks are encouraged, but not required. Room 110 is large enough that social distancing is possible. You may also watch the meeting over the zoom link below.

Topic: FVAS Meeting

Time: Sep 12, 2022, 7:00 PM Mountain Time (US & Canada)

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://umontana.zoom.us/j/99927146108>

Meeting ID: 999 2714 6108

One tap mobile

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Find your local number:

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Peeps from The Board: Bobolinks, Part II

By William Boggs

Bobolinks (like the rest of us) have seen a lot of changes in the last 200 years. For Bobolinks, the first change was the most radical. Between 1820 and 1920, the species' ancestral habitat—the mid-continent tallgrass prairie—was eliminated by the plow. Bobolinks had been living, and flourishing, in that ecosystem since the last Ice Age. Now it is gone.

Unlike many tallgrass prairie birds (like the Greater Prairie Chicken), who desperately searched for what was no longer there and died out, Bobolinks adapted. Beginning in the mid-19th century, and continuing to the mid-20th, they began to breed in the fallow fields, hedgerows, meadow verges, and hayfields of the patchwork landscape of what was then America's diversified agricultural regime. This was not ideal. The new breeding environment was more fragmented and drier than the tallgrass prairie, and it was also constantly changing—not a congenial feature for a species showing extreme site fidelity through the generations. So, Bobolinks' population declined significantly as their range expanded both westward and eastward from its original Midwest core. You could encounter Bobolinks in Massachusetts and Montana, but often they were birds searching for a home rather than returning to one.

Hayfields turned out to be a favored breeding area during this time since they tended to be wetter and have taller grass than fallow or border land. Up until the 1960's, hayfields worked for Bobolinks, since they were often planted in timothy and clover and not cut until later in the summer, after the Bobolinks had bred, fledged their young, and fled.



Illustration by Robert Bruce Horsfall

The next 60 years, however, brought very difficult times. As fully mechanized, chemical-intensive agriculture began to dominate the land, many hayfields were converted to row crops, and those that remained were planted in cultivars like alfalfa, and harvested two, three, or more times a season. So, hayfields, the ever-tempting habitat, became death-traps for the unsuspecting birds, with their eggs, nests, and unfledged young being destroyed by the cutting and baling machines. Surviving adult birds with this experience would not, of course, return to the site of the slaughter, but might well repeat the experience the next spring in the hayfield a mile or two down the road. This situation, naturally, led to drastic population declines. In Illinois, for example, the Breeding Bird Surveys revealed a 90% population drop by the year 2000. The prospect of a world without Bobolinks darkened the horizon.

But there was hope nearby - the cattle ranch of the Ruffatto family near Bass Creek on the west side of the Bitterroot Valley. There, several large, irrigated hayfields—deliberately cut late—mimicked the Bobolinks' tallgrass prairie habitat. As a result, scores of bobolinks return there from South America every May to sing, mate, nest in the tall grass, and nurture and fledge their young before the haying. And they have been doing it for decades, so that their perfect site fidelity is rewarded. Each spring the birds end their 5,000-mile migration by dropping into the hospitable fields where they were born, and from where, in mid-July, they, along with their just-fledged young, will retire to obscure marshes of the Metcalf to molt, change color (the males, that is), and gain weight for the long journey south.

How did this happen? "Well, my grandfather used to talk about the Bobolinks. He called them skunk-birds," says Tom Ruffatto, reminiscing. "He liked them. I remember them growing up. You notice Bobolinks, you know! And we saw these birds weren't there in the fall and winter. But every May, they'd show up—lots of them, singing on the fenceposts, flying over the fields, disappearing in the grass. And we'd see the nests—they're hard to find, you know—but we'd get a pretty good idea when the little birds could fly. So, we didn't hay 'til then. And these fields have never been cultivated, just irrigated—flood-irrigated—for the grass—which isn't fancy grass, it's native: clover, creeping foxtail, orchard-grass, reed canary...but it makes good hay, even cut a little late...And these last years, we have quite a few birdwatchers down here, I see the cars parked along Larry Creek Road, next to the fields. It's neat! Everybody likes the Bobolinks."

