April 2020

Birding Observer

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

Calendar

At this writing—March 20th—and because it is important to limit gatherings, **all Chapter-sponsored meetings at the University are cancelled for April and May.** We will try to reschedule our planned speakers for future programs.

The four remaining classes of the Advanced Birding Workshop are cancelled. We hope to reschedule, perhaps next year, pending demand. If you would like these to occur, please let Larry Weeks know via phone or email.

Chapter-sponsored field trips are cancelled. If you want to go birding individually—great! Feel free to contact Larry or your other birding pals to see if he or they will be going birding—without carpooling— during this period. Seattle Audubon has suggested that we not share binoculars or scopes when in the field.

The Board Meetings will also be cancelled, and we will conduct business via our email google group or other online venue.

Montana Audubon's COVID-19 Response March 18, 2020

Greetings Friends,

Especially in these challenging times, we hope that you and your loved ones are doing well and staying safe and healthy! By working together throughout Montana, we will get through this. In that spirit, we would like to announce our COVID-19 response and let you know that your health and safety are of utmost importance to us. We will continue to closely monitor news sources and CDC guidance for recommendations and will keep you updated regarding resulting changes to this response. Following is the status of our various areas of operation:

The Helena office is closed to the public until further notice. We are happy to send you any information via mail or email including birding information, checklists, brochures, etc. Please contact us at: (406) 443-3949 or info@mtaudubon.org.

In light of school closures and efforts to otherwise #flattenthecurve, **the Montana Audubon Center** is closed until March 27th.

Currently, the **Wings Across the Big Sky Bird Festival** will be held as planned, June 5-7, 2020 at the Yogo Inn, Lewistown. As with all of our endeavors, we will be evaluating alternative plans for the Festival in the coming weeks. In the event that the Festival is postponed or cancelled, participants will be offered full refunds and other options. Otherwise, our regular refund policy is still in effect and is as follows: Full refund through April 30; 50% refund through May 28; and no refunds after May 28.

Our Citizen Science Projects, including individual and team-based citizen science surveys, will continue.

Please check our website (www.mtaudubon.org) and social media channels regularly for updates. Our top priority is public safety and we feel a strong responsibility to our staff, volunteers, supporters, and fellow Montanans. Thank you for your ongoing support and consideration and know that our important mission-related work continues on.

Sincerely,
Larry Berrin
Executive Director

Peeps from the Board:
A Once and Future Treasure
By Edward Monnig

At times the reports on the condition of wildlife in general and birds in particular are discouraging; the downward trends seem inexorable. As a partial antidote to this global turmoil, let us briefly consider a local counter example, the rare reclamation of an industrial site and its transformation into important wildlife habitat.

The site, the former Knife River Corporation gravel and concrete mixing operation near McCauley Butte, is in the Target Range area of Missoula. It is quiet now, this place that produced materials that shaped a large part of modern Missoula. The excavators, dump trucks, and rolling stock have all moved on. The concrete mixing plant has been disassembled. The land has not been so absent human activity since 1885 when Michael McCauley filed a Declaration of Occupancy on 320 acres near McCauley Butte; his homestead eventually converted in part to this Knife River operation.

Two large ponds remain from this operation and provide a new water resource on this land next to the Bitterroot River. Willows are sprouting in places on the edges of these ponds. The adjoining dry land has been revegetated with a mixture of grasses and forbs. Cottonwoods and other woody plants have been planted and protected from grazing wildlife.

The owners, JTL Group and its local holding, the Knife River Corporation, have offered to donate this land to the city. Five Valleys Audubon has joined with Clark Fork Coalition and Montana Natural History Center in working with the city to assure the acceptance of this donation, an issue that will come before the City Council imminently.

Upon acceptance of the donation, the city must then decide how to manage the site. This decision will involve a long process of public engagement. There are many potential uses of this land. Humans share with many wildlife species a need for and irresistible attraction to water. Water is both a wildlife habitat resource and a recreation enhancement. These uses and interests must be balanced.

In adjudicating this balance, we maintain that thoughtful deference be given to wildlife, not to the exclusion of humans but to enhance human enjoyment and appreciation of the natural world. The Bitterroot and Clark Fork Rivers provide the Missoula Valley a treasured resource that is vital to the many plants and animals of our living landscape. Riparian areas and wetlands occupy less than 4% of Montana's land surface and less than 1% in the West, yet they support 80% of the bird species found in Montana. The Knife River Ponds constitute the only large open water wetland in the greater Missoula Valley.

