

October 2022

Birding Observer



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

Calendar

- **Monday, October 3rd, 6-8pm:** The October Board Meeting will be held in Blackfoot Room (the large one) of the Missoula Public Library.
- **Saturday October 8th, 9-11am:** Kelly Island is the destination for this month's Town Bound Birding Series field trip. See details on page 3.
- **Monday, October 10th, 7pm:** Dr. Andy Boyce, avian and conservation ecologist, will speak at our October Program meeting. His presentation, "Ecology and Conservation of the Long-Billed Curlew in Eastern Montana," will begin at 7pm in Room 110 of the Interdisciplinary Science Building.
- **Saturday, October 15th, 10am:** The Beginning Bird Walk at the Lee Metcalf NWR will take place 10am-1pm. Meet the field trip leader at the Refuge Visitor's Center and prepare for approximately two miles of level hiking.
- **Saturday, October 22nd, 9am:** Join us for an all-day field trip to Brown's Lake to look for loons and scoters. Meet at 9am at the northwest corner of the Adams Center parking lot. No hiking will be involved.

Ecology and Conservation of the Long-billed Curlew

Please join us for our monthly chapter meeting on Monday, October 10th at 7:00 PM to hear Dr. Andy Boyce present his talk on Ecology and Conservation of the Long-billed Curlew in Eastern Montana and Beyond.



Dr. Boyce will provide us with insights into the ecology of Long-billed Curlews in the context of Black-tailed prairie dog colonies. He will also discuss advances in curlew conservation as a result of GPS-tracking studies. Long-billed Curlews are the largest sandpiper in North America. They come to Montana's vast grasslands in the spring, building

their nests on the open ground following a winter stay in California, Central America, and the Gulf of Mexico.

Dr. Andy Boyce is an avian and conservation ecologist with the Migratory Bird Center & Great Plains Science Program and the Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute. Before arriving at the Smithsonian in 2018, Andy received his BA in Ecology and Evolution at the University of Colorado, and his PhD in Wildlife Biology from the University of Montana. His work focuses on understanding how the restoration of grassland keystone species impacts grassland birds of conservation concern, and bird biodiversity in general. His work and that of his students combines old-fashioned point counts and nest-searching with cutting-edge animal tracking technology including GPS and Motus tags.

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. Because our membership is comprised of mostly older adults, masks are encouraged, but not required by the university. Room 110 is large enough that social distancing is possible, but you also have the option of watching the meeting over the zoom link listed below, until you feel comfortable attending.

Topic: FVAS General Meeting

Time: Oct 10, 2022 at 7pm Mountain Time

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://umontana.zoom.us/j/97068418653>

Meeting ID: 970 6841 8653

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Peeps from The Board: An Interview with Sara Scott
By Jeff Ipsen

What do bluebirds, puffins, and raptors have in common? Sara Scott!

Over the past several years, I have been involved with Missoula's Audubon chapter in a variety of ways. I have gone on field trips, served on the board, and written articles for the newsletter.

More recently, I was fortunate to

become acquainted with Sarah Scott – a scientist who has studied bluebirds in western Montana for the last several years. I thought I would interview Sarah about her research both here in Missoula and recently in Greenland for this month's contribution to the Audubon newsletter!

So Sarah, what is the focus of your bluebird field work in Missoula? What are you trying to find out?

I have been a seasonal banding assistant on Renee Duckworth's (University of Arizona) long-term field study since 2019. The focal species are Western and Mountain Bluebirds. There are several sites in and around Missoula, comprising over one hundred nest boxes, all of which are monitored for breeding activity during the spring and summer. Nestlings and many adults are banded each year. Tracking the development of the nestlings from egg to fledgling is one of my favorite parts of this field work.

The questions we try to answer change frequently with each graduate student, but the broad topics of investigation for the study have to do with competition between the two bluebird species and the inheritance of behavior, specifically aggression which has some interesting playback on movement and population density.

Because conditions in the natural world (e.g. weather) are always flexing and changing on different timescales and vary from season to season, long-term data is crucial to having an accurate portrait of how things are and how things have changed. Dr. Duckworth has banded bluebirds in Montana for 22 years and plans to continue for many years to come.



Sara with two Peregrine nestlings in Greenland

What, in your opinion, is the most interesting thing about bluebirds? What sets them apart?

I think the most interesting thing about bluebirds is the variation in personality! One bird can behave so differently from another under seemingly similar circumstances and that is always fascinating to watch. These populations are also special due to the range overlap between the Western and Mountain species in this part of the country. The interactions between the two species can be very different at sites that are quite close together and seem very similar to the human eye.

Several of the observations that have been the most surprising and interesting to me during my seasons on the project have been related to territories and competition over nest boxes. For example, this past season a Mountain Bluebird male was hanging out near a nest box that was occupied by an active Western Bluebird pair with a full clutch of eggs and there was an unusual absence of aggression. One other highlight from this past season that comes to mind is the return of an eight-year-old female Western Bluebird!

