May 2013

Birding Observer

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

Calendar of Events

- **Saturday, May 4th:** Brown's Lake - Meet in the middle of the UM Adams Center Parking Lot at 8am for carpooling to the Brown's Lake area for a day of birding led by Jim Brown returning around 4pm. Dress appropriately and bring a lunch. **The field trip will leave promptly on the hour.** For more info call Terry Toppins at 214-1194.

- **Monday, May 6th, 7pm:** Jim Brown will host the May board meeting at 1504 Woods Gulch Road, Missoula.

- **Monday, May 13th, 7:30pm:** There will be two presentations at the May program meeting. Bill DeCou will present on Kenyan and Tanzanian wildlife, and Montana Audubon's Amy Cilimburg and three interns from the Climate Change Studies Program will illustrate how Montana birds are responding to climate change. Assemble at 7:30pm. in room L14 of the Gallagher Business Building at UM. See article on page 2 for more details.

- **Wednesday, May 15th:** Submission deadline for the June edition of the *Birding Observer*.

- **Saturday, May 18th:** Beginning bird walk at Lee Metcalf NWR from 10am-Noon. Meet the field trip leader at the Refuge Visitor's Center.

- **Saturday, May 18th:** Help observe and document the migration of Vaux's swifts at Swift Night Out in Hamilton. See details in our special events section on page 3.

- **Thursday, May 23rd:** The Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes will hold a festival on International Migratory Bird Day, from 5pm-8pm. See page 3 or visit www.cskt.org/birdday.htm for details.

- **Saturday, May 25th:** Field trip to Smurfit Stone Pulp Mill. Meet in the middle of the UM Adams Center Parking Lot at 8am for carpooling or at the plant at 8:30am for a half day birding trip, led by Larry Weeks. All field trips leave promptly on the hour. For more info call Terry Toppins at 214-1194.

- **Saturday, June 1st:** Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area & Seeley Lake area - Meet in the middle of the UM Adams Center parking lot at 8am to carpool. FW&P Wildlife Biologist Kristi DuBois will lead the field trip to look at birds, butterflies and wetlands. Please dress appropriately and bring a lunch. The group will depart UM promptly at 8am and return around 4pm. For more info call Terry Toppins at 214-1194.

- **June 7th – 9th:** Montana Audubon's 14th Annual Wings Across the Big Sky Festival in Lewistown, MT. For details, please see the article on page six and visit http://mtaudubon.org/birdwatching/festival.html.

- **Saturday June 15th:** Pollinator Party organized jointly by Five Valleys Audubon and the Native Plant Society. Visit native-plant gardens around Missoula then gather at Fort Missoula in the afternoon for a tea and panel discussion on gardening for pollinators. Numerous local organizations will have tables at the Pollinator Party. More details to come in the June newsletter.

Peeps from the Board: A Sign of Spring
By Vick Applegate

For many of us, certain sights or sounds signal the return of spring. For me, it's the song of an early morning robin, the call of geese on their northern migration, the appearance of buttercups or the first sound of my neighbor's lawn mower. More recently spring is the arrival of flying house guests.

For the last six-years our sign of spring is the predictable arrival of Vaux's swifts *(Chaetura vauxi)* to our fireplace chimney. Returning from Central America or Mexico every May 1, within a day or so, 5-10 swifts arrive resonating a noisy high-pitched chirping from our chimney. There they roost for several nights to a week or more before they disperse except for a pair or two that remain to nest in the chimney.

Vaux's swifts are the smallest swift of North America and are most closely related to hummingbirds. They are primarily a forest species in the West whose habitat for roosting and nesting is hollow trees with vertical entrances. Swifts roost in a vertical position, grasping with their tiny legs the inside of trees or at our house, the inside of the brick chimney. In Western Montana common roosts and nests are in large old grand fir and lesser amounts of western larch and western redcedar with broken tops. Birder observations indicate that Vaux's swifts may be moving into man-made structures like chimneys due to a loss of suitable trees.

