February 2014

Birding Observer

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

Calendar

- **Monday, February 3rd, 7pm**: Betsy Griffing will host the board meeting at her office. The address is Axilon Law Group, 257 W Front St, Suite B in downtown Missoula.
- **Monday, February 10th, 7:30pm**: Please join us at our program meeting to hear Jerry O'Connell, Executive Director of Big Blackfoot Riverkeeper, discuss riverkeeping.
- **Friday, Feb 14th — Monday, Feb 17th:** Great Backyard Bird Count. Spend at least 15 minutes counting birds in your yard or elsewhere and report your sightings on www.birdsource.org. (A bird count will also be held at MPG Ranch on Feb 15th. See article on page 3.)
- **Saturday, February 15th**: Submission deadline for the March edition of the *Birding Observer*.
- **Saturday February 15th**: Observe wintering birds of the Mission Valley with Terry McEneaney. To join this all-day field trip, meet at the Adams Center Parking Lot for carpooling, departing at 8am, or meet at the Cenex Station in Ronan at 9am, returning to Missoula by 5pm. Dress appropriately and bring a lunch. For more info please call Terry Toppins at 214-1194.
- **Saturday, February 15th**: Beginning bird walk at Lee Metcalf NWR from 10am-Noon. Meet the field trip leader at the Refuge Visitor's Center.

Riverkeeping in Western Montana

Jerry O'Connell, Executive Director of Big Blackfoot Riverkeeper, will speak at our program meeting on **Monday, Feb 10th at 7:30pm** in room L14 (lower level) of the Gallagher Business Building at UM.

Riverkeeping is doing whatever it takes to insure a waterway is swimmable, fishable, and drinkable. Mr. O'Connell will explain the interwoven efforts by nonprofits and government agencies to protect the Blackfoot River watershed, covering social, environmental, and economic issues.

The Blackfoot River watershed is the last biologically intact ecosystem in the lower 48 states (and one of only 12 in the world). That means all animal species that were present before Europeans entered arrived are still found here today.

Jerry O'Connell first glimpsed the Blackfoot River in 1986, after a two-week backpacking trip in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. "It was just stunning-looking," says O'Connell. "Right then, it just hooked me."

O'Connell moved to Montana in 1992 and built a cabin near the river. Since then, he has worked to preserve and protect this important watershed. He's been a board member of the Big Blackfoot Chapter Trout Unlimited since 2001, served on Montana FWP's Blackfoot River Recreation Advisory Council (RRAFT), and is a member of the Blackfoot Challenge. He is also a member of the Missoula Consolidated Planning Board. Most recently, O'Connell founded the Big Blackfoot Riverkeeper, Montana's first affiliate of the renowned Waterkeeper Alliance.

Photo: Blackfoot River

Peeps From The Board: Birds and Birders of Butte
By Andrea Stierle

In 1980 I was about to embark on a career as a marine biologist when the man of my dreams whisked me off to a remote mining town 1200 miles from the nearest ocean. Butte was a different place then—not quite the trendy and revitalized town into which it is evolving. Decades of mining left the hillsides devoid of vegetation. There were few gardens. Many people just stuck plastic flowers in the ground, because the long winters, cool summers and rocky soil made "organic" gardens too risky.

Almost in spite of ourselves, we started falling in love with the area. The surrounding countryside is an extension of our backyard which sits at the base of "Big Butte" (6000 ft) and the open spaces beyond. We started a garden and surrounded ourselves with aspen trees, shrubs and any kind of flowers that would grow in the decomposing granite masquerading as soil. I hung feeders filled with Wild Bird Seed from the trees and was thrilled by the large populations of house sparrows partaking of the bounty. Although the occasional robin, house finch and rock pigeon joined the feeding frenzy, few other birds visited our yard.

In 1993 we joined a Helena Birdathon team, and we were quickly hooked on birding. We filled our feeders with sunflower seeds and suet and watched our backyard population shift to include mountain and black-capped chickadees. Our perennial garden attracted rufous hummingbirds, as many as 23 at a time sampling our columbines and delphiniums.

