

December 2010

Birding Observer



Five Valleys Audubon Society

A Chapter of the National Audubon Society

Calendar

- * **Monday, December 6th, 7pm:** Pat Little will host the board meeting.
- * **Sunday, December 5th:** Full-day field trip to the Mission Valley led by Jim Brown. Meet in the middle of the UM field house parking lot at 8:00 AM.
- * **Saturday, December 11th:** Owl trapping field trip in the Missoula Valley led by Denver Holt. Meet in the middle of the UM field house parking lot at 9:00 AM.
- * **Monday, December 13th, 7:30pm:** Hummingbirds are the subject of the December program meeting.
- * **Friday, December 17th:** Submission deadline for the January edition of the *Birding Observer*.
- * **Saturday, December 18th:** Five Valleys Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count
- * **Saturday, January 15th:** Bird walk for beginners at Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge. Please see page 3 for details.

Flight in the smallest of birds



The intriguing flight of hummingbirds will be the topic of the Five Valleys Audubon program on Monday, December 13 at 7:30 p.m. in the Gallagher Business Building, room L14 (lower level) on the University of Montana campus. Dr. Bret Tobalske, professor in the Division of Biological Sciences at UM and Director of the Field Research Station at Fort Missoula, will explore two alternative strategies for accomplishing flight in small birds.

Hummingbirds are the smallest flying vertebrates, the only birds that can sustain hovering, and yet they also accomplish long-distance migration. Hummingbirds fly with "rigid" wings and continuous, rapid wing flapping. In contrast, virtually all other small species regularly interrupt their wingbeats in what is called "intermittent flight," and they also flex and contort their wings to various degrees during their upstroke. These contrasting strategies are clearly related to wing design and ecology.

Dr. Tobalske pursued graduate study at the University of Montana. His initial research led to an M.A. degree in Zoology in which he explored the effects of timber harvesting on bird populations and fledging success in woodpeckers. This effort was supported by a P.L. Wright Research Award from Five Valleys Audubon. Woodpeckers have a characteristic intermittent flight style, and a fascination with this type of movement led him to pursue research into bird flight, a focus that continues today. He received his Ph.D. in 1994, worked as a post-doctoral fellow

under a Fulbright Fellowship in France and then at Harvard University. He was on the faculty at the University of Portland in Portland, Oregon from 1999-2008, and since then has returned to the University of Montana.



Peeps from the Board: Cattail Corner

by Pat Little

Watching a marsh is one of the best therapies I know. There's something special about the complexity of the scene – the cattail spikes, the reeds bent over, willow leaves rustling in the wind, and ripples on patches of open water. And of course, the birds.



A few blocks from my house there's a small marsh called Cattail Corner which occupies about 2½ acres at the intersection of Russell and 39th. I stop there for a dose of relaxation whenever I walk or ride by. There's always something interesting going on. Last fall, a little over a year ago, I saw something amazing...

I arrive at Cattail Corner in the dark, and the lights in Albertson's parking lot and Noon's gas station are shining into my eyes as I look across the marsh. At first all is quiet, no bird sounds, little traffic. Then the birds start to make their small noises, gathering strength as the daylight begins to increase. Soon I can see some details in the marsh. The cattail stems seem to have little black dots on them, like so many specks of pepper, and over the course of the next few minutes the dots become more obvious, more numerous, and climb nearer to the tops of the stalks. Blackbirds!

With the improving light the sounds increase, both birds and traffic, and I begin to see groups of blackbirds flying around in the marsh. They go a little ways and land again, on the tops of the spikes. There's a kind of collective energy in their movements that gradually builds, and the flocks get larger and the flights more energetic. I can feel something is going to happen.

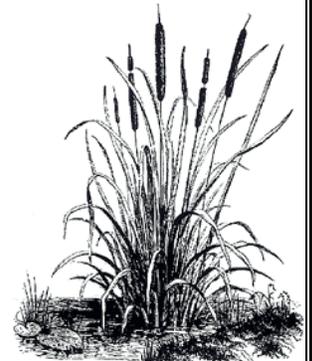
A group flies toward the edge of the marsh and, instead of landing again, as they have been doing, they keep going, climbing over the willows, past me, and off into the sky, headed north. I watch them disappear into the lightening sky.

