November 2009

Birding Observer

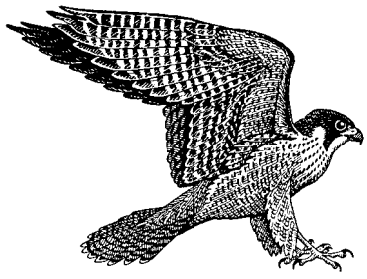
Five Valleys Audubon Society **A Chapter of the National Audubon Society**

Calendar

* **Monday, November 2nd, 7pm:** Alex Taft will host the board meeting.
* **Saturday, November 7th:** Half-day field trip to Smurfit-Stone. Meet at 9:30 am in the middle of the UM field house parking lot or at the pulp mill at 10:00 am.
* **Monday, November 9th, 7:30pm:** MT Audubon's Steve Hoffman will present at the November meeting.
* **Sunday, November 15th:** Submission deadline for the December edition of the *Birding Observer*.
* **Sunday, December 6th:** All-day field trip to the Mission Valley led by Jim Brown. Meet in the middle of the UM field house parking lot at 8:00 AM or at the Ninepipes Lodge at 9:00 AM.
* **Saturday, December 19th:** Christmas Bird Count.

Rocky & Wal-Mart Support Audubon Adventures

For the fifth year in a row, Rocky Healey applied for a grant from The Wal-Mart Foundation to support the Chapter's education program called Audubon Adventures. Rocky presented a check for $250 to the Chapter at the September meeting. Rocky and his wife Suzi both work for Wal-Mart's Supercenter on Mullan Road. Thanks again to both Rocky and The Wal-Mart Foundation.



Raptor Migration in Western North America

Steve Hoffman, Executive Director of Montana Audubon, will present the program on November 9th at 7:30 p.m. in the Gallagher Business Building, room L14 (lower level), on the University of Montana campus. How did an eastern hawk watcher come to discover so many western raptor migration flyways? How do eastern and western North American raptor migrations differ? What have we learned about the status and trends of raptor populations in the West based on migration counts taken during the past 20+ years? Where do the birds breed and where do they over-winter? Why don't the birds use the same route in both spring and fall? How often do the birds stop to hunt, and do they deposit "pre-migratory fat" before they initiate their migration? How is expanding oil & gas development across the West impacting western raptor populations? Climate change? These are just some of the many questions Steve will try to answer.

Steve has 29 years of professional experience in wildlife conservation and nonprofit administration. After 10 years with the US Bureau of Land Management and the US Fish & Wildlife Service, as a wildlife biologist in the American southwest, Steve founded *HawkWatch International* (HWI), a nonprofit organization dedicated to raptor research and conservation. After serving as Executive Director of HWI for 12 years, he served as State Director of Bird Conservation for Audubon Pennsylvania, and Executive Director of Predator Conservation Alliance in Bozeman. Steve began with Montana Audubon in December 2006. He has a Master's degree in Wildlife Ecology from Utah State University and has published more than a dozen scientific articles on raptor migration in the western US.

Peeps from the Prez by Paul Loehnen

The corvids or crow family is one of my favorite bird families primarily because they are considered the most intelligent of the birds having demonstrated self-awareness in mirror tests and tool making ability-skills until recently regarded as solely the province of humans and a few other higher mammals.

Corvids are found worldwide except for the tip of South America and the polar ice caps. Young corvids have been known to play and take part in elaborate social games such as "king of the mountain" and "follow the leader" type pattern. Other play involves the manipulation, passing, and balancing of sticks. These games are understood to play a large role in the adaptive and survival ability of the birds.

Mate selection is quite complex and accompanied with much social play in the Corvidae. Youngsters undergo a series of tests, including aerobatic feats, before being accepted as a mate.

The brain-to-body ratios of corvid brains are amongst the largest in birds, equal to that of great apes and cetaceans, and only slightly lower than a human. Their intelligence is boