February 2018

Birding Observer

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

Calendar of Events

- **Monday, February 5th, 6:45-8:45pm:** The board meeting will be held in the large meeting room in the Missoula County Library.
- **Monday, February 12th, 7:00pm:** Come learn about the Common Loon. Donna Love will present in Room 123 of the Gallagher Business Building at the University of Montana.
- **Thursday, February 15th:** The deadline for the March 2018 edition of the *Birding Observer*.
- **Saturday, February 17th:** Bird walk at Lee Metcalf NWR from 10:00am-Noon. Meet the field trip leader at the Refuge Visitor's Center.
- **Saturday, February 24th:** All-day field trip to the Mission Valley. Meet in the northwest corner of the Adams Center parking lot at 7:50 am or at the Cenex Station in Ronan at 9:00 am.
- **Various Dates in Feb, March & April:** Advanced Birding Workshop. See details on page 3.

Love for the Loon

A tingling of the spine occurs when you hear the haunting call of the Common Loon as it cuts the silence of a cool spring morning on Seeley Lake. It was here that Donna Love fell in love with loons, when in 1995 she and her husband, Tim, and their three children lived at the Seeley Lake Ranger Station at the north end of the lakeshore near a loon nest. She watched the loon pair nest, hatch, and raise chicks on the lake every summer for 14 years. In 1997 she became the secretary for the Montana Loon Society (MLS), a position she holds to this day.

Loons play a big part in Donna's life. Aside from her work with the MLS she was directly involved in the pilot loon ranger program in the Seeley Lake/ Ovando are from 2000 to 2004 and takes part in the Common Loon Working Group. Donna also works to educate others about loons and Montana's other fauna through her writing. In 2003, Donna's first children's nature book, Loons, Diving Birds of the North, was published by Mountain Press. She now has seven traditionally published and three independently published books. Donna will share her years of experience watching and studying these fascinating birds at our meeting on February 12th at 7:00 PM in Room 123 of the Gallagher Business Building at UM.

Following Donna's presentation, Carly F. Muench, a recipient of a 2017 Philip L. Wright Memorial Research Award, will make a brief presentation of her evaluation of Northern Goshawk turnover within the Minidoka Ranger District of the Sawtooth National Forest in Idaho.

Peeps From The Board:
Gravel Pits Make Good Habitat
By Poody McLaughlin

Some of my most exciting bird sightings, and perhaps yours too, occurred at improbable places such as garbage dumps, sewage lagoons, and gravel pits. Seeing a Marbled Godwit, Hoary Redpoll, and Tamaulipas Crow for the first time in such locales etched these species and places firmly into my memory. It's probably a testimonial to hard-core birders that we endure abused habitats and their smells and noise in order to see these stunning creatures. Which says nothing of what the birds themselves endure.

If birds can thrive, or at least survive, in such marginal habitats, what happens when humans restore these areas to a more natural state? There has been success across the country restoring "played out" gravel pits to more natural areas. Unlike abandoned mines with potential toxins, gravel pits can be cleaned up with relatively little expense. Frequently gravel pits are below the water table, where they are well-suited to become artificial ponds that serve as wetland habitats. On the west coast, gravel pits are being reconnected to rivers as off-channel habitat in an effort to restore salmon numbers. In other areas, restored gravel pits are used to create biodiverse wetlands that help replace land lost to human development.

Closer to home at the Montana Audubon Center in Billings, teachers, students, and volunteers have been transforming a landscape from gravel pit to wildlife habitat. This once "tapped-out piece of ground" is an example to us all. "What is emerging along the Yellowstone River is a permanent place in the community for birds and wildlife and for people to learn and study and grow," their website says.

West of Missoula, there is such a "diamond in the rough." This abandoned gravel pit is still privately held so access is not allowed. The property is fenced, well-posted with 'No Trespassing' signs, and undergoing initial restoration. The 86-acre site is west of Fort Missoula and about 200 yards from the Clark Fork River. Two ponds represent 1/3 - 1/2 of the area. Eventually, after restoration is completed, Knife River plans to turn over the land to the City of Missoula.

Meanwhile, the wildlife value of these ponds has become evident to birders. According to ebird data, 189 species have been identified there in under two years. All of this observation has been done behind a chain link fence and with the aid of spotting scopes. The diversity of the waterfowl is stunning. Fifteen species of diving ducks, unusual enough in Missoula, include five in the Aythya genus (scaup, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, and Redhead); White-winged and Surf Scoters; and the recently seen Long-tailed Duck. Dabbling duck species total 11. Trumpeter and Tundra swans have been sighted. A Five Valleys Audubon field trip in November found 740 migratory Snow Geese. Shorebird species total 14. Even terrestrial species have been diverse, 13 sparrow species among them. But right now with the ponds frozen, there's not much bird life.

