

APRIL 2011

BIRDING OBSERVER



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

Calendar

- * **Monday, April 4th, 7pm:** Larry Weeks will host the board meeting.
- * **Monday, April 11th, 7:30pm:** Artist/ author Donna Love will discuss Great Blue Herons at the April program meeting.
- * **Friday, April 15th:** Submission deadline for the May edition of the *Birding Observer*.
- * **Saturday, April 16th:** Monthly beginning bird walk at Lee Metcalf NWR from 10am-Noon. Meet field trip leaders Poody McLaughlin and Joe Regan at the Refuge Visitor's Center. Learn basic skills for bird identification, including use of binoculars and field guides, key field marks, and much more. Families with children and birders of any level are welcome!
- * **Saturday, April 23, 2011:** Full-day field trip to Warm Springs Ponds led by Gary Swant. Meet in the middle of the UM field house parking lot at 7:00 AM. PLEASE NOTE THE EARLIER START.
- * **Saturday, April 30, 2011:** Full-day field trip to Brown's Lake led by Jim Brown. Meet in the middle of the UM field house parking lot at 8:00 AM.
- * **June 21-22, 2011:** Two-day field trip to Freezout Lake. See write-up on page 4 for further details.



The GREAT Great Blue Heron

The Monday, April 11th program focuses on the physiology, life history, and conservation of the Great Blue Heron. Artist and award-winning author Donna Love will describe its skeletal structure and its nesting, fishing, and migration habits. The program will take place in the Gallagher Business Building, room L14 (lower level) at the University of Montana at 7:30pm.

Donna has written numerous nature books for young people. She regularly brings her interactive natural history and art programs to grade schools and public events in Montana and the Pacific Northwest. Her motto "The more you know about something, the better care you can give it" is why she likes to help people learn more about an animal or place.

Donna's book awards include a Skipping Stones Honor Award for "Awesome Ospreys" for promoting ecological understanding and cooperation around the world; a Mom's Choice Award for "Henry the Impatient Heron" for outstanding education in children's literature; and the Association of Partners for Public Lands Children's Book of the Year for "Animals Count in Grand Canyon National Park" for excellence in children's literature promoting national parks and preserves.

Following Donna's presentation, you will hear two more, brief presentations. One will be from Luke Stappler, a recipient of a 2010 Philip L. Wright memorial research award. He will tell us what he learned on his study titled "Distribution and relative abundance of beavers in the Upper Clark Fork River Basin." Luke is a senior at UM studying wildlife biology. The other speaker will be Hillary Kimbler, a senior at the University of Montana, majoring in Environmental Studies, who served as an intern for Five Valleys Audubon's Community Naturalist Program (CNP). Hillary will give a brief summary of her experience.

Peeps from the Board

The Black Vulture: Picking Up the Pieces

by Carolyn Goren

The Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) is the most numerous of the seven New World vultures (family Cathartidae, to which the Turkey Vulture also belongs). It is not considered a species of concern. Despite its name and black appearance, it is not related to the near-threatened Eurasian Black Vulture (Cinereous Vulture, *Aegypius monarchus*, family Accipitridae). Instead, it is more closely related to Storks (Ciconiiformes, Storks and their allies). I was reminded of their numerosity on a recent trip to Panama. They are everywhere. They are likewise prevalent in Mexico and other Central American countries. In fact, their range extends from Patagonia in South America into North America, particularly the East Coast, lower Midwest, Texas and the Southwest. Their northern range has been expanding north and west over several decades, and they have been seen in Wisconsin, North Dakota, and even Nova Scotia. They are regularly reported on Christmas Bird Counts in New Jersey, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana. Vagrants have been reported in British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, Yukon Territory, California, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Colorado, and North Dakota. If they have been seen in Montana, they must be very rare, as I haven't yet found any reports.