How did your interest in bird research begin – what got you hooked to this field?

I was in my last year of undergraduate studies in Biology at University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point. I was completely unsure of what area I wanted to specialize in, when I got an email about an opportunity to travel to Greenland and study Peregrine Falcons with Dr. Robert Rosenfield. I applied, was accepted to the program, and fell head over heels for birds that summer. Quite the introduction!

I know you recently got to return to Greenland! What was it like to study birds in such a remote location?

I did! I was lucky enough to be able to return to Greenland with The High Arctic Institute. It was incredible. The landscape is unlike any other and the visual human presence is so different from what we are accustomed to. I was assisting with breeding bird surveys of several species.

The High Arctic Institute has been doing these surveys in northwest Greenland, specifically in and around Thule, for several decades. They study 25-30 species in one capacity or another, with some short-term projects and some long-term. For many of these species, the Thule area is the northernmost edge of their breeding range. The arctic is warming significantly faster than the rest of the planet, so changes are more likely to be observed in these populations. The Peregrines in this area, for example, did not breed this far north until about 50 years ago, but their numbers in the region have been increasing over the last 30 years. Monitoring species in extremely remote areas is logistically challenging, so they are often under-studied.

Having long-term data on these arctic populations is vital, especially as environmental conditions grow unstable.

The project focused on a variety of species. Many birds we worked with, I had never seen in-person before! We surveyed several species of seabirds that were “lifers” for me. Dovekie, Black Guillemot, and Atlantic Puffin, to name a few! Seeing the enormous cliffside nesting colonies of Thick-billed Murres and Black-legged Kittiwakes was one of the most amazing field experiences I’ve had. We also caught and banded two Northern Wheatear fledglings, which was a wonderful surprise.

How do you think climate change and the loss of glacial ice will impact these birds?

Birds, like other animals, are being tasked with adapting to an increasingly erratic set of environmental conditions. Some seem to be able to adjust to unexpected changes better than others and we are seeing the effects of this already. One issue of note for the arctic breeders we were monitoring this summer is the change in the type of precipitation they experience when raising young. As conditions warm, there has been a change from snow to rain during the summer and its increasingly common to see heavier rainfalls, which can all be very difficult to cope with for small, downy young birds.

As this community knows, birds in general are struggling. I have seen in the field how tough they are, but things have not been made easy for them and they need our help, however we can manage to give it.

So, you are back in Missoula working on a research project with Raptorview. What are you trying to learn?

Yes, I am back in Montana to help monitor the fall raptor migration! Migration allows us to see how various species of birds are doing (e.g. are there more or less of a certain species flying along a particular migration route this year?). There are many migration stations at various locations in the US that conduct species counts as raptors fly overhead. Some, including Raptorview, conduct banding operations as well. I spent a season at Lucky Peak in Idaho previously and am very excited to observe this epic movement of birds from Montana this year!



Belted Kingfisher photo by Brian E. Kushner

Field Trip Summaries by Larry Weeks

August 21st: The field trip to Freezout Lake was to look for shorebirds. However, due to recent sightings of a Whooping Crane at Freezout, we spent considerable time looking for the crane, but our efforts were unsuccessful. The crane was seen the following day and Alex Kearney photographed the crane on September 9th. We ended up with 16 species of shorebirds with the best location along the dike south of the first outhouse. The shorebirds included Killdeer, Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes, American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Dowitcher, Solitary Sandpiper, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Willet, Spotted, Baird's, Least, Semipalmated, and Western Sandpipers. There were hundreds of yellowlegs. Other birds included Clark's Grebe, American Bittern, Black-crowned Night Heron, Bonaparte's Gull, and Black Tern. There were 11 people on the trip.

September 11th: Pablo Reservoir was the primary destination for the September field trip to look for migrating shorebirds. The water level was down this year and there was plenty of shoreline habitat. However, we had to work for our shorebirds. We were able to walk out onto the mud flats to get closer to the birds. We ended up with 9 species of shorebirds. A single Western Sandpiper and a group of five Pectoral Sandpipers were the best shorebirds. Baird's Sandpipers were the most abundant. Other sightings included a Caspian Tern which flew by while we were on the dike, a Peregrine Falcon perched on a rock, several American Pipits, 4 species of grebes, and a Red-breasted Merganser. We also visited the Ninepipes Reservoir which had a few Greater Yellowlegs and Baird's sandpipers. There were also 20+ Trumpeter Swans, and we heard a Red-necked Grebe. There were 11 people on the trip which included 2 people from Flathead Audubon and Will McDowell joined us later. We had 44 bird species.