The proximity of the ponds to the river provides important habitat to birds dependent on riparian and wetland habitats. Given how so many birds use this "diamond in the rough," the Five Valleys Audubon Board believes that the area's highest and best use will be to return it to more natural habitats. Imagine restored wetlands alongside the ponds creating nesting and migratory habitats for birds. We look forward to the opportunity to create habitat alongside the Clark Fork that both people and birds can value.

Converted gravel pit at Montana Audubon Center on the Yellowstone River

References:

- mtaudubon.org/center
- nmfs.noaa.gov/stories/2012/09/09_06_12gravel_pits.html
- creeklife.com/blog/gravel-pit-restoration-biodiverse-wetlands-for-wildlife-protection

Field Trip
By Larry Weeks

Saturday, January 13th: The owl trapping field trip with Denver Holt and his crew took place in a brushy draw north of the Ranch Club golf course. Matt Larson and Will left the cul-de-sac at the end of Prada to set up the mist nets while Denver addressed the group on a variety of owl-related subjects. The group then hiked about a half mile to the capture site. The group was then stationed on the hillside while Denver and his crew "drove" the brushy draw towards the nets. Several Long-eared Owls could be seen flying ahead of the drivers. They ended up catching two Long-eared Owls; one male and one female. One of the owls had been banded a month earlier. Denver explained that they have been able to sex the owls by the color of their wing lining; tannest for females and whitish for males. Matt also covered the owl's adaptations for silent flight. This is the 31st year of Denver's Long-eared Owl study and they have banded over 1900 owls. The overall population continues to show a downward trend. At the conclusion of the field trip, Denver let nine-year-old Joliz Davis release both owls. There were 19 people on the field trip.

Advanced Birding Workshop

By Larry Weeks

An advanced birding workshop has been scheduled for February, March and April 2018 that will include seven sessions on Thursday nights from 7:00 – 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
February 22	Raptors	Larry Weeks
March 1	Shorebirds	Jim Brown
March 8	Owls	Matt Larson
March 15	Sparrows	Larry Weeks
March 22	Gulls	Alex Hughes
March 29	Flycatchers	Mike Krzywicki
April 5	Forest Birds	Jim Sparks

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

Philip L. Wright Memorial Research Awards
By Bill Gabriel

In 1976 Professor Philip L. Wright gathered several U of M professors, students, and a few other birders to found the Five Valleys Audubon Society. Among the chapter's goals was: "To promote research on wildlife and other natural resources." Accordingly, in 1981 FVAS announced a program of Study Grant Awards that granted a total of $700 to 3 University of Montana graduate students. The $700 came from the FVAS operating budget, and Jim Brown remembers sitting on the Board and wondering if such expenditures would bankrupt the chapter.

In 1984 FVAS revised the Study Grant program, renamed it Field Biology Research Awards, announced the program in the chapter newsletter, and continued to fund awards from the annual budget. From 1984 through 1991 a total of $1,900 was awarded to 9 students.

In 1992, that program was in turn replaced by the Philip L. Wright Research Award program. From 1992 through 1998, 12 students received awards totaling $3,641.50, all from the FVAS annual budget.

An Endowment to fund the Awards

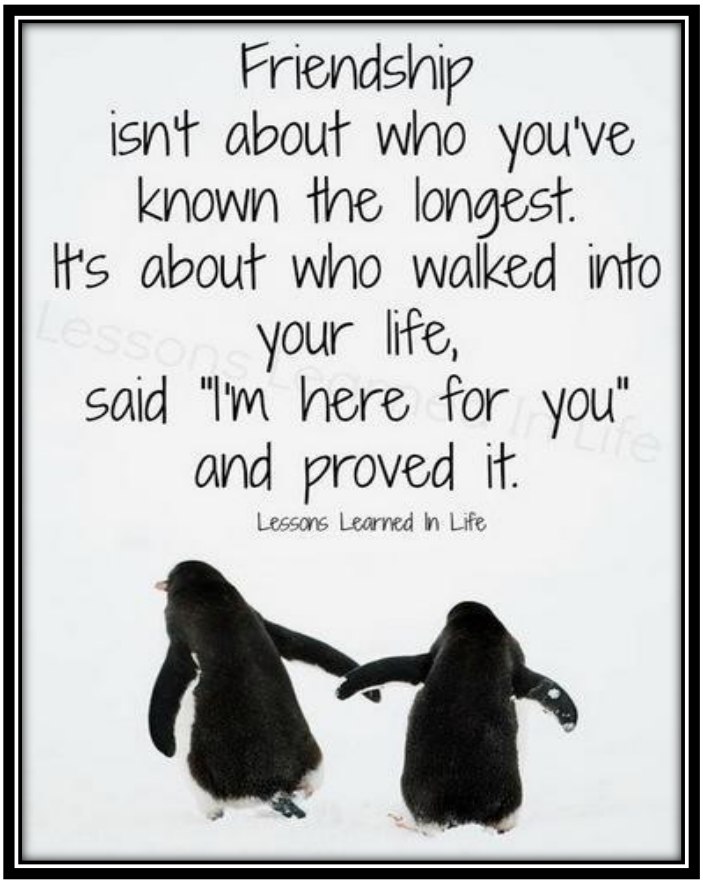
Professor Philip L. Wright died in 1997, and in 1998 the FVAS Board of Directors decided to establish an endowment in his name to provide ongoing funding for the small research grants that had been funded year to year from the FVAS operating budget. The goal was to raise $20,000 for the endowment, and to use the annual income from that for the awards. We have succeeded beyond all expectations, and now, 20 years later, the Philip L. Wright Endowment has grown to $85,865 while awarding $34,925 to 59 students in grants of $150 to $1,180. Our management rules permit 4% of the year-end value to be used for research awards the following year. That is $3,434 for 2018.