Our growing interest in birds coincided with concerted clean-up efforts in Butte, ground zero of the largest Superfund site in North America. Removal of mine waste and capping of tailings improved growth conditions for a variety of plants and provided coverage and food for wildlife. We worked at Montana Tech for 29 years and our trek from our house to the college provided a nice sampling of bird sights and songs, mostly house sparrows and house finches. In May 2004, the usual chorus included a new voice—a sweet piping song I had never heard before. A week later, the high-pitched piping was accompanied by a metallic chipping song and a more bell-like chipping song. Intrigued but clueless, I dragged biologist Bill Good out for a walk. He identified the singers as ruby-crowned kinglets, chipping sparrows, and dark-eyed juncos. That summer I found several ruby-crowned kinglet nests in the large Douglass fir trees on campus. Townsend's solitaires called from the tops of several juniper trees. Small flocks of Gray jays and Clark's nutcrackers added their harsher notes to the morning chorus.

We began birding with Gary Swant and Nate Kohler, two generous and patient birders who helped us develop our birding skills. We often photographed new birds and sent them to Gary or Nate for ID. In 2005 we watched a northern goshawk snatch a pigeon in our backyard. Two sharp-shinned hawks regularly patrolled our feeders. A family of northern flickers built a nest in a neighbor's cottonwood tree and took advantage of our constant supply of suet. Downy and hairy woodpeckers became regular visitors. Seasonal flocks of waxwings descended on mountain ash berries. Evening grosbeaks, lazuli buntings, red-breasted nuthatches, Cassin's finches, and pine grosbeaks. Catbirds and red-winged blackbirds also visited our yard occasionally, and Cooper's hawks, sharpies, kestrels, and merlins commonly patrolled our neighborhood. Christmas 2012 brought the first northern pygmy owl to the neighborhood.

"Big Butte" itself has also rebounded as a mixed conifer forest, diverse shrubs and wildflowers have reclaimed the hillsides. A walk around "Big Butte" last summer brought evidence of three nesting pairs of rock wrens, and two of kestrels, as well as mountain bluebirds, song sparrows, vesper sparrows, and green-tailed towhees down in the willows. Hundreds of ravens catch the thermals rising from the "M", a diversion from their diurnal migration from Butte's landfill to their secret night-time roosts somewhere north of town.

Our skills as birders have slowly evolved and improved in tandem with the healing landscapes of this old mining town. Butte now plays host to a successful Folk Festival, Irish Festival and Evel Knievel Days, and many visitors marvel at the great old buildings and dramatic mine-scapes and Gallus frames that define the mining district. But the Butte we especially know and love is the one that now supports denning foxes and coyotes, and healthy and diverse populations of songbirds and raptors.

MPG Ranch Great Backyard Bird Count Field Trip

Once you've finished counting the birds in your backyard, please consider helping the MPG Ranch staff count the birds in their 10,000-acre yard! On **Monday, February 17th, from 8am-2pm**, the MPG Ranch will host a field day to count as many birds and species as possible, as part of National Audubon's Great Backyard Bird Count.

Participants will split into small groups led by MPG Ranch staff. They will spend the morning hiking through a wide variety of habitats, including floodplain forest, open agricultural fields, shrubby draws, and upland conifer forest. At 1 pm, we will gather at one of the ranch houses for a brown bag lunch, to share observations, and to tally the results.

Species we may see include: Snow Bunting, American Tree Sparrow, Lapland Longspur, Horned Lark, Pine Grosbeak, Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Harrier, Pygmy Nuthatch, and many more!

Please note: All of our surveying will be on foot, and participants need to possess the ability to hike for several hours in winter conditions. We suggest the following gear:

~ Gaiters
~ Hiking poles
~ Warm clothing
~ Food and water for morning
~ Brown bag lunch
~ Binoculars
~ Field guide
~ Camera
~ Sturdy, insulated winter hiking boots
~ YakTracks, Microspikes, or something similar to prevent slipping on ice

Participants must REGISTER for this field trip by February 14th by contacting Kate Stone at (406) 381-1115 or kstone@mpgranch.com. Details will be sent to registered participants.

Snow Bunting

Advanced Birding Workshop by Larry Weeks

An advanced birding workshop has been scheduled for February and March 2014 that will include seven sessions on Thursday nights from 7pm – 9:30 pm at the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Regional Office on Spurgin Road. Each session will be devoted to one bird group. The date, subject and presenter of each session are as follows:

Date	Bird Group	Presenter
Feb 13	Flycatchers	Christian Meny
Feb 20	Owls	Matt Larson
Feb 27	Raptors	Steve Hoffman
Mar 6	Shorebirds	Jim Brown
Mar 13	Forest Birds	Jim Sparks
Mar 20	Gulls	Terry McEneaney
Mar 27	Sparrows	Terry McEneaney

A person may decide to attend a single session, any combination of sessions or all 7 sessions. The cost will be $15 per session or $70 for all 7 sessions. To sign up, contact Larry Weeks at 549-5632 or bwsgenea@centric.net.