David Sibley's *Guide to Bird Life and Behavior* and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's *All About Birds* say that swifts do almost everything 'on-the-fly'. They feed on insects and spiders, drink water, gather nest materials, and even mate in the air. They build their nests by cementing twigs together with a sticky saliva mix. (The famous Chinese cuisine, 'bird's nest soup', is prepared from saliva-made nests of mainly two Asian swiftlets: *Aerodramus fuciphagus & maximus).*

In our chimney, we do not see the nest building. The swifts remain fairly quiet until the young hatch. But by July, the peeping sounds of young swifts resonate into our living room as they compete for food ferried to them by their parents. The feeding flight is pretty amazing, a chirping announcement of their arrival, a rapid beating of their wings, a quick circling and then a diving or fluttering controlled-plummet into the chimney. The noise becomes increasingly intense until the young fledge. After fledging they regroup nightly to roost and their noisy 'feed me' chatter is replaced with a much lower-volume 'welcoming' sound from roosting birds. There is also a low-pitched rumble from the fireplace as each fly up out of the chimney every morning. Then one-day after mid-summer it's full silence, our fun watching them is over and they're gone until next spring. Soup anyone?

Readers, please note: A Vaux's swift field trip is planned for Hamilton on Saturday, May 18th. See our special events section on page 3 of this newsletter for details.

African Wildlife Comes to May Meeting

Black rhinoceros

Bill DeCou of Five Valleys Audubon will discuss Kenyan and Tanzanian wildlife that he encountered on safari in November 2012. Join us for the program on Monday, May 13th at 7:30pm in the Gallagher Business Building, room L14 (lower level) on the University of Montana campus.

Bill DeCou moved to Montana in 1973 and earned an M.S. in microbiology at MSU and an MBA at UM. He worked in public health, as an insurance investigator, and taught business at Northern Montana College. Since 1995, he has been an active property manager and wildlife enthusiast.

Also presenting at the May program meeting will be Amy Cilimburg, Montana Audubon's Director of Conservation and Climate Policy, and three interns from the Climate Change Studies Program at UM. The students have been combining their artistic and wildlife science skills to create fantastic visuals showcasing how Montana birds respond to our changing climate. They'll share what they've designed. And they will provide a quick update on a student-led wildlife and mercury research project.

April Fool Surprise Field Trip
By Terry Toppins

On **April 1, 2013**, seven curious people showed up for the April Fool Surprise Field Trip led by Terry Toppins and went to the Montana Waterfowl Foundation north of Ronan. Participants were able to enjoy extreme close up views of many waterfowl species such as Hooded Merganser, American Wigeon, Redhead, Gadwall, and Wood Duck. A close up view of a pair of Sandhill Cranes was nice and the breeding pairs of Trumpeter Swans were enjoyed by all. Perhaps the stars of the visit were a pair of Smew, in breeding plumage, that were on loan to the Foundation. The weather was good and the birds were magnificent.

2013 Spring Lee Metcalf NWR Field Trip Summary
By Terry McEneaney

On **March 30, 2013**, more than two dozen participants, traveling in two waves, descended on Lee Metcalf Refuge to shake off the winter cobwebs. Collectively we tallied approximately 66 bird species. The weather was extremely nice and warm. The Bitterroot Valley appeared to be drier than normal, and preliminary signs of a possible drought could be on the horizon. Most notable highlights included: a newly arrived Osprey; a Rough-legged Hawk and California Gull in passage; a pair of Trumpeter Swans setting up what appears to be a territory; a flock of 50+ Snow Geese feeding yet alert in a stubble field; Virginia Rails calling; Marsh Wrens defending territories; high flying, paired, and vociferous Sandhill Cranes; two closely viewed American Tree Sparrows; a tent of Canvasbacks; a newly arrived Pied-billed Grebe and a Yellow-headed Blackbird; several horse laughing White-breasted Nuthatches; and the exotic primitive calls of the Pileated Woodpecker. Other raptors for the trip included Golden Eagle, Bald Eagle, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, and American Kestrel. The year 2013 marks the 50th anniversary of the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge. So Happy Birthday Lee Metcalf, wherever you are! I am not much for naming public places after people, but this refuge is well deserved. For it took the strong will and vision of a conservationist like Lee Metcalf to have the foresight to set aside a unique piece of wildlife habitat, an urban refuge island of sorts, surrounded by a sea of current and future human impacts and developments. Lastly, hats off to the Metcalf NWR staff as well for a job well done.