After serious consideration of the values and character of this site, we offer the following principles on which future management should be predicated.

1. We believe the land and its surrounding area should be managed for human use that benefits from the close experience of wildlife and natural settings.

2. We believe the management of these lands can demonstrate how high quality wildlife habitat can be secured and buffered from the impacts of more intensively developed lands.

3. We believe this area will provide extraordinary opportunities for environmental education that is organized cooperatively with local schools, the university, and continuing education groups.

4. We believe partnerships can be developed with local non-profit groups to assist in improvement and management of these valuable spaces and that this land can become a living laboratory in the practice of ecosystem restoration.

5. We believe that with minor interventions we can improve the habitat quality of the ponds and surrounding lands and enhance the human experience of this setting.

As the city proceeds with decisions on the management of this area, we will need the support and engagement of our members. We will keep you informed of developments. In the meantime, let us celebrate our opportunities.

Proposed Camping Field Trip to near Twin Falls, ID to look for Cassia Crossbill
By Rose Leach

If life gets back to normal by summer, the Chapter is planning a camping field trip to Porcupine Springs Campground in Sawtooth National Forest (https://www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/sawtooth/recarea/?recid=5781) from June 19-21, 2020. I have reserved a group camp site there for 2 nights—Friday, June 19 and Saturday, June 20. The Cassia Crossbill occurs in this campground, so I anticipate finding it fairly easily (famous last words, I know). While we will likely drive to the City of Rocks area (a bit farther south) to look for sage-mountain mahogany species such as Virginia's Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, and Black-throated Sparrow, we have reserved and will camp both nights at Porcupine Springs. Please keep in mind, this is our first trip here, so we will be exploring the birding as we go—some flexibility will be required.

The campground group site that we have reserved is limited to 9 vehicles. I hope we can carpool by the time of this proposed trip. If not, I think we could still go, but at that point, this would not be a Chapter-sponsored activity, and we would need to drive separately. At this writing, I will accept the first 9 cars, with a waitlist for 20 total people or so. The campground does accept RVs as well as tents. The total cost for 2 nights at the campground will be somewhere between $25-$40.00, depending on how many people end up going (I have already reserved and paid for the campground, so you will be paying me). We will bring our own breakfast and lunch items, and if appropriate by that time, we would have potluck-type dinners, to be assigned. Water is available, but I doubt electricity.

If you are interested in participating, please email Rose Leach (rleach370@gmail.com) or call 406-721-0779. That is my home number, and I often wait for the caller to identify themselves due to robo calls, so please leave a message. If I am there, I will pick up.

Field Trip Summary
By Larry Weeks

Saturday, February 22nd: The Mission Valley field trip unfolded a little differently from previous trips. A Ferruginous Hawk had been reported on a regular basis by Dan Stoken during the beginning of February, but the sightings had been spotty in the week before the field trip. I was not in favor of back tracking from Ronan to look for the hawk but Rose Leach convinced me that it was worth a shot. This made more sense when Dan Stoken met the trip at the Cenex in Ronan. I had Dan lead the beginning portion of the trip by returning to the 44 Bar and birding Red Horn Road, Hillside Road and Hi-Hi-Tau Road. As we birded north on Hillside, we encountered Rough-legged Hawks and 3 Harlan Red-tailed Hawks. We also had a scattered flock of Gray Partridges.

Then Dan located the Ferruginous Hawk which flew north towards Hi-Hi-Tau Road. Dan relocated the bird along Hi-Hi-Tau and everyone got a scope view. The hawk eventually started soaring against the Mission Mountains and drifted north. The field trip resumed by going north on Leighton Road. At the intersection with Carbine Road, there was a pond that was mostly frozen and it had about 300 Mallards, 40 Canada Geese and 3 Trumpeter Swans. We then went west on Carbine and then north on Stassoo. There were a few Red-tails and several Rough-legged Hawks including a rough-leg that was almost pure white. We did not go into Polson because we had a second pit stop in Ronan, and the Polson sewage ponds are now dry.

We drove down Eli Gap Road and Valley View Road. There weren't many buteos along this portion of the route but we did see 6 Great Horned Owls. Three of the owls were on nests. Then, we traveled down Moiese Valley Road to look for a Peregrine Falcon that I had seen on the previous Wednesday but we were unsuccessful. However, we saw a couple of Townsend's Solitaires and a flock of American Robins near Crow Creek. We ended the trip with an unsuccessful search for a Barred Owl at the Bison Range picnic area. We had 23 people on the trip and saw 30 bird species.

Stay out in the field with Montana Audubon's 2020 Citizen Science Programs! Submitted by Amy Seaman, Director of Policy & Science

Great Blue Heron Rookeries Survey

The Great Blue Heron is a species of concern in Montana. Their status is a result of a 2.2% annual population decline measured by Breeding Bird Surveys from 1966-2010. This colonial species relies on intact rivers and streamside habitat to establish its nesting colonies. One impact can affect many at one time. There are many rookery sites all over Montana and many can be difficult to find or access. Currently, most of the surveys are conducted by aircraft, and flying over all Montana waterways regularly is unrealistic.

Montana Audubon has partnered with the Montana Natural Heritage program to ensure better statewide coverage of annual heron rookery surveys. From the comfort of our desk, we used Google Earth's aerial photography and satellite imagery to look over five sections of major Montana rivers. We happened to find 94% of historic rookeries by using the survey technique! Now comes a call of action to get boots on the ground and confirm our findings. We are looking for volunteers statewide to help confirm potential new rookeries, population, conservation opportunities, and threats for our Great Blue Herons in Montana.

Check out our Great Blue Heron citizen science webpage on, montanabirdsurveys.com for more updates and announcements of new trainings. Please contact Amy Seaman at aseaman@mtaudubon.org or Carmen Borchelt Carmen@mtaudubon.org to get set up for the survey!

Long-billed Curlew Survey

Long-billed Curlews offer the perfect opportunity for citizens to get out early in the spring to help collect details on local curlew hotspots. Further, hearing and seeing their breeding displays and defense calls makes the survey effort worth it. Plus, it's easy!

Survey routes consist of early morning road-side stops repeated every half mile. At each stop, you will get out of the car for five minutes and look and listen for curlews. Along the way, you will collect important data on the time, habitat, and presence or absence of curlews.
The best way to get involved is to visit our survey website, montanabirdsurveys.com to view the routes available in the Flathead & Mission Valleys, Blackfoot valley, and Helena/Canyon Ferry areas.

Surveys should be completed between April 8th - May 7th, and between May 8th - May 31st. Please contact Amy Seaman at aseaman@mtaudubon.org or Carmen Borchelt Carmen@mtaudubon.org to get set up for the survey!

Don't forget, you can use our in-field data collection app on any smartphone or smartdevice! The application is called Survey 123 and there is a how-to-guide on our website listed above. Amy or Carmen will happily guide you through on how to use the app!

Climate Watch Survey- Thank you!

Thank you to everyone who participated in the Climate Watch Survey! Nuthatches and many other birds are vulnerable to habitat change or loss, and this is what the survey hopes to document using the data you collected! The best aspect of this survey is that it can be conducted anywhere in Montana. There remain plenty of survey opportunities! Check them out at https://www.montanabirdsurveys.com/climate-watch.html. The next survey period will be May 15th - June 15th. Please contact Carmen Borchelt at carmen@mtaudubon.org for more information, or to sign up for a summer square!

Future Monthly Meeting Presentations of

The Five Valleys Audubon Society

Is there a topic that interests you?
Is there a person you know who could present?
Please tell us by contacting Andrea:
406-728-6419 or andrea.stierle@mso.umt.edu.

Welcome New Members

Kim Erway Birck	Carolyn Corey	Jadd Davis	Charles Dumke
Armand Fangsrud	Bruce R. Farling	Michael Fredrickson	Karen Goodall
Brian Hood	Ronda Howlett	Bradley E. Johnson	Lori Johnson
Kristin Kopplin	Leah Lipka	Karla Long	Carl Monnsmith
Nancy Mori	Killeen Nielsen	Glenda Ransom	Anne Robertson
Anna Taft	Nancy Winslow	Lori Penrod Yacovella	

Five Valleys Audubon Society greatly appreciates those who renewed their membership this past month. We generally encourage members to receive their newsletter via email (to conserve resources and our expenses), which is the default mailing option if provided by new members. If you want to change how your newsletter is delivered or have any changes to your mailing preferences, please contact the Membership Chair, Poody McLaughlin, at poodymc@gmail.com.

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 only, includes newsletter sent via email.

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

$_____ General Fund, use as needed for conservation, field trips, education and outreach.

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

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

$_____Total contribution

_____ 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 handles 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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