Board Update By Pat Little

Five Valleys Audubon Society will hold its **Annual Membership Meeting on Monday, March 10th,** during the regular monthly meeting.

A **nominating committee** has formed to identify candidates for vacant board positions, including Vice President and Membership Promotion Chair. We also have two Directors whose terms are expiring, and two new Directors recently appointed by the board, who will be standing for election by the membership.

The nominating committee consists of Ed Monnig, Larry Weeks, and Carolyn Goren. If you are interested in joining the board, or if you have a suggestion for someone who might be a good candidate, please contact one of the nominating committee members. Elections will take place at the annual meeting on March 10th.

Missoula Christmas Bird Count by Larry Weeks

The Missoula Christmas Bird Count was held on Saturday, December 14, 3013. Eighty-four species were seen, making it the 3rd consecutive year that we have been in the eighties. Jim Brown's group identified 2 cackling geese in a large flock of Canada geese along Mullan Road. The cackling goose is a new bird for the Missoula Count. Jim Brown's group also had the only northern pintail, American coot and marsh wren. Joe & Poody's group had the only ring-necked duck and bufflehead on Kelly Island. Thomas Kallmeyer, who birded Butler Creek with Katie Heath, had the only golden eagle. Terry Toppins' group had the only great gray owl and white-crowned sparrow. Paul Hendricks' group found the only three-toed woodpecker and gray jay on the Marshall Canyon to Woods Gulch hike. The author and Michael Bechard had the only dusky grouse 1.5 miles up a ridge towards Snow Bowl. Scott Hampton had a blue-winged teal/cinnamon teal at Sleven's Island. The feeder watchers also added several species. Gary Lancaster, who lives at the top of 57th St, had the only Cooper's hawk and peregrine falcon. Kay Lambert, who lives on Aspen Dr, had the only spotted towhee and common redpoll. Kay and Gordon Skaggs had the only pine siskins. Gene Miller had purple finches on Gladys Dr and Bob Anderson had blue jays on Spurgin Rd. Northern goshawks were seen at the entrance to Marshall Canyon by Radd Icenoggle and by Gary Lancaster. Bob Considine, who lives on Scott Allen Dr, had a chukar on his deck. Dan Casey will report the chukar as an uncountable exotic. Other group leaders included Paul Loehnen (Council Grove), Kristi DuBois (Mullan Rd), Norm & Cathy Smyers (State Nursery & Tower St Open Space), Robin Anderson (University & Greenough Park), Brian Williams (Stewart Peak trail), Denver Holt & Matt Larson (west of airport), Cathy Ream (LaValle Cr), and Zona Lindemann & Virginia Vincent (Orchard Homes & Target Range). There were 76 participants in the field and 25 feeder watchers. Total birds for the Count was 9,417. The feeder watchers had 50 species and 1,463 birds. The Count concluded with a potluck dinner at Ruth & Russ Royter's home. My thanks to all of the participants and especially the Royters!