Special Events

Swift Night Out
On **Saturday, May 18th**, participate in Swift Night Out. Join observers throughout the Pacific Northwest to document the migration of Vaux's swifts by counting their presence at known roost sites. **Our roost site is a chimney located in the Hamilton Fire Hall**. Participants should gather in Hamilton at the corner of South 3rd and State Street at 8pm. We will observe for an hour and a half. Please bring a portable chair, warm clothes, and water.

There will be an optional social gathering before watching the swifts: meet up with members of the Bitterroot chapter in one of downtown Hamilton's dining establishments at 7pm for a bite to eat then gather at the observation point by 8pm. **Meet at the Adams Center parking lot at 6pm for carpooling to Hamilton.**

This field trip is organized in conjunction with the Bitterroot Audubon Society. See the Vaux's Happening website for more information on Vaux's swifts and their migration, and citizen-science efforts to monitor them. (www.vauxhappening.org)

International Migratory Bird Day
On **Thursday, May 23rd**, the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes will hold a festival in Pablo on International Migratory Bird Day, from 5pm-8pm. Celebrate birds by learning about their life cycles and yearly migrations through information stations, vendors, games, crafts and short films. The event is sponsored by the CSKT Wildlife Management Program and SKC Environmental Studies Program. Visit www.cskt.org/birdday.htm for more details.

If you are interested in carpooling to this event, please contact Pat Little at roughleg@gmail.com.

Spring Freezout Lake Field Trip Summary
by Terry McEneaney

2013 marks my 45th year of going to Freezout Lake to view the spring migration of Snow Geese. Interestingly enough, this year also marks the 20th anniversary of my book *Birding Montana*. My, how time flies. Freezout never ceases to amaze me. But in the past, this annual pilgrimage to the spring birding Mecca of Montana always involved two days, and an overnight stay or two, either camping at the lake or staying in Choteau. This year I decided to try something different, so it was decided to go from Missoula to Freezout Lake, and back to Missoula in a day. It was a long day I might add, encompassing a total of 13 hours (which is equivalent to 780 minutes or 46,800 seconds). Useless statistics you might say. Not so, if you equate we saw more than two birds per second for the entire 13 hours of birding.

I led a group of 17 adventurous birders in five vehicles, with that group size breaking down as the day waned. We left Missoula before sunrise, and returned to Missoula near sunset. Earlier reports from Freezout Lake indicated the Snow Geese had already reached its peak and had moved on heading north. But I was not concerned; I had a good feeling about the trip beforehand. My experience with Freezout has taught me "see it for yourself", since any spring field trip to Freezout is a crapshoot of bird migration timing coupled with weather. My biggest concern was the snowstorm the day before, and the road conditions particularly going up the Blackfoot and over Roger's Pass on March 24, and the marathon trip. The day started out cold (-3F at Roger's Pass) and ended up in the 40 F's at Freezout and 50'sF in Missoula.

We were rewarded from the fruits of our labor in so many ways. First we saw in excess of 900 elk or wapiti, dozens of mule and white-tailed deer, and pronghorn, a single coyote, and glimpses of recently emerging Columbian and Richardson's ground squirrels. Our first omen of a good day started west of the Continental Divide, when we found Pileated Woodpecker flying ahead of the car caravan and landing in the sun at the top of a large conifer. East of the divide it was slow birding until we came across a recently arrived Ferruginous Hawk on territory, as we experienced it nest building. Then there was an adult female Golden Eagle perched on a rock outcrop and the fun began. There are no words to describe the look and feel of being on the Rocky Mountain Front, and the day we chose for this field trip happened to be a rare day in the annals of Freezout birding. What was lacking on a trip this time of year was quite rare ---there were no bluebirds, and yes NO WIND.

