

September 2023

Birding Observer



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

Calendar

- **September 5th, 6-7:45pm:**
The board meeting will take place in the Blackfoot Room of the Missoula Public Library.
- **September 11th, 7pm:**
Attend our program meeting to hear Dr. Jack Kirkley talk about the significance of Great-tailed Grackles in Montana.
- **September 16th, 10am–1pm:** Beginning Bird Walk at the Lee Metcalf NWR. Meet the field trip leader at the Visitors Center. Expect two miles of level hiking.
- **September 23rd, 8am:** All-day field trip to the Pablo Reservoir to look for shorebirds. Meet at the Adams Center parking lot. Expect approximately one mile of level hiking and a rocky dike.
- **October 7th:** The field trip to Roger's Pass for raptor banding is full. Contact Larry Weeks if you want to join the waitlist, in case of cancellations.



by five consecutive years of Great-tailed Grackle activity there. This six-year series of occurrences included several documented breeding attempts, one of which resulted in the successful fledging of a pair of hybrid offspring, the first confirmed case of successful hybridization between a Great-tailed Grackle and a Common Grackle.

One grackle (dubbed Mr. McGrackle, due to his frequenting of his favorite fast-food restaurant!) apparently spent at least five summers and two consecutive winters in Dillon. Considering this species' century-long range expansion northward throughout the western half of North America, the significance of these recent observations in Dillon may suggest that this could have been an initial pioneering instance into Montana of the leading wave of this on-going range expansion. If so, then perhaps someday in the not-too-distant future Great-tailed Grackles will no longer be considered a "rare bird" within our state. Time will tell.

D Kirkley is an ornithologist who specializes in the study of birds of prey. He earned his bachelor's degree in pre-professional zoology at Ohio Wesleyan University and his masters and doctoral degrees in biology-ecology at Utah State University. He retired in June of 2021 after a 36-year career as a biology professor at the University of Montana-Western in Dillon. He continues to pursue his research interests and service to the community as an emeritus professor, while maintaining a connection with the institution to which he dedicated his entire career.

Great-tailed Grackles in Montana

Please join us on Monday, September 11, 2023, at 7pm for our first chapter meeting after the summer break. We're excited to welcome back Dr. Jack Kirkley as our speaker who will regale us with the story of Mr. McGrackle.



Mr. McGrackle
Photo by Dr. Kirkley

Up until recently, there were very few documented sightings of Great-tailed Grackles in Montana. The first Dillon sighting of a lone male in March 2013 was followed

The meeting will be held in the Interdisciplinary Sciences Building (Rm 110) 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 by the university. You may also watch the meeting over zoom:

<https://umontana.zoom.us/j/96990543104>

Peeps From the Board: Summer Birding By Ser Anderson

I have a harder time getting out and birding in the summer than during most of the rest of the year. The days are hotter, and they and the birds start earlier, but I've never been a morning person. FVAS continues to run field trips, but my schedule fills up with other things and I am rarely able to attend. Activity patterns and plumages change and the songs that help me find birds quiet and the ducks all start to look the same.

I'M NOT AN
EARLY BIRD
OR A
NIGHT OWL,
I'M SOME
FORM OF A
PERMANENTLY
EXHAUSTED
PIGEON.



In some ways though, the challenges make the times I do go birding in the summer more noteworthy.

This year, I started the summer off by attending Montana Audubon's Wings Across the Big Sky Festival in Great Falls in early June. Two things about the festival stood out for me: the birds and the birders. My favorite part about any field trip is getting to learn from and share with other people who care about and are as excited by birds as much as I am. The festival expands the range of the people I get to interact with, drawing birders from all over the state and beyond to share their knowledge of birds and passion for birding. On my Saturday field trip, a loop around Choteau, I described a shorebird I glimpse flying overhead as having black and white wings to the trip leader, Dan Casey, who easily identified the bird as a Willet. Driving out towards the Front Range from Freezout Lake, we found bobolinks and watched the musical flights of both Chestnut-collared and Thick-billed Longspurs. A final stop for the day near the mountains taught me the song of a Veery, though the bird itself remained elusive. I bird mostly in northwestern Montana, and it shows. My life list expanded by at least these five species over the course of just one day. And the weekend continued from there as I explored the prairies and wetlands around Great Falls.

At the end of July, I went camping with a friend in the Thompson Chain of Lakes area. My friend isn't a birder though her interest in birds is expanding, in part due to her enjoyment of the board game Wingspan. We spent most of our time on or in the water: swimming, canoeing and floating. It wasn't a bird-focused trip by any means, but the call of the loons on the lake at six in the morning served as my wakeup call each morning, pulling me out of my tent earlier than I usually get up and into the

unfurling dawn, starting each day with a little early morning magic.

Finally, in August, I joined Thomas Kallmeyer and William McDowell for a shorebird survey of Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area. I eagerly anticipate spring migration each year but am either taken by surprise by fall migration or miss it completely, so participating in this survey was an exciting change. My shorebird knowledge is relatively limited, but I was delighted to tag along to provide another set of eyes and act as a scribe. Through the morning, we drove between the ponds dotting the sprawling WMA and spent varying lengths of time looking for shorebirds at each stop and honing in on the distinguishing features of the different species when we did find shorebirds. We found 14 shorebird species over the course of the day, and I learned a lot about the subtle differences between shorebirds. Thomas and William, despite their greater levels of experience identifying shorebirds, reassured me that shorebird ID can still pose challenges for them, which they enjoy. We ended the day watching a pale-faced sandpiper intermixing with a flock of Baird's sandpipers. Through our observations and discussion, we couldn't quite confirm whether it was a Western or a Semipalmated Sandpiper, and I learned as much from my companions' enjoyment of the discussion, challenge, and uncertainty as I did from their concrete identification tips.

As summer melts into fall, FVAS meetings resume, fall migration continues and temperatures will eventually begin dropping again. I will go back to birding more regularly as the days shorten and the birds return to keeping more of the same hours I do.

But these summer birding experiences stick with me, rare because they are few and far between and rare because of the magic of the birds themselves and the company I kept while seeing them.



Stilt Sandpipers
Photo by Thomas Kallmeyer

Summer Field Trip Summaries

By Larry Weeks

May 27th – 28th: The birds from the two-day field trip to Freezout Lake and Benton Lake were used for the Birdathon. Many of you received a list of the 113 birds that were seen or heard. As soon as we crossed over Roger's Pass, it started to rain, and the rain lasted for most of the day. We made the usual stop along highway 200 at mile marker 114 to look for Upland Sandpiper but did not find it. There were several Long-billed Curlews at that stop. An Upland Sandpiper was seen on the road from Simms to Fairfield. After a pitstop at Freezout, we hiked a dike where there was a good diversity of ducks, both Western and Clark's Grebes, Forster's Tern, and a few American Avocets and Black-necked Stilts. The next stop was the "garage" where we had a Baltimore Oriole, Hammond's Flycatcher, Yellow Warblers, and Mourning Doves. We did not have any luck with American Bittern. At the "neck", we had all three species of teal and a few non-migrating species of shorebirds. At the next outhouse, we met Stan and Pat Senner who were returning from a grassland tour of eastern Montana. Stan had seen a Long-billed Dowitcher at the "neck" which we missed. He also mentioned that the water conditions at Bowdoin NWR were much improved over last year. We had Black-crowned Night-Heron, Common Tern, and Virginia Rail at that location. The rain had made the dirt roads slippery, but we were able to travel the roads we usually do at Freezout. The best bird at the Duffey Place was a female American Redstart. We did not find an active Golden Eagle nest on Rattlesnake Butte, but we did see a Golden Eagle flying along the cliffs being harassed by a couple of Common Ravens. On Bellview Road, we had Bobolinks and one Chestnut-collared Longspur but no Thick-billed Longspur.

The weather was much better for the trip to Benton Lake. On the road to the headquarters, we had an Upland Sandpiper and three Sharp-tailed Grouse. A Say's Phoebe was calling from one of the buildings at the headquarters. The first pond on the auto tour had lots of Eared Grebes and Franklin's Gulls. There were also many Wilson's Phalaropes, and finally, after looking at several, I found one Red-necked Phalarope. At the end of the long board walk, we were able to find a couple of White-faced Ibis in the tall grass that appeared to be working on nests. On the return trip, we got Veery, Gray Catbird and Spotted Sandpiper at Skunk Creek, a White-crowned Sparrow at the Aspen Grove CG, a Rufous Hummingbird near Lincoln, Northern Waterthrush and Song Sparrow at Nevada-Odgen, Warbling Vireo, Red-

breasted Nuthatch, Northern Flicker, and Mountain Bluebird on Dry Creek Road, and a Sandhill Crane near Ovando. There were seven people on the trip.

Saturday, June 5th: The Erskine Fishing Access is a large area of habitat along the Clark Fork River pass the King's Ranch golf course on old Mullan Road. The tour spent most of the morning on the downstream portion of the site which consisted of mixed forests, brushy strips and grassland. Waterfowl is limited but there were lots of songbirds like Black-headed Grosbeaks, Gray Catbirds, Warbling Vireos, Bullock's Orioles, Spotted towhees, Western Tanagers, and Song Sparrows. The river is eroding the habitat severely in one section and access will have to be rerouted if it continues. We also covered some of the upstream habitat from the parking lot and that is where we found a Black-chinned Hummingbird. There were five people on the trip, and I tabulated 44 species.



Western Tanager
Photo by Rick Derevan

June 13th – 16th: The four-day field trip to the Bowdoin NWR was blessed with good weather except for wind on the afternoon of the third day. We made short stops at Carter Lake and Roy which are between Lewistown and James Kipp Recreational Area. After setting up tents at James Kipp, we birded west of highway 191 and found Field and Lark Sparrows. There were Green-tailed Towhees north of the river, but we failed to locate a Plumbeous Vireo. Birds at James Kipp included an adult and an immature male Orchard Oriole, Yellow-breasted Chat, Bullock Oriole, Least Flycatcher, and Ovenbird. On the second day, we visited a small prairie dog town but did not find a Burrowing Owl. There were Rock Wrens at a road cut along 191. We then drove to Camp Creek Campground which is two miles outside of Zortman. Camp Creek had several Ovenbirds but getting a visual was difficult. Other birds included a Red-napped Sapsucker, American Redstart, MacGillivray's Warbler, and Western Tanager. We played for Sprague's Pipit at the entrance to the Matador Ranch but did not get a response. We then drove north on 191 to a large prairie dog town and found two Burrowing Owls. On this road, we had several Marbled Godwits, a few Long-billed Curlews, a Swainson's Hawk, a Bobolink, and three Upland Sandpipers. Midale Road had Lark Buntings and

five Burrowing Owls in a small prairie dog town. We stayed two nights in Trafton Park in Malta. Chimney Swifts were flying around in downtown Malta at 8:30 pm, and we found Eastern Screech Owls both nights in the park. The third day, we birded Bowdoin NWR. We started off with a Baltimore Oriole at the headquarters. The water conditions at the lake were much better this year as compared to last year and was within one foot of full pool. Last year, the lake was almost completely dry. There was a diverse collection of ducks, Black-crowned Night-Herons, White-faced Ibis, American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Wilson Phalaropes, Willets, Grasshopper Sparrows, Franklin's Gulls, and Common Terns. The last car saw a Loggerhead Shrike near the end of the auto tour, but we couldn't relocate it for the other cars. Then to Nelson reservoir where the wind was causing white caps on the water. There was a Brown Thrasher in the sparse habitat where we had one two years ago. Then to the Milk River WMA where we had Black Terns and an American Bittern. We also had a pair of Loggerhead Shrikes along the Milk River. On the fourth day, we drove back to Missoula. There were eight people on the field trip, and we had 121 bird species.

July 10th – 13th: Fifteen people gathered at the Chewing Black Bones Campground for the 4-day field trip to Glacier Park. Participants included Al & Michelle Jensen, Becky Catmull, Michelle Cummins, Don & Andrea Stierle, Jeff Ibsen, Jean Duncan, Dan Brzozowski, Jill Davies, Jil & Mark Hollinger, Jeannie Siegler, Rob Holden, and the author. After dinner, we made a short hike around the campground. Best birds on the evening hike were Common Loon and Veery. However, the loon's reputation took a hit after Jean watched a loon kill two Common Goldeneye ducklings. The most common bird in the campground was the White-crowned Sparrow and we had to be careful not to step on the juveniles. On the second day, we entered Many Glacier for the hike to Grinnell Lake. Unfortunately for Rob, he had a flat tire at the entry station and spent the rest of the day fixing his tire. And unfortunately for the rest of the group, it rained during the hike. Birds included the ubiquitous Swainson's Thrush, Varied Thrush, Pacific Wren, MacGillivray's Warbler, Fox Sparrow, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Spotted Sandpiper, and Olive-sided Flycatcher. The highlight was two young bull moose that approached to less than 50 feet of the trail. That evening, we had Black Swift and Black Tern at Lower St. Mary's Lake. Some of the participants entered the Park and hiked to St. Mary's Falls. It was warm and dry for the hike on the Red Eagle Lake Trail on day three. Birds included Chipping Sparrow, Red Crossbill, Cedar Waxwings, Red-naped Sapsucker visiting a cavity with young, Savannah, Clay-colored and

Lincoln's Sparrows. We met Josh Covill who was leading a week-long trip for Glacier Birding Adventures. We had lunch at a lush meadow that overlooked Logan Pass and the Cutbank Canyon. The group then travelled to the Glacier Campground which is one mile west of West Glacier. We hiked into Howe Lakes on the last day. Birds included Olive-sided Flycatcher, Western Tanager, Fox Sparrow, Willow and Dusky Flycatchers, Ring-necked Duck, and a Common Loon that was not bothering a Gadwall with nine ducklings. We ended up with 80 species for the trip.

Friday, July 28, 2023: The field trip was coordinated with the Clark Fork Coalition's field day in the Deer Lodge Valley. It began with mist netting of birds at the Galen River crossing by the University Bird Ecology Lab. During the time I spent at the mist netting location, they caught and processed six Willow Flycatchers and one juvenile Common Yellowthroat. Steve Flood and I then made a quick visit to the Job Corps Ponds. We returned for the presentations on recent and future research projects in the Upper Clark Fork Basin. Nate Kohler then led the group to the Job Corps Ponds to look for shorebirds. The north pond had a good diversity of shorebirds that included Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Semipalmated Plover, Marbled Godwit, Semipalmated Sandpipers, Wilson's Phalaropes, and Killdeer. Other birds seen at that location included two family groups of Red-necked Grebes, a family group of Canvasbacks and a Sora. We also visited a wildlife management pond in back of the State Hospital that had six Wilson's Snipes and two Long-billed Dowitchers. An American Avocet and Spotted Sandpiper were seen earlier on the south Job Corps Ponds. Only three people from Five Valleys Audubon attended, and I had 33 bird species.



Larry Weeks leads group on a hike in Glacier National Park

Standing up for the Clark Fork-Grass Valley IBA

By Poody McLaughlin & Jim Brown

A proposed residential development at Fort Missoula threatens the riparian area around Slevens Island on the Bitterroot River. Although the proposal to rehabilitate the Old Post Hospital in Fort Missoula sounds like a good thing to do, the developer tries to downplay the 16 townhouses that would be located smack dab next to this riparian wetland of the Bitterroot River. This is one of the most valuable, bird-rich wildlife wetland locations in the Missoula Valley. This river corridor is a gift to the City of Missoula, and a treasure needing protection for all citizens to enjoy now and in future generations.



On September 11th, the Missoula City Council will hold a hearing to consider the proposed rezoning of this special property. The developers want and need the rezoning to proceed building the townhouses and several small businesses. Please contact the Missoula City Council to oppose this development at council@ci.missoula.mt.us or 406-552-6012. For more information about this proposal and the Historic Fort Missoula Coalition that has formed to oppose this rezoning (the chapter is a member), visit our website: <https://fvaudubon.org/historic-fort-missoula-coalition/>

Life in the Clark Fork-Grass Valley IBA: Spring Migration on the Fort Missoula Ponds By Poody McLaughlin

In May, the chapter wrapped up a series of nine spring migration surveys at the Fort Missoula Ponds. Beginning in late March and ending mid-May we documented the birds' usage, primarily for waterfowl, of the two ponds and the riparian area adjacent to the Bitterroot River.

The weather on the first survey, on March 26, was snowy with the south pond totally frozen and the north pond mostly frozen. (Writing this in 90 plus degree heat, that sounds delightful!) Nonetheless we heard meadowlarks singing brightly through the snow and chill. A coyote crossed the frozen south pond. Our cool, late spring meant that the south pond remained frozen until the April 10 survey. Although deeper than the South Pond, the North Pond was completely open by April 4.

A total of 93 species were observed on the ponds and surrounding grassland and riparian wooded areas. Twenty-eight of those species were waterfowl using the ponds. Rare or unusual species observed were Eurasian Wigeon and Red-breasted Merganser. Among the waterfowl observed that are listed as Species of Concern by the Montana Natural Heritage Program are Trumpeter Swan, Common Loon, and Horned Grebe. Potential Species of Concern on the ponds included Barrow's Goldeneye and Hooded Merganser. Another observed waterbird Species of Concern was Great Blue Heron, which has an active heronry in cottonwoods to the west of the city property.

We saw Common Loons and Horned Grebes on both ponds. However, the North Pond attracted the most Horned Grebes, 15, from March 29 through April 24.

In addition to waterfowl usage of the ponds we wanted to record the species' pulses of migration. On the initial survey of 3/26 on the North Pond there were high numbers of Northern Pintail (an early migrant) and American Wigeon. The *Bucephala* genus – Bufflehead and Common and Barrow's Goldeneyes – were regulars on the North Pond through most of the surveys along with Hooded Mergansers. Great Blue Herons were active at the heronry flying in with nest material. Speaking of pulses, there were 50 Western Bluebirds in one active flock in the riparian habitat.

The South Pond attracted flocks of many waterfowl species: Snow Geese, Redhead, American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck, and Lesser Scaup. The South Pond also hosted 26 Ruddy Ducks on the 5/14 survey.

On 3/29, Thomas Kallmeyer captured this photo (to the right) of a Prairie Falcon flying over the ponds. Red-tailed Hawks nest in the vicinity and were seen on all surveys. Osprey first appeared on 4/14 and on subsequent surveys. Before the Osprey's arrival, Turkey Vultures were initially seen on 4/10. Cooper's Hawk, American Kestrel, and Great Horned Owl rounded out the predators.



Among songbirds and smaller species, the meadowlarks were a constant auditory presence throughout the surveys. In the riparian area, Red-naped Sapsuckers first appeared on 4/14 as did an American Pipit on the North Pond. Savannah and Lincoln's Sparrows first appeared on 4/24 in the North Pond area. Hardy Yellow-rumped Warblers showed up on both pond areas on 4/24, along with Wilson's Snipe on the North Pond. Vesper Sparrows arrived later with Yellow Warblers and Vaux's Swifts on 5/4. Orange-crowned Warblers were first sighted in the river riparian vegetation on 5/10.

The hardy Yellow-rumped Warblers were no hardier than the 25 volunteers who braved all sorts of weather conditions. Thank you to all of you, and I hope that our discoveries outweighed the wet boots and optics!

With this survey, preceded by last year's breeding bird and fall migration surveys, we have collected a full year of data for the Fort Missoula Ponds parcel. This information and data will provide the city with a strong case to maintain this parcel as a natural area. Despite its history as an industrial site, the ponds attract a diverse array of species, both for breeding and for migration. At the earliest, the city will produce a final report with management options late this fall, depending on funding. Sometime this winter we hope to have the opportunity to weigh in on the future of this special habitat.



Above: Red-naped Sapsucker
Photo by Rick Derevan
Below: Yellow-rumped Warbler
Photo by Mick Thompson



You Can't Get There From Here By Ogden Nash

Bird watchers top my honors list.
I aimed to be one, but I missed.
Since I'm both myopic and astigmatic,
My aim turned out to be erratic,
And I, bespectacled and binocular,
Exposed myself to comment jocular.

We don't need too much birdlore, do we,
To tell a flamingo from a towhee;
Yet I cannot, and never will,
Unless the silly birds stand still.
And there's no enlightenment in a tour
Of ornithological literature.
Is yon strange creature a common chickadee,
Or a migrant alouette from Picardy?

You can rush to consult your Nature guide
And inspect the gallery inside,
But a bird in the open never looks
Like its picture in the birdie books-
Or if it once did, it has changed its plumage,
And plunges you back into ignorant gloomage.
That is why I sit here growing old by inches,
Watching a clock instead of finches,
But I sometimes visualize in my gin
The Audubon that I audubin.

Welcome New Members

Patricia Andrews	Robert Athearn	Sharee Ballinger	D Bolin	Curtis Carter
Jody Chritton	Mary Angela Collins	Chris Frandsen	Elizabeth Geilen	Wendy George
Edward Greskiewicz	Terri Hartigan	Kathy Ives	Lauren Jurewicz	Dick Larson
Sydney Lea	Janice Lowry	Mary McCourt	Brent Noel	Joseph Peterson
Rachel Skaalure	Michael Sleeting	Lynn Stewart	Marty Stomberg	Richard Tamcke
Sheri Thick	Nathan Turner			

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If you subscribed to through National Audubon, we may not have your email address. To receive our newsletter and other bird news by email, and to help save trees and reduce expenses, please send your email address to Treasurer, Jean Duncan at treasurer@FVAudubon.org or Membership Promotion Chair, Thomas Kallmeyer at thomas@tarns.net.

Five Valleys Audubon Society Membership Application

Please support Five Valleys Audubon Society (FVAS). There are several ways to donate. All options include the *Birding Observer* newsletter and allow you to 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: <https://fvaudubon.org/make-a-donation/>

\$ _____ \$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.

\$ _____ Total contribution

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

\$ _____ Donate to our General Fund to support our habitat protection work within Missoula County, nonprofit organizations that care for birds, and education on birds and birding.

_____ I would like to Volunteer. Please contact me.
(Please provide an email address below.)

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: <https://act.audubon.org/a/join>. 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: <https://mtaudubon.org/>. Please give generously to each organization. Although independent, we work together to protect what we all love.

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