Instantly the marsh is calmer, less frenetic. Peace prevails for a little while, and a few minutes pass before the next group decides to leave. Over the willows and off into the dawn sky they go. Then more and more flocks leave, all heading north or north-west. Gradually the marsh empties. Every time a flock takes off a sudden hush descends, and all the birds in the marsh pipe down for a bit. Then the chatter resumes. Why? I wonder.

In the evenings I have noticed flocks of blackbirds returning to Cattail Corner from the north, so I assume they are roosting in the marsh at night and foraging elsewhere during the day. Where? I wonder.

Last fall I watched this spectacle on a number of mornings over a two week period, in late September. Sometimes I took pictures. Other times I just tried to count them, which was not always easy. One day, for instance, part way through the exodus, a couple of noisy motorbikes drove by, and the whole marsh erupted – a sky full of blackbirds, then all gone. I couldn't count them, but what a sight! On other days the groups were smaller and I could get a good estimate. The first flocks leaving were small, maybe 10 or 20 birds, and I would be able to calibrate my eye, as it were, by counting the individuals in these smaller groups and visually dissecting the later, larger, flocks into chunks of a size that I knew contained, say, 20 birds. I could scale up from the earlier numbers. Not precise, of course, but a decent estimate, I hope.

One day they made it easy. The blackbirds flew out in small flocks, well spaced out, and I was able to keep up. I just stood there and counted, adding in my head as they went. 20, then 50, then 200, then 150... On and on and on. Over a period of about 25 minutes, that morning in late September 2009, I counted four thousand blackbirds leaving Cattail Corner! That's a lot of blackbirds for a small marsh.



Clearly so many birds don't live there on a regular basis, and I presume this was a large congregation staging for migration, or perhaps stopping off for a while en route.

This year I didn't see the same large numbers. Maybe I was there at the wrong times, or maybe it didn't happen at all. Perhaps the unusual weather last fall, with the severe cold snap in early October, had something to do with it. Did the blackbirds know that their watery world was about to solidify, and were they migrating en masse ahead of the freeze? I wonder.



Beginning Bird Walk
10am-Noon, January 15th, 2011
Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge

Are you a beginning birder? Or do you want to brush up on identification skills? Then this monthly beginning birding field trip is just right for you! Learn basic skills for bird identification, including use of binoculars and field guides, key field marks, and much more. Binoculars are available if needed. Families with children are welcome. Minimal walking is involved.