We arrived at Freezout only to be reminded why the name Freezout is well deserved. The water at Freezout was ice covered and the ground frozen. There were a few open leads in the ice, thanks to waterfowl spending the night. This time of year can be traditionally cold, but without much wind and a good amount of sun this was a day to be remembered. We took a break as we arrived mid-morning and waited for a while taking in the warm sun and watching the landscape for birds, then after sizing it up we went for the chase. We ended up in the perfect location, as skeins or waves of Snow Geese came from the east and south and landed in the barley field near us. It was a toss-up what was better, the sights or the sounds of Snow Geese or both. Later in the day they ended up in two large flocks, on the main lake on one on Pond 5. But the entire day was like this either-magnificent or brilliant.

In summary, we ended up with 80,000-100,000 Snow Geese (including over a dozen "blue morphs"), and approximately tens of thousands of Northern Pintail, and 2,000-3,000 Tundra Swan. Not bad for iced-up conditions. Besides the impressive squalls of Snow Geese, we found 11 Eurasian Wigeon. This is the most Eurasian Wigeon I have ever seen in Montana at any one time. Other birds worth noting were Trumpeter Swan, Cinnamon Teal, and expected waterfowl and raptors of different persuasions and color morphs.

There is an Irish saying "Good things come to those that wait". At the end of the day our wait paid off, with a grayish chocolate plumaged juvenile female Gyrfalcon perched on a pole. We had a lot of smiles and laughs throughout the day, including the leader's car rolling slowly down the hill only to be saved by Bill Thomas. The leader was prepared to run very fast had Bill not saved the day. Near the end, we birded Trixi's only to find an old Bald Eagle in the watering hole as the group toasted to a very fine day of birding "Freezout style". As we entered Missoula, with the sun setting in the west, and we were reminded of the great time we had and that not all trips to Freezout end up as memorable as the spring Freezout Lake Field Trip 2013.

Hummingbirds at Home
Audubon's New Citizen Science Project

Hummingbirds visit our yards each spring to breed and seek nectar from our gardens and feeders. Fascinating to watch, hummingbirds captivate us with their magical feats of flight and their showy colors. The Continental US is breeding home to 14 species of hummingbirds, with a few other species making rare appearances.

Recent science reports that flowers are blooming earlier and earlier due to climate change. Some flowers are blooming as many as 17 days before the migrating hummingbirds arrive. The impact for migrating and breeding hummingbirds is unknown.

Building on our Christmas Bird Count (CBC) legacy and the more recent success of the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC), Audubon is launching a new program called **Hummingbirds at Home**.

Through this new program Audubon's goal is to gather data that will help document the hummingbirds' journey, and better understand how changing flowering patterns and supplemental feeding by people relate to hummingbirds' migration and breeding success, and also climate change. Since nectar is critical to hummingbirds, we're asking people to document which flowering plants hummingbirds are feeding on in their backyards as well as whether hummingbird feeders are supplied and used. The Hummingbirds at Home program will provide an opportunity for citizen scientists to help us learn how these changes in the environment are impacting hummingbirds.

In this family-friendly program, participants can log hummingbird sightings and the flowering plants or feeders they visit, with mobile technology or on desktop computers. Participants can also view hummingbird sightings online in real time. Scientists will use the data to better understand how hummingbirds are impacted by feeders, non-native nectar sources in gardens, shifting flowering times, and climate change.