**October Town Bound Birding at
Kelly Island Fishing Access
Saturday October 8th (9-11am)
Meet & park at 4854 Spurgin Road**

Please join us for a morning walk, as we leisurely search for birds in the woodlands, floodplain, and along the river. All interests and experience levels are encouraged to come. We recommend comfortable closed-toed shoes for the unpaved trail. The terrain is level and accessible to most. Likely encounters include Belted Kingfishers, Pileated Woodpeckers, Bald Eagles, and more. For those interested, we will meet for coffee and discussion afterwards at The Trough (2106 Clements Road.)



**10 Fun Facts
About the Barred Owl**
By Neel Dhanesha
Reprinted from
www.audubon.org

The Barred Owl is one of our more common owl species. Like most owls, it is primarily nocturnal, but it is known to call and hunt during the day. Easily

identified by its heavily streaked chest, round, tuftless head, and big, black eyes, the Barred Owl can be found in forested areas throughout its range year-round, including in more urban environments. Read on to learn more fun facts about this bird.

1) If you're out in the woods and hear someone calling "who cooks for you, who cooks for you all," you're hearing the distinctive call of the Barred Owl. If you hear what sounds like maniacal laughing afterward, that's usually two Barred Owls performing a courtship duet. Usually.

2) Barred Owls prefer nesting in tree hollows, but they also use nests abandoned by other animals, from squirrels to Red-tailed Hawks, and nest boxes located in forest habitat.

3) These hefty owls become incredibly territorial once they establish a nest—and especially when they begin rearing chicks. Barred Owls chase away intruders by aggressively hooting or attacking and striking with their talons.

4) Barred Owls prefer mature forests that have an abundance of prey and trees with cavities. Barred Owls hunt from a perch, where they sit and wait, scanning and listening for prey. They silently swoop down when they pinpoint their meal.

5) Barred Owls mostly eat small mammals like mice and voles, but sometimes they go fishing for crayfish and crabs. If a Barred Owl eats enough crayfish, the feathers under its wings can turn pink—just like a flamingo, which gets its hue from the high volume of shrimp in its diet.

6) Barred Owls are largely sedentary, but in the past century, they have expanded their range. The expansion began west across Canada and then south into the states of the Pacific Northwest, reaching California by the 1980s. This poses a problem for the bird's smaller cousin, the Spotted Owl, which is endangered and relies on old-growth forests. Barred Owls force Spotted Owls from their territories and can also hybridize with them.

7) Barred Owls mate for life, and they usually have a single clutch of two or three white eggs each year. During

incubation, which lasts between 28 and 33 days, the female sits on the eggs while the male hunts for food.

8) After they hatch, young Barred Owls can stick around the nest for up to six months, which is unusual for owls. During this time, the young owls rarely stray far from each other and are often seen sitting side by side.

9) Hatching order often determines chick size: The oldest of a Barred Owl clutch tends to be the largest, with the other chicks being progressively smaller. Adult owls can grow to an impressive 20 inches tall—big enough to terrify an unsuspecting person wandering in the woods.

10) Chicks leave the nest at four to six weeks old, but they don't go far: Once they leave the nest, these talented climbers clamber about their nest trees, using their bill and talons to grab hold while flapping their wings to keep balance. At 10 to 12 weeks, they begin flying.

Bonus Fact! Historians believe that Harriet Tubman, an avid naturalist, used the Barred Owl's call as a signal for people traveling the Underground Railroad. Depending on the call she used, freedom-seekers would know whether it was okay to come out of hiding.



Autumn Jokes

How do you fix a broken pumpkin?
~ With a pumpkin patch!

Why did the scarecrow win a Nobel Prize?
~ He was outstanding in his field.

What kind of music did the Pilgrims listen to?
~ Plymouth Rock.

Why is Dracula so easy to fool?
~ Because he is a sucker!

What happens when winter arrives?
~ Autumn leaves

What happened when the turkey got in a fight?
~ The stuffing was knocked out of him.

Why are trees so forgiving?
~ Because every fall, they let it go!

A Warm Welcome to our Newest Members

Judith Arledge	Cynthia Baker	William Ballew
Richard Beaver	Natilya Blades	Carmela Bowns
Richard Carter	Barbara Cieslewicz	Thomas Cook
Dan Deborde	M H Gierach	Inge Goetz-Cordova
Randy & Gail Heaton	Ann Karp	Carolyn Kramer
Holly Kuehlwein	Susan Levenstein	Diane Litz
Roger McDonald	Robert McGowan	FJ McMichael
Eric Nelson	Mary Oelschlaeger	Max Oelschlaeger
Brad Peterson	Martina Rolando	Kaitlin Sawyer
Edie Smith	Marianne Spitzform	Cheryl Tanis
Janet Vandyke	Stephanie Walther	Diane Wells-Cherry



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, 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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