So—at least on this ranch—we have come full circle, in a way. A diversion weir at the Bass Creek bridge produces a 300-acre miniature tallgrass prairie, around which cattle roam in the neighboring fields. Bobolinks sing in the grass and tend their nests. They are safe. They have a home. They can thank the Ruffattos for that—and therefore, so can we.

Field Trip Summaries

by Larry Weeks

May 28–29: The Freezout Lake trip did not find the Upland Sandpipers along Highway 200 for the second consecutive year. We stopped just short of Fairfield to look at a hawk's nest that was occupied by a Red-tailed Hawk. There was a nice group of birds in a flooded field next to the highway that included about 10 White-faced Ibis, Franklin's Gulls, and a Willet. After a stop at the first outhouse at Freezout Lake, we went south and hiked a dike. It was obvious that the lake level was down because the pond to the north side of the dike was dry. On the south side of the dike, there were American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Wilson's Phalaropes, and a few ducks. There were 3 shorebirds at the end of the dike that we finally identified as Sanderlings. At the "neck", we flushed an American Bittern and found at least 2 Clark's Grebes. At the second outhouse, there were several Willets along with American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, and a Forster's Tern. Pond 1 had a good variety of waterfowl. On a dirt road north of Pond 1, there was a Swainson's Hawk on a nest, but the Ferruginous Hawk's nest was unoccupied. At Duffie's place, we saw Swainson's Thrushes and Western Kingbirds. There was a Golden Eagle at the Rattlesnake Butte that was being harassed by a Prairie Falcon. Bellview Road had both longspurs and Bobolinks. The next day, we decided to go to Benton Lake. Before leaving Freezout, we stopped at the "garage" which is south of the headquarters. As we arrived, a couple of Great Horned Owls started flying back and forth. We also got an excellent look at a Lark Sparrow in the gravel driveway. On the entrance road to Benton Lake, we found Upland Sandpipers. As we started the tour route, there were over 20 Sharp-tailed Grouse displaying on the lek. The ponds had lots of waterfowl including a few Red-necked Phalaropes, 3 Black-crowned Night-Herons, lots of Eared Grebes, and Franklin's Gulls. Rose Stoudt located a Loggerhead Shrike near the outhouse on the way out. There were 14 people on the trip, and we had 108 species.



Sandpipers, but the prairie dog town did not have any visible Burrowing Owls. The next stop was at a large prairie dog town, but again, no owls. We then visited Camp Creek near Zortman and walked around the campground. Birds included Spotted Towhee, Western Tanager, American Redstart, Ovenbird, Veery, Swainson's Thrush, Cedar Waxwings, and Wild Turkey. The stop at Midale Road produced Lark Bunting again this year, but the surprise was 6 Burrowing Owls at a medium-sized prairie dog town. There were Chestnut-collared Longspurs at several locations along 191. We camped the next 2 nights at Trafton Park in Malta. The Eastern Screech Owl was seen both nights in the park and the Chimney Swifts were found in the city center at 8:30 pm. On Saturday, we had a Baltimore Oriole on the drive to Bowdoin. The lake is very low due to the drought, and I estimated that less than half of the lake was covered by water. Despite the dry conditions, we did find most of the expected shorebirds; American Avocet, Black-necked Stilts, Willets, Marbled Godwits, and Wilson Phalaropes. Gulls included Ring-billed, California and Franklin's. As we were progressing around the lake, we met Andrew Dreelin, who was working for the Smithsonian on a bird study with the American Prairie Reserve. He was on his way to see the Cassin's Sparrow which had been identified by Josh Covill. So, we followed him and got to see the Cassin's Sparrow which is a non-descript sparrow. During our conversations with Andrew, he suggested a study plot south of Malta for Sprague's Pipit and Baird's Sparrow. After Bowdoin, we visited Nelson's Reservoir to look for a Brown Thrasher, but we were unsuccessful. However, we did find Western Kingbirds and a Black Tern. We tried for Red-headed Woodpeckers along the Milk River, but apparently, they have stopped nesting due to the drought and competition with European Starlings for cavities. We found a Loggerhead Shrike in the same location as last year. We did drive south of Malta to look for Sprague's Pipit and Baird's Sparrow. On the drive, we flushed about 10 Sage Grouse near the road and got excellent looks. At the study site, we found Baird's Sparrows and Rose was able to see and hear a Sprague's Pipit. On Sunday, we did a little birding along Highway 191 on our way back to Missoula. There was a Sharp-tailed Grouse on a phone line by the entrance to the Matador Ranch. We tried again for the Green-tailed Towhee at James Kipp and finally located some. We also had a Plumbeous Vireo which was confirmed by Alex's photos. We ended up with 136 species for the trip.