A Request for Proposals (RFP) for 2018 has been distributed within University of Montana, proposals are due near the end of March, and awards will be made early in April.

And Now The Pitch

If you would like to help this fund grow, and support more student research, turn to the membership application near the end of this newsletter. The fourth item on the left is for "Philip L. Wright Fund, small grants for student research." Write in the amount of your contribution, put Philip L. Wright Fund on the memo line of your check, and send it to FVAS, P.O. Box 8425, Missoula, MT, 59807.

Thank you,
Bill Gabriel



Help Wanted: The Owl Research Institute is Looking for Short-eared Owl Monitoring Volunteers

Dear Short-eared
Owl Enthusiasts,

We need your help. The Owl Research Institute is embarking on a 3-year collaborative study to monitor Short-eared Owl populations in the western U.S. The study will rely on volunteers to make it a success.

Project WAfLS (Western Asio flammeus Landscape Study), involves 15 other agencies and organizations across 8 states and is designed to assess the population status, trends, and threats against the Short-eared Owl – an enigmatic, open-country species.

This project, funded by a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is a rare example of cooperation and collaboration on a large scale and is an opportunity to influence and focus conservation and restoration activities for this species. This species-specific monitoring program will provide the most robust population data for Short-eared Owls to date.

The effort aims to complete a number of coordinated surveys across California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. The survey design is well-suited to volunteer participation and will rely primarily
on volunteer, citizen-scientists to collect data.

Volunteers will be asked to select one of 50 grids in the state and will be responsible for two 1.5 hour visits, each occurring in a separate 3 week window (March/April and April/May). The timing for a given route is dependent upon elevation. It is a road based survey (8 - 11 points along a secondary road, separated by 1/2 mile) that starts 100 minutes before darkness, and finishes 10 minutes after darkness. The survey timing is set to coincide with the Short-eared Owls elaborate courtship displays.

More information, maps, and sign-up will be coming shortly. In the meantime, if you're interested in learning more about this ambitious project or want to know how to participate, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Matt Larson
Research Director – Owl Research Institute
Cell: (701) 866-5771
Email: owlinstitute@outlook.com

Montana Audubon 2018 Update

Amy Seaman, Montana Audubon's Conservation Program Manager, has sent us a list of her 2018 projects. Several have opportunities for public participation. Check out the list, and contact Amy (details below) if you would like to sign up or have any questions.

- Citizen Science Long-billed Curlew surveys in the Mission and Helena Valleys;
- Citizen Science Rosy-Finch and Black Swift surveys throughout western Montana;
- Citizen Science Chimney Swift surveys in eastern Montana;
- Breeding Bird Surveys in Eastern Montana;
- Assisting with Golden Eagle Monitoring Study (GEMS) in the Big Belts;
- Representing Montana Audubon on the Berkeley Pit Advisory Committee;
- Presenting citizen science lessons learned, and policy communication programs at The Wildlife Society conference (my main annual conservation networking opportunity);
- Greater Sage-Grouse conservation;
- Climate change; and
- Riparian habitat quality.

Amy Seaman, Conservation Program Manager
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Missoula Christmas Bird Count
By Larry Weeks

The Missoula CBC was held on Saturday, December 16, 2017. There were 97 participants in the field and 17 feeder watchers. We identified 85 species on Count Day and had 3 Count Week birds. This is the 7th consecutive year that we have been in the eighties. The most unusual bird was a Double-crested Cormorant that was seen by Nathan Senner at the gravel pits and by Dick Hutto and Sue Reel who were birding Sleven's Island. Poody and Joe's group had the only Ring-necked Ducks, Barrow's Goldeneyes, Swamp Sparrows, and Northern Saw-whet Owl on Kelly Island, Jim Brown's group had the only Prairie Falcon, Redhead, Short-eared Owls, and March Wrens in Grass Valley, Denver and his group had 49 Long-eared Owls wet of the airport, Rose Leach and her group had the only Western Meadowlarks along Mullan Road, Rob Holden had the only Canvasback at McCauley Butte, and the author had the only Blue Jay in the Grant Creek area. The feeder watchers also contributed to the Count with a Chestnut-backed Chickadee at the Loehnen's and a White-throated Sparrow at the Toppins. Other group leaders included Brian Williams who birded the Stewart Peak trail, Robin Anderson who birded the University and Greenough Park, Terry Toppins who birded Maclay and Big Flats, Thomas Kallmeyer who covered Butler Creek, Debbie Leick who birded LaValle Creek, Paul Hendricks who birded Marshall Canyon and Woods Gulch, Pat Little who birded the Kim Williams trail and the upper Clark Fork River, Rose Stoudt at the State Nursery and the Tower St. Open Space, Paul Loehnen who birded Council Grove and the Kona Ranch, Nickolas Sly and Cole Wolf who birded Crazy Canyon and South Hills, Zona Lindemann who covered the Target Range area, Will Bebern who birded the Rattlesnake Greenway, Mary Ann Frikazee who hiked Mt. Sentinel, and Joy Earls who hiked along Snowdrift Lane. The Count Day ended with a potluck at the author's home. My thanks to all the participants who made it a successful Count.

Missoula Christmas Bird Count 2017		
Double-crested Cormorant 1	Wild Turkey 111	White-breasted Nuthatch 46
Great Blue Heron 34	American Coot 8	Pygmy Nuthatch 51
Canada Goose 1122	Killdeer 17	Brown Creeper 12
Green-winged Teal 55	Wilson's Snipe 14	Pacific Wren 3
Mallard 798	Rock Pigeon 777	Marsh Wren 3
Northern Pintail 9	Eurasian-collared Dove 518	American Dipper 4
Gadwall 7	Mourning Dove 10	Golden-crowned Kinglet 13
American Wigeon 45	Great Horned Owl 29	Townsend's Solitaire 31
Ring-necked Duck 14	Northern Pygmy Owl 5	American Robin 21
Common Goldeneye 218	Long-eared Owl 49	Bohemian Waxwing 650
Barrow's Goldeneye 7	Short-eared Owl 2	Cedar Waxwing 203
Bufflehead 17	Northern Saw-whet Owl 1	Northern Shrike 10
Hooded Merganser 8	Belted Kingfisher 27	European Starling 37
Common Merganser 61	Downy Woodpecker 50	Yellow-rumped Warbler CW
Bald Eagle 47	Hairy Woodpecker 23	American Tree Sparrow 30
Golden Eagle 7	Northern Flicker 194	Song Sparrow 59
Northern Harrier 13	Pileated Woodpecker 17	Swamp Sparrow 2
Sharp-shinned Hawk 10	Horned Lark 5	White-throated Sparrow 1
Cooper's Hawk 3	Gray Jay 3	Harris' Sparrow 3
Red-tailed Hawk 125	Steller's Jay 20	Dark-eyed Junco 188
Rough-legged Hawk 76	Blue Jay 1	Red-winged Blackbird 146
American Kestrel 13	Clark's Nutcracker 48	Western Meadowlark 2
Merlin 4	Black-billed Magpie 408	House Finch 450
Prairie Falcon 1	American Crow 136	Red Crossbill 390
Redhead 1	Common Raven 197	Common Redpoll 239
Canvasback 1	Black-capped Chickadee 465	Pine Siskin 63
Gray Partridge 39	Mountain Chickadee 47	American Goldfinch 86
Ring-necked Pheasant 18	Chestnut-backed Chickadee 1	Evening Grosbeak CW
Dusky Grouse CW	Red-breasted Nuthatch 390	House Sparrow 582
Ruffed Grouse 2		
	85 species	**9720 total birds**

New Members:

- Guy Bateman
- Treva Bittinger
- Les & Jo Carpenter
- Karen Cates
- Sneed B. Collard III
- Amy Ratzlaf
- Nina van Rensselaer
- Stanley and Patricia Senner
- Robert Stahl
- Joyce Stevens
- Mari & Laxmi von Hoffman

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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