Black Vultures are sometimes referred to as Carrion Crows. They are highly social, monogamous, family centered, opportunistic scavengers, but the real Carrion Crow is a totally different bird. They form long-term pair bonds. They are generally non-migratory, but those in the most northerly regions, or at higher elevations, may

relocate to warmer climates in winter. And some birds do move locally. Black Vultures congregate around human populations, particularly in Central and South America, less so in the US in large modern cities with good sanitation. They feed in open areas, but roosts and nests are often in forests, and roosts are often near water. Humans enhance their food sources by providing garbage dumps, road kill, farms, markets, and slaughter houses. Large communal roosts facilitate communication about food sources and formation of foraging groups. They may roost with Turkey Vultures. Groups are referred to as Kettles, Committees or Wakes. Aggression is directed primarily at non-kin.

The Black Vulture is black, with a grey-black, unfeathered, wrinkled head and neck. Length ranges 60-68 cm (22-27 in.); wingspan 137-150 cm (4.5-5.5 ft.); weight 1.18-2.75 kg (3.5-6.4 lbs.) Tails are short and rounded, while Turkey Vulture tails are longer and slender. Their under-wings show light silvery-white primaries. Their heads appear larger than that of the Turkey Vulture. Males and females are similar. Unlike the red-headed Turkey Vulture which soars with a dihedral wing pattern, the Black Vulture soars with flat to only a slight dihedral pattern. Their flight is described as soaring with more flapping. Take-offs and landings are "gangly." Their feet are weak, and not particularly good for grabbing and holding prey. They hop more than walk on the ground. The Black Vulture has excellent eyesight, but a poor sense of smell; and in places where the two species co-occur, the Black Vultures soar well above the Turkey Vultures, whose sense of smell is extraordinarily good, and follows the Turkey Vultures to prey. The Black Vulture's aggressive nature then becomes manifest as they chase the Turkey Vultures away and claim the feast for themselves. Both of these Vultures lack a syrinx, and their vocalizations are primarily hisses, grunts, and squeals.

Lifespan of the Black Vulture has been reported up to 25 years, and reproduction begins at about 8 years. They typically lay 2 eggs (range 1-3), once a year. They do not build a nest. Eggs are laid on a tree stump, in a cave, in an unoccupied human structure, or on the ground. Both parents incubate the eggs, with incubation lasting 37-55 days. Human disturbance



negatively impacts nesting success. Young fledge about 70 days after hatching. Parents continue to feed and nurture the young for 10 weeks, and up to 8 months. The very young are fed regurgitated liquefied food 15-20 times a day.

Diet consists primarily of carrion, mostly large mammals, and occasional live prey and plant material. They feed on the ground, but sometimes wade into water to feed on carrion or fish. They will attack and kill domestic stock such as newborn lambs, calves, and pigs, and may eat eggs and catch and eat young birds and newly hatched sea turtles. We watched a small group of Black Vultures feeding on an opossum road kill in a small town in western Panama. They also eat coconuts, overripe pumpkins, and the fruit of the oil palm. Pellets, containing hair, vegetable material, occasional pieces of plastic and other garbage, accumulate under roosts. Despite their seemingly unsavory diet, they are apparently resistant to diseases such as botulism and anthrax. They are not known to be significant vectors of disease. Their stomach acid is said to kill almost all bacteria and viruses.

Conservation Status: Common. In U.S., they are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Before modern sanitation, Black Vultures were regarded as beneficial scavengers. In the 1800s, they were tolerated around meat markets in Charleston, S.C., Savannah, GA, and New Orleans, LA. However, in the 20th century, ranchers' concerns over possibilities of diseases and of attacks on weak calves and lambs led to the trapping and poisoning of thousands of vultures. From 1948 to 1970, DDT caused significant egg losses. Degradation of habitat, with loss of tree cavities for nesting, shifted the nesting sites from 25% tree cavities to other sites after 1920. Other human causes of Black Vulture mortality include collisions with autos and power lines. Aircraft collisions are a risk to both the birds and the planes. In 2008, a Delta plane from Atlanta landed with a Black Vulture in its nose cone. American crows and opossums are known to take Black Vulture eggs.

Certain Black Vulture behaviors have not endeared these birds to all people. For example, Black Vultures regulate temperature by urohydrolysis (excreting onto their legs for cooling). They sometimes roost on rooftops where they defecate and regurgitate. They also regurgitate when stressed or if they have to fly after a large feeding. They may predate newborn farm

animals. Still, they have been described as "the most crucial avian scavenger in the world."