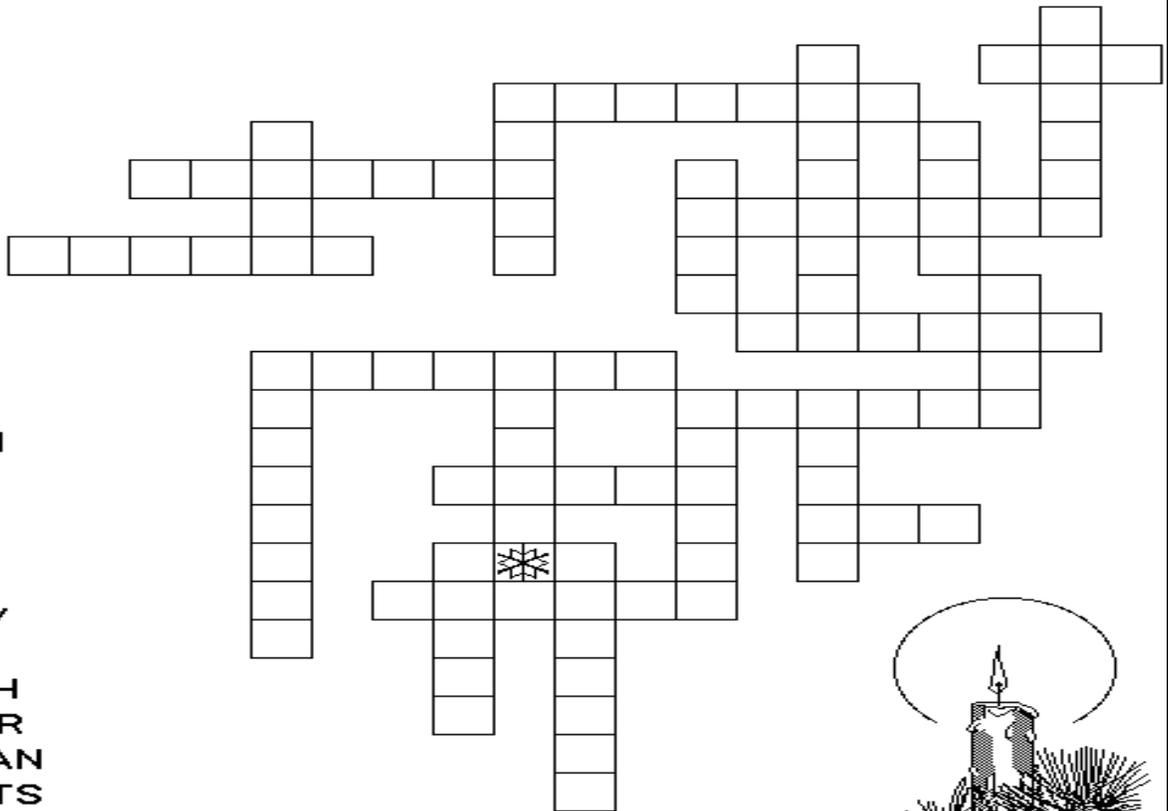
Meet at the Lee Metcalf NWR headquarters at 10 am. For more information, contact Larry Weeks, 549-5632 or Lynn Tennefoss, 544-6323.

Sponsored by Bitterroot Audubon Society, Five Valleys Audubon Society and Lee Metcalf NWR.

Christmas Crossword

Make all the words fit into this crossword.
 Each word is only used once.

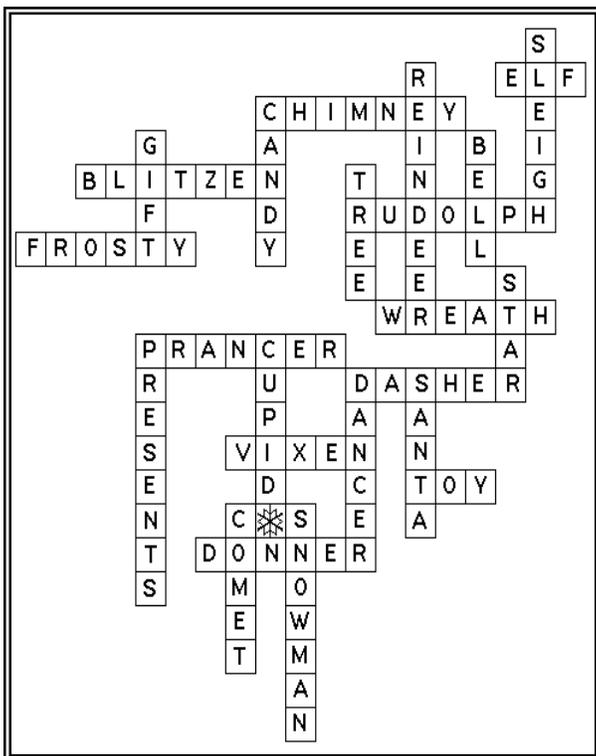
- ELF
- TOY
- GIFT
- BELL
- TREE
- STAR
- SANTA
- COMET
- CUPID
- VIXEN
- CANDY
- FROSTY
- WREATH
- DASHER
- DONNER
- SLEIGH
- DANCER
- CHIMNEY
- BLITZEN
- RUDOLPH
- PRANCER
- SNOWMAN
- PRESENTS
- REINDEER



Field Trips by Larry Weeks

Saturday, November 6, 2010: The field trip to Maclay Flat involved a hike around the 2-mile path. It turned out to be a cool day with light showers. With the exception of red-breasted nuthatches and Clark's nutcrackers, the birds were hard to find. I used taped calls to attract a pair of Steller's jays and a small flock of Clark's nutcrackers. We found one great blue heron roosting in a tree on our side of the river and then it flew to another tree across the river. Immature and mature bald eagles were observed flying upriver and both were seen later sitting in the cottonwood trees near an eagle nesting site. The only waterfowl was a lone mallard that was flushed from a swampy area along the Blue Mountain Road. However, we did get all 3 species of nuthatches. When we returned to the parking lot, we encountered a large flock of Eurasian-collared doves that must have numbered about 20 birds. It seems odd to find the doves in a forest habitat. There were 27 participants on the field trip and we tallied 16 bird species.