June 9-12: The 4-day field trip to Bowdoin NWR was blessed with good weather for a change. Only four people participated: Alex Kearney, Paul Hayes, Rose Stoudt, and the author. We did some birding on the drive

which included a stop at a nest east of Windham which had a Ferruginous Hawk in 2019 but contained a Swainson's Hawk this year. The stop at Roy included Bobolinks, Night Hawks, Least Flycatcher, and a Great Horned Owl. Before setting up camp at James Kipp Recreation Area, we got a Field Sparrow but failed to find the Green-tailed Towhee. After dinner, we birded James Kipp and saw or heard Orchard Orioles, American Redstart, Lark Sparrows, Red-eyed Vireo, Ovenbird, and Yellow-breasted Chat. On Friday, the first stop along Highway 191 was at Dry Fork where we had Upland

July 7–10: This year's Glacier campout was attended by Michelle Lower (De Borgia), Alex Kearney, Paul Hayes, Jill & Mark Hollinger, Jeff Ipsen, Danny



Tannenbaum, Jill Davis, and the author. The group met at Chewing Black Bones Campground at 5:00 pm on July 7th. After a dinner of chicken fajitas, we birded around the campground. A Baltimore Oriole was an unexpected bird. Other birds included Veery, Swainson's Thrush, American Redstart, Cedar Waxwing, Northern Waterthrush, and Black-

headed Grosbeak. The following morning, the Common Loons on Lower St. Mary Lake provided a wakeup call at 5:00 am with their melancholy yodeling and wailing calls. After breakfast, we drove to Many Glacier and hiked into Grinnell Lake. The birds were a little sparse until we got to the upper end of Lake Josephine where we found a pair of Three-toed Woodpeckers, Fox and Song Sparrows, Common Merganser, Northern Waterthrush, and Yellow Warbler. Shortly after leaving the lake, we found a second pair of Three-toed Woodpeckers that were visiting a cavity nest. Then we started hearing Varied Thrushes and Pacific Wrens. At Grinnell Lake, I spotted a group of 13 Mountain Goats on the hillside across the lake. On the return trip, we had Boreal Chickadees on the south side of Lake Josephine. After dinner, some of the group entered the park at St. Mary and hiked into St. Mary Falls. There was a black bear along the road on the drive to the falls. On Saturday, we hiked the Beaver Pond Trail and the Red Eagle Lake Trail. At the beaver pond, we had Barrow's Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Willow Flycatcher, Northern Waterthrush, and Red-naped Sapsuckers visiting their cavity nest. When we reached the intersection with the Red Eagle Lake Trail, we hiked a mile up the trail to a large grassy meadow with a stunning view of the Logan Pass area. The Hollingers separated after the Red Eagle Lake Trail and the rest of the group drove to Glacier Campground which is on the west side of Glacier Park. Before dinner, we hiked into McGee Meadow and found Lincoln's Sparrow and Wilson's Snipe. On Sunday, we drove up the Inside North Fork Road and hiked into Howe Lakes. On the hike into the lakes, we had Olive-sided Flycatcher, MacGillivray's warblers, Red Crossbills, American Kestrel, Fox Sparrow, and Cassin's Vireo. There was one adult Common Loon on the first lake and 2 adults loons and 2 chicks on the second lake. Other birds at and around the lakes included Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Red-winged Blackbird, Lewis' Woodpecker, and Black-headed Grosbeak. The trip ended at Camas Creek with a short walk into Christenson's Meadow. We failed to find a LaConte's Sparrow, but we did see a pair of Sandhill Cranes. We had 78 species for the trip and hiked 22 miles.