Field Trip by Larry Weeks

Saturday, February 26,

2011: When I schedule a field trip for late February, I expect to encounter some moderating temperatures. However, this year, I got one of the coldest days of the winter. During the field trip to the Mission Valley, the temperature ranged from 0 to 6 above. Fortunately, the winds were light. The route started in Ronan and went West on Round Butte Road, North on Leighton Road to the Pablo Reservoir, South on Stasso Road for 2 miles, North on the Back Road to the Cafferty Road area, Polson sewage ponds, Valley View Drive, and Moiese Valley Road. Wintering raptors is the focus of this field trip, and because we only had 2 vehicles and there was little traffic on the back roads, we were able to stop and identify nearly every raptor. We ended up with 121 raptors which included 51 rough-legged hawks, 31 red-tailed hawks, 31 bald eagles, 4 great horned owls, 2 American kestrels, 1 prairie falcon, and 1 Cooper's hawk. There was tremendous variation in the hawks which led to the usual discussions as to the proper identification. We ended up with 3 Harlan's red-tails and a spectacular whitish hawk with horizontal barring that looked like a gyrfalcon that we decided was a rough-legged hawk. Two of the great horned owls were on nests and we had one clump of cottonwoods that contained 8 bald eagles. Another treat was finding a small flock of American tree sparrows feeding on weed seeds with a few horned larks. The Foust Slough contained an estimated 2000 mallards and 2 trumpeter swans with red neck bands. We searched for the snowy owls and the ferruginous hawk that were seen earlier this winter but we were unsuccessful. We also found a porcupine along Moiese Valley Road which we GPS'd for reporting to the Montana Natural Heritage Program. There were 5 people on the field trip and we had 36 species.



Two-Day Field Trip to Freezout Lake

The 2-day field trip to Freezout Lake and the Rocky Mountain Front has been scheduled for May 21st and 22nd and it will be led by Joe Elliott. The plan is to leave at 7:00 AM on May 21st and drive to Freezout Lake. The group will bird Freezout on Saturday and the Rocky Mountain Front on Sunday. We will spend the night in Choteau and the motel options include the Stage Stop Inn (1-800-466-5900), Bella Vista Motel (1-406-466-5711), or Gunther Motel (1-877-491-5444). Participants are asked to make reservations in advance. Please call Joe Elliott at 542-5014 or Larry Weeks at 549-5632 if you wish to attend, and we will coordinate carpooling.

Research Project at the Bison Range by Larry Weeks

I received a call from Kerri Citterbact, a student at Notre Dame, who will be doing research at the National Bison Range this coming spring and summer. She is looking for volunteers to assist her with locating grassland bird nests by dragging a rope over the grassland to flush nesting birds. She expects that most of the bird nests will be western meadowlark, Vesper sparrow and grasshopper sparrow. She would like help for 5 days in late May, 5 days in June and 5 days in July. A person could volunteer for 1 day or more. She would like to have 2 volunteers each day. If you are interested, please contact Larry Weeks at 549-5632 or bwsgenea@onlinemt.com.



World Wildlife Fund Calls for Volunteers

World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Northern Great Plains (NGP) Program is seeking enthusiastic volunteers for a unique opportunity to assist in annual counts of Greater sage-grouse, *Centrocercus urophasianus*, displaying on leks (dancing grounds) throughout the month of April on the American Prairie Reserve in Phillips County, North Central Montana.

Although some knowledge of sage-grouse behavior and experience attending active sage-grouse leks is an asset, it is not a requirement because a local WWF biologist will provide on-site orientation and training prior to initiating counts. Volunteers will be directed to one or more specific leks to conduct counts, preferably committing to volunteer for a period of at least three days. Counts will be conducted from 30 minutes before sunrise to two hours after sunrise. Data forms and recording materials will be provided. Volunteers should feel free to explore all that the American Prairie Reserve and the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge have to offer outside of survey hours. Accommodations will not be provided, but volunteers will be directed to two public campsites in the vicinity of the leks and drinking water will be provided. It is hoped that volunteers will have some flexibility in scheduling should rain result in the need to shift scheduled survey dates because roads may become hazardous in the area in wet conditions. Regrettably, volunteers should also recognize that forecasts for extended periods of rain during the survey period may result in cancellation of activities, as human safety is of key concern. As a result, volunteers with 4 wheel drive or all wheel drive vehicles will be given preference.