Crossword Answers



Missoula Christmas Bird Count

The Missoula Christmas Bird Count will be held on Saturday, December 18, 2010. If you would like to participate in the field count, contact Larry Weeks at 549-5632 or bwsgenea@onlinemt.com. If you are interested in being a feeder watcher, contact Elizabeth Johnston at 327-1525 or birder@bigsky.net. The count day will end with a potluck dinner at the home of Ruth & Russ Royter, 520 Highland Park Dr. (telephone # 728-7984). Dinner will commence at 6:30 PM. Please bring your favorite potluck dish, or A-L, bring a salad or dessert, and M-Z, a hot dish. After the potluck, we will tabulate the count results.



Nominating Committee

The Five Valleys Audubon Board has formed a Nominating Committee to put forward candidates for vacant and expiring Director and Officer positions. Elections will be held at a Chapter membership meeting in early 2011. The committee is Alex Taft, Carolyn Goren, and Pat Little.

All of our Officers—President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer—are up for election, and the incumbents (Paul Loehnen, Pat Little, Char Murray, and Alex Taft, respectively) are willing to stand for re-election. Of the six Director positions on the Board, one is vacant, two (Joyce Nave and Bill Boggs) will continue their existing unexpired term, and of the three incumbents who are up for re-election at least two (Gerhard Knudsen and Carolyn Goren) are willing to stand for re-election.

The Nominating Committee solicits suggestions from members for candidates for any of these vacant and expiring positions. Our contact information is on the back page.

Welcome New Members:

Brook & Molly Blair
Sophy Hagey
Susan Jensen
Colin Martin
William Robnett

Louise Cameron
Denise Hamersley
Christopher L. Lott
Terry McEaney
Janet Stevens

Florence Chessin
James Harkins
Forrest Madden
Janet McMillan
Bill Thomas



Thanks to our Returning Members:

Cori Archibald
John Baumann
Ed Brunsvold
Gladys & Barney Considine
Bill DeCou
Allison Easterling
Richard Haines
Carol Kinney
Anne & Pat Little
Judith Perine
Jeanine Siegler
Robert W. Weaver

Vivian Aylesworth
Guy Bingham
Judy Bungarz
Elaine M. Corrigan
Kristi Du Bois
William Elison
Patricia A. Hardman
Ellen Knight
Beth & Paul Loehhen
Thomas Roberts
Kit Stevens
Suzy Archibald Wilson

Dianne Barnes
Nancy Braun
Gail Clarke
Kristen Crandell
David Durnford
H. William Gabriel
Elizabeth Johnston
Rosemary Leach
Sharon Lukomski
Freda Rodgers
Mary Thomas
Beth Wright

Sara Jones
Lisa Lenard
Janet Palmer
Bob Rolfson
Tom & Mary Thompson
Hedwig Wright

**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. **COZ 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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<http://www.fvamisoula.org>

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Vice President	Pat Little	1710 34th St., Missoula, 59801	493 – 1745	roughleg@gmail.com
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2010	Gerhard Knudsen	4400 Scott Allen Dr, Missoula, 59803	251 – 2765	gmk@bresnan.net
2010	Bill DeCou	PO Box 8674, Missoula, MT 59807	728 – 5376	billdecou@bigsky.net

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	Jim Brown	1504 Woods Gulch Rd, Missoula, MT 59802	549 – 8052	brownjs2@bresnan.net

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www.mtaudubon.org

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Board President: Dan Sullivan

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Director of Bird Conservation: Amy Cilimborg amy@mtaudubon.org

Administrative Officer: Larissa Berry lberry@mtaudubon.org