July 30th: Only 4 people participated on the Deer Lodge field trip to look for shorebirds. The group met Nate Kohler at the Job Corps Ponds and he led the trip since he knew where the shorebirds were. We ended up with ten shorebird species; Killdeer, Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes, American Avocet, Wilson's Snipe, Solitary Sandpiper, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Spotted Sandpiper, and Semipalmated Sandpiper. The Ducks Unlimited Pond behind the Warm Springs Hospital had the best diversity and quantity of shorebirds. The sewage treatment pond had eight species of ducks, about 50 Wilson's Phalaropes and 2 Red-necked Phalaropes. Total species for the trip was 42.

Fort Missoula Pond Surveys: An early assessment By Poody McLaughlin

Beginning May 18th and ending July 14th, 35 volunteers participated in five bird surveys that broadly encompassed the nesting season. We listened to and saw which birds used the many habitats at the Fort Missoula Ponds property. The birds themselves provided many surprises and much data about the importance of this area for wildlife.



While I am still wading through the data, there are some interesting observations to report. The five surveys averaged 61 species. Not surprisingly the highest diversity of species was found on Route 1, which had the densest riparian habitat (and mosquitoes!), followed by Route 2 which also included riparian habitat along the Bitterroot River. Although not on city property, there is a heronry that supported several successful nests of Great Blue Herons.

Surprisingly, the north pond had the highest diversity of waterfowl. This is surprising because earlier fish surveys on both the south and north ponds concluded that the only fish were in the south pond, with none in the north pond. Three species -- Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, and Hooded Merganser -- all had broods on the north pond. On the July 14 survey there were three broods of Hooded Merganser: 3 females with 5, 7, and 3 chicks each. The Common Goldeneye brood was first found on May 18 and on each of the remaining 4 surveys. In one survey the female Goldeneye was seen battling with a Hooded Merganser over a four-inch fish!



There are extensive grassland areas in the area, and three grassland species were seen and heard on all 5 surveys: Western Meadowlark and Vesper and Savannah Sparrows. A Vesper Sparrow nest was found and photographed, and the other 2 species had direct evidence of breeding. A now rare find in the Missoula Valley was a Bobolink that was seen and heard on May 18 only. Other migrants seen only on that date were a rare sighting of a Broad-winged Hawk and Sandhill Cranes. This points to another important value of this property as a migratory stopover for several species.

This fall the chapter will submit a report to city that includes these discoveries and our recommendations for the future use of the property. By early spring, the city will issue its own report and options for this property. The public could then provide input. A heartfelt thank you to all 35 volunteers who contributed to this effort. Stay tuned for your chance to chirp up for the birds!

Thank You!



The Chapter would like to thank Larry Weeks and Ginny Fay for their teaching a summer beginning birding class as part of the University of Montana's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (MOLLI) catalog. Larry and Ginny have taught the class since 2018. UM sponsors the MOLLI effort, and they handle the registration and fees required. The classes run for 4 hours on three consecutive early mornings in the first week of June, when the group visits 3 field trip sites and they learn the basics of field identification and birding by ear. Since 2018, Larry and Ginny have taught four sessions (2020 was skipped due to Covid) that have reached 56 adults.

And that's not all—Larry and Ginny have generously donated all their teaching salaries (paid by the University) back to the Chapter, which has totaled \$4,800 to date. Thank you so much Larry and Ginny for offering this service to our community and for donating your time and salary earnings back to the Chapter. We appreciate all our dedicated and talented volunteers!

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

\$ _____ \$15 FVAS membership, includes newsletter sent via email.

\$ _____ Phillip L. Wright Fund, small grants for student research.

\$ _____ \$25 FVAS membership, includes newsletter sent via USPS.

\$ _____ Legacy Fund, creating and supporting local urban bird habitats for citizen enjoyment without leaving the city.

\$ _____ Free for students, includes FVAS newsletter, sent via email.

\$ _____ 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.

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 manages 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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