Missoula Christmas Bird Count 2013		
great blue heron (38)	wild turkey (63)	Red-breasted nuthatch (73)
Canada goose (524)	American coot (1)	White-breasted nuthatch (44)
cackling goose (2)	Killdeer (17)	pygmy nuthatch (39)
green winged teal (44)	Wilson's snipe (16)	brown creeper (7)
blue-winged/cinnamon teal (1)	rock pigeon (359)	Pacific wren (6)
Mallard (888)	Eurasian-collared dove (226)	marsh wren (1)
northern pintail (13)	mourning dove (133)	American dipper (7)
Gadwall (36)	great horned owl (26)	Golden-crowned kinglet (22)
Ring-necked duck (8)	northern pygmy-owl (4)	Townsend's solitaire (21)
common goldeneye (306)	great gray owl (1)	American robin (76)
Barrow's goldeneye (17)	Long-eared owl (36)	Bohemian waxwing (2108)
Bufflehead (1)	northern saw-whet owl (4)	cedar waxwing (433)
hooded merganser (6)	belted kingfisher (17)	northern shrike (7)
common merganser (29)	downy woodpecker (61)	European starling (89)
bald eagle (38)	hairy woodpecker (20)	spotted towhee (1)
golden eagle (1)	Three-toed woodpecker (1)	American tree sparrow (26)
northern harrier (7)	northern flicker (159)	song sparrow (79)
Sharp-shinned hawk (7)	pileated woodpecker (14)	White-crowned sparrow (1)
Cooper's hawk (1)	gray jay (3)	Dark-eyed junco (165)
northern goshawk (2)	Steller's jay (43)	Red-winged blackbird (186)
Red-tailed hawk (64)	blue jay (2)	purple finch (5)
Rough-legged hawk (40)	Clark's nutcracker (15)	house finch (460)
American kestrel (6)	Black-billed magpie (469)	red crossbill (2)
Merlin (8)	American crow (111)	common redpoll (1)
peregrine falcon (1)	common raven (172)	pine siskin (6)
gray partridge (76)	Black-capped chickadee (410)	American goldfinch (131)
Ring-necked pheasant (17)	mountain chickadee (66)	evening grosbeak (16)
dusky grouse (1)	Chestnut-backed chickadee CW	house sparrow (480)
ruffed grouse (2)		
		84 species 9417 total birds

Helping Tree Swallows By Kathy Heffernan

Photo by Julie Turunen
Tree Swallow in Aspen along Sun River

Many of us like to provide boxes for our native, perky, insect-eating Tree Swallow. These cavity-nesting swallows require a 1-3/8 inch hole and do best in larger boxes (5" x 5" floor) to accommodate their clutches of 4 to 8 and to allow air circulation. As with bluebirds, best practice demands that box-builders watch over and maintain their boxes, paying particular attention to proper hole size. If flickers or squirrels enlarge the hole, predators will enter and destroy the eggs or young. If the hole is enlarged, create a "hole guard" from another piece of wood by drilling a 1-3/8" hole and screwing the "hole guard" over the old hole. (If birds other than Tree Swallows are using the box, you can modify hole size accordingly. If you aren't sure who is using it, make hole 1-9/16").

Because of their short, stubby legs, Tree Swallows cannot cling to smooth surfaces as easily as bluebirds and woodpeckers. It is absolutely imperative that the inside of a Tree Swallow box be roughened up or scored with a nail before the birds are invited to reside within. Otherwise, Tree Swallows can actually be trapped inside the box. What was meant to be a comfortable abode can actually become a death sentence!

Tree Swallows mainly eat flying insects. Boxes should be placed near open fields or near marshes or lakes. Placing the box on a post rather than a tree will prevent interest by squirrels. The Nestbox Project (Cornell University) recommends facing boxes east to prevent them overheating in the afternoon sun.

If the box is near houses or barns, a "slot" box will prevent the chubbier House Sparrow from using it. The horizontal slot replaces the 1-3/8" hole and measures 2-1/4" wide by 15/16" high. The non-native House Sparrow is a wily bird, so boxes should still be monitored to ensure no House Sparrows are moving in.

Hole size is essential for attracting and PROTECTING a particular bird. Tree Swallows require 1-3/8" hole. Western Bluebirds require 1-1/2" hole but Mountain Bluebirds need 1-9/16". House Wrens need 1-1/4" holes and Chickadees only need 1-1/8" holes. Of course, a smaller bird can use a larger hole. However, if the hole is too large, magpies and other hungry predators will eat the eggs or nestlings.

House Sparrows will try to fit into anything they can. Please remove these aggressive non-native birds.

Update on Sentinel High School's Bluebird Project

The numbered boxes on Waterworks Hill/North Hills yielded 92 bluebird fledglings in 2013. These numbers included 39 Western Bluebirds and 53 Mountain Bluebirds.

Thirty-five bluebird boxes are maintained on Waterworks Hill and the North Hills by Mountain Bluebird Trails volunteers, Sentinel High School students, and interns from a University of Arizona research project. In addition, MBT volunteers maintain three wren boxes, five Tree Swallow-only boxes and one "slot" box which attracts Violet-Green Swallows annually. Approximately 46 Tree Swallows fledged from various MBT boxes. At least 2 Violet-Green Swallows fledged from the "slot" box. No wrens appeared to have used the wren boxes this year, but one wren box was used by Chickadees.