Dennis Jorgensen, Program Officer, with WWF's NGP Program will coordinate volunteer registration and offer the on-site orientation and training. Dennis can be reached at Dennis.Jorgensen@wwfus.org. Initial contact will be via e-mail but once interest has been expressed subsequent communication will include follow-up on the telephone to address any questions regarding this opportunity. In the event of the expression of interest beyond the need for volunteers, we will create a list of volunteers for future participation. Thanks so much to all of you Audubon members for your consideration.

Call for Montana Audubon Award Nominations!

We are now seeking nominations for 4 awards that will be given away at Montana Audubon's annual meeting this year. The awards acknowledge individuals who exemplify a commitment to birds, other wildlife, and habitat conservation. This year awards will be given for Conservationist of the Year, Environmental Educator of the Year, Special Achievement, and Lifetime Achievement Award.

To nominate your candidate, please call the Montana Audubon office to request an award nomination form or download the form from our website at <http://mtaudubon.org/about/awards.html>. To be considered for this year's award, nominations and all supporting material must be postmarked no later than May 16, 2011. All nominations and supporting material should be sent to Montana Audubon, PO Box 595, Helena, MT 59624, or by fax: (406) 443-7144. The award ceremony will take place on June 4 at Montana Audubon's Bird Festival in Glasgow. Questions? Contact Janet Ellis at 406-443-3949 or jellis@mtaudubon.org.

Intern for Community Naturalist Program

by Larry Weeks

In January, the author hired Hillary Kimbler as an intern for the Community Naturalist Program (CNP). Hillary is a senior majoring in Environmental Studies at the University of Montana. Her duties as an intern consists of contacting the teachers which received Audubon Adventures, asking them if they wanted a bird presentation and giving the presentations to the classes whose teachers requested a presentation. As of March 15th, Hillary and the author have made 15 presentations, mostly to 3rd, 4th and 5th grades, at St. Regis, Charlo, Arlee, Potomac, Bonner, Target Range, and Hawthorne. A total of 306 children have attended the presentations so far. Six more presentations are scheduled which include Frenchtown, Rattlesnake, Lowell, Target Range, and Franklin, plus 2 field trip are scheduled for Alberton and Target Range. All of these activities are in addition to the normal CNP. Hillary will give a brief summary of her experience at the April 11th Chapter meeting.

Watch the Skies!

The Truth About Alfred Hitchcock's BIRDS

By Ted Geoghegan

While Alfred Hitchcock's movie classic THE BIRDS is a work of fiction, there are many interesting facts about the movie that few people know.

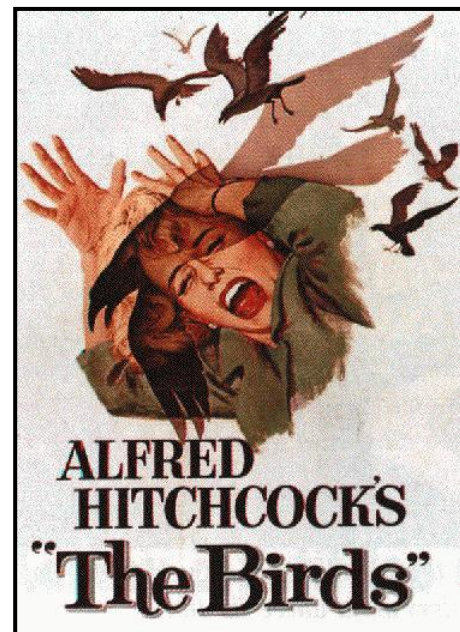
Almost all of the birds used in the film were real. During one scene in which actress Tippi Hedren is attacked by birds as they fly down her chimney, director Hitchcock actually tied several of the animals to her with thin string!

There is no score in the film at all, an idea the director had to help draw attention to the eerie cries of the various birds as they flocked together.

The film is based on a short story from 1952 by Daphne Du Maurier. In that tale, the events take place in England. In the film, they take place in a coastal California town.

Actor Mitch Brenner claims that in order to get the seagulls to stand around long enough to be filmed, they were fed wheat that had been soaked in whiskey!

Accompanying director Alfred Hitchcock to the film's premiere in London were two flamingos, 50 red cardinals and starlings, and six penguins.



We wanted to know how the breeding bird populations were faring in the Clark Fork River-Grass Valley Important Bird Area (IBA) in order to know how well the IBA was protecting important bird species. To find this out we compared breeding bird survey data gathered by Chapter volunteers in 2003-04 with data taken in 2009-10. We were particularly interested in breeding populations of species of conservation concern. The table below summarizes the number of breeding pairs for species of conservation concern that were sampled during both time periods. More of the IBA was sampled in 2009-10 than the earlier dates so some increase in breeding pairs might be expected. Some variability in breeding pairs was expected due to normal fluctuations in bird activity and the variability inherent in the sampling process. With this in mind, we found that most of the species maintained stable breeding populations. The Lewis's Woodpecker, a keystone species that gives the IBA a rating of Continental significance, did very well. We are concerned about the apparent decline of the Red-eyed Vireo, a species that seeks cottonwood and aspen riparian areas. We are also puzzled by indications of decline in the Hooded Merganser and possibly Red-napped Sapsucker. Overall however, we believe the IBA is functioning well and helping to protect important bird species.



Species	2003	2004	2009-10
Hooded Merganser	12	5	3
Osprey	15	9	17
Bald Eagle	4	6	6
Red-tailed Hawk	7	5	7
Peregrine Falcon	1	1	1
Calliope Hummingbird	14	9	17
Lewis's Woodpecker	41	41	57
Red-naped Sapsucker	24	30	22
Pileated Woodpecker	12	8	7
Willow Flycatcher	44	30	44
Veery	2	1	0
Red-eyed Vireo	16	21	3
Warbling Vireo	17	11	25
Lazuli Bunting	0	14	16
Bobolink	3	7	4
Clay-colored Sparrow	8	6	9

Hi Friends! Go Green!

View your *Birding Observer* newsletter even sooner, only **on-line**.

Just send us an email request with your name to Vick Applegate at k7vk@arrl.net.

We will alert you each month when the newsletter becomes available on-line.

You can find the Five Valleys Audubon web site at: <http://www.fvamisoula.org/>

Welcome New Members:

Joyce Brobeck
Fred & Shirley Hager
Robert Noonan
Ruth Sypian

Margaret A. Cronin
Carol Hayes
Rosemary C. Oechsli

Weber Greiser
Judith Kiely
Anne Sorte

Nina Harbine
Mary Langenderfer
Debbie & Marc Steinberg

Thanks to our Returning Members:

Charles K. Allen
Tony & Marlene Beltramo
Juliette Crump
John E. Dunkum
Le Roy Gaskin
Judith Hutchins
Donald & Charla Murray
Cathy H. Ream
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Important Note To Our Valued Members: Please note the expiration date of your membership on the address label of this newsletter. We wouldn't want your membership to expire. We would miss you! A renewal form is on the last page of every newsletter for your convenience. Please renew your membership so that you don't miss any newsletters or any of the upcoming events of the Five Valleys Audubon Society.

**Join National Audubon Society
and Five Valleys Audubon Society**

Please enroll me as a member of the National Audubon Society and my local Chapter. I will receive the *Audubon* magazine and the *Birding Observer*, as well as participate in all local Chapter activities. I understand that my dues are shared between NAS and my local Chapter.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

\$20 for a one-year membership
for an individual or family

Please make the check payable to National Audubon Society and mail to: National Audubon Society, Membership Data Center, PO Box 422250, Palm Coast, FL 32142-2250. **C1Z N53 OZ**

Join Five Valleys Audubon Society

Please enroll me as a Chapter member of the Five Valleys Audubon Society. I will receive the *Birding Observer* and may participate in all local Chapter activities. I understand that my dues remain entirely with the Chapter.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Email (optional): _____

\$15 is enclosed for Chapter-only membership

An additional sum of _____ is also included to support Chapter activities.

Please make check payable to the Five Valleys Audubon Society and mail to: Five Valleys Audubon Society, PO Box 8425, Missoula, MT 59807.

Five Valleys Audubon Society

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