Rufous Hummingbird
Photo by Nathan DeBoer

Do you enjoy watching hummingbirds and want to become involved in this program? You can participate at a level that fits your schedule – from one sighting to watching hummingbirds over several weekends throughout the program. To learn more about this exciting citizen science project, please visit the website hummingbirdsathome.org.

Fooled by Finches?

Ever been stumped by a streaky brown finch at your feeder? Or have trouble determining whether the "Purple" finch you're looking at is really a Purple Finch and not one of the other look-alike species? The trio of House Finch, Purple Finch, and Cassin's Finch provide one of the most challenging groups of birds to identify in North America.

Cornell Lab of Ornithology has published a printable tip sheet that will help you sort them out. You can find it on the eBird web site (http://ebird.org) – look for the article titled "ID Tips for Tricky Finches" dated March 29, 2013. Or you can type in this address into your browser: http://t.co/LVduDeUQMf.

House Finch
Photo by Pat Little

And Wild Birds Unlimited also recently published some helpful tips. You can find them by viewing their blog at http://blog.wbu.com and then searching for "finch id" (it should be the first story in the results). Or you can go directly to the article by typing in this address into your browser: blog.wbu.com/2013/01/10/finch-id-take-a-closer-look/

Wings Across the Big Sky
Lewistown, Montana June 7 - 9th

See wonderful birds, wildlife, and habitat in Central Montana! Wings Across the Big Sky still has many wonderful field trip options from which to choose. Join fellow birders in the heart of the state for field trips, a visit from live raptor ambassador birds, and presentations on state and worldwide conservation efforts.

Owl bet this trip will be amazing! 15SU American Prairie Reserve Join a guided tour of the American Prairie Reserve and hear firsthand about this ambitious conservation project. The tour will weave through the Reserve as we learn about the project's progress and the area's wildlife, focusing on birds. We'll see migrating shorebirds taking up residence alongside birds that stay year-round. We'll explore sagebrush grasslands and riparian corridors. Stops will include a conservation bison herd, an active prairie dog town with Burrowing Owls and raptors, and ponds with shorebirds and ducks.

Not interested in worms? Not an early bird? 11SA Carters Pond Later morning trip! Carters Ponds are prairie reservoirs between the Moccasin and Judith Mountains, north of Lewistown. Common waterfowl include American Wigeon, Ruddy Ducks, Ring-necked Ducks, Lesser Scaup, Northern Shoveler and grebes. Falcons, eagles, Savannah Sparrows, Western Meadowlarks, and shorebirds are also seen.

Fishing for a good catch? 2SA/2SU Big Springs State Fish Hatchery Big Springs State Fish Hatchery is 7 miles south of Lewistown. Springs bubble up supporting greenery and giant willows. A leisurely walk takes you through grassy hills and shade trees. Watch for Belted Kingfishers, woodpeckers, crossbills, grosbeaks, sparrows and warblers, and duck and goose families. Tour the hatchery and feed the fish!

Wing your way to an oasis! 16SU Zortman Area You'll find yourself in a different setting from the prairie as you travel to Zortman, located in a mountain range surrounded by an ocean of grass. The Little Rockies are called the Island Mountains by local tribes. Quaking aspen, pine and fir provide habitat for Cooper's Hawks, Western Tanagers, Dusky Flycatchers, Red Crossbills and Saw-whet Owls. The cliffs attract White-throated Swifts. You'll see how a mountain oasis can attract birds and bird-watchers!

The field trips listed above are just a few of the many that will take place over this exciting weekend.

We hope to see you in the center of Montana June 7—9th!

Learn much more online at the Wings Across the Big Sky website!
Visit www.mtaudubon.org/birdwatching/festival

Welcome New Members:

Claudia H. Brown	Russ Kerr	Tracy Mikesell	Christine Oakenshield
Jean S. Pfeiffer	Rose Solum	Sarauna Torrez	Sarah Washko

Go Green and Save !

Do you want to help Five Valleys Audubon Society save money, paper and volunteers' time? Please consider viewing 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!

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: _____

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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: _____

_____

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

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