A Sentinel High School student moved a bluebird box on Waterworks Hill last November to protect it from predation and mouse habitation, which was common at the previous location.

2014 *Wings Across the Big Sky*

Field Trips

It's not too early to begin planning your summer activities. During winter, when birds are sparse, it's easy to dream of long summer days and abundant birds. Where you will find plenty is in the beautiful Gallatin Valley and surrounding area. Come join us for **Montana Audubon's Annual Bird Festival, this year co-hosted by Sacajawea Audubon Society, June 6–8 at the GranTree Inn in Bozeman.**

As for field trips we have close to 40 planned!—almost 20 each on Saturday and Sunday—guided by knowledgeable birders and naturalists familiar with the species and their habitats in the Bozeman area. Here is just a brief sampling of some of those trips to contemplate as you anticipate the upcoming Bird Festival:

Yellowstone's Northern Range

The Northern Range, often called "America's Serengeti," is home, either seasonally or year-round, to a wide variety of birds. We will explore the area's diversity beginning in the dry Gardiner Basin, where Horned Larks and Mountain Bluebirds are common along the Old Yellowstone Road. En route, we will stop at higher elevation woodland, willow, and wetland habitats searching for different ducks, grebes, woodpeckers, flycatchers, and sparrows. Breeding pairs of Harlequin Ducks are possible in the fast moving waters of the Gardiner and Yellowstone Rivers. Raptors, such as Osprey, Red-tailed Hawks, and American Kestrels are likely along this route. The trip will end at the lower Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, where Peregrine Falcons have nested in recent years.

Deep Creek, Paradise Valley

We will visit the recently burned habitats of the south fork of Deep Creek via a Forest Service trail that begins in the foothills of the Paradise Valley. We begin with a moderate climb (half-mile) through open grassland and shrub-dotted hills, likely observing a variety of towhees, sparrows, warblers and bluebirds. The trail then drops into a forested canyon as it crosses the south fork of Deep Creek and heads into the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. This area was thoroughly burned during the 2012 Pine Creek Fire so we will be looking for woodpeckers, sapsuckers, and other fire-dependent species and observing the post-fire ecology.

Headwaters State Park Area

The Headwaters area has a variety of habitats, including sage/grassland and riparian, where species from Common Mergansers to Clay-colored Sparrows may be seen. One of the unique features of the Headwaters area are the limestone cliffs, which support several cliff nesting species such as Prairie Falcons, White-throated Swifts, and Canyon Wrens. The park where Lewis and Clark camped, at the confluence of the Jefferson, Madison, and Gallatin Rivers is steeped in history. Beside the many nesting species here, numerous other birds use these river corridors as they travel between feeding sites, and during migration.

Harlequin Duck

Keep watch in early March: Festival Brochures with all field trip information and schedules will be in the mail and the online system for registration will be active.

For more information please contact Montana Audubon Bird Festival Coordinator, Cathie Erickson at **cerickson@mtaudubon.org** or call (406) 443-3949.

Go Green and Save !

Do you want to help Five Valleys Audubon Society save money, paper and volunteers' time? Please consider reading your ***Birding Observer*** online. In addition, your online copy will have 'color' content and you will receive your newsletter much earlier than the mailed hard copy!

If you can **Go Green** and wish to receive your ***Birding Observer*** only via email, just send us a request with your name to Vick Applegate at k7vk@arrl.net. You can also always find your current newsletter on the Five Valleys Audubon Society's website at: www.fvaudubon.org. Thanks!

Welcome to Our New Members

Larry Depute
Carol Ellis
Anne Kazmierczak
Jan Kubasko
B. Lowery
Carol Nichols
Jade Siefert
Anne Van Doren
Sandra Gerber
William Kendrick
Eldora H. Landman
Jody McKenan
Rain Reynolds
Annie Watson

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: _____

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Please note: The newsletter will be delivered electronically unless requested otherwise.

___ $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

Join National Audubon Society & 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*, and I may participate in all local Chapter activities. I understand that my dues are shared between NAS and my local Chapter.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City:_____ **State:**_____ **Zip:** _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Please note: The newsletter will be delivered electronically unless requested otherwise.

__ $20 for a 1-year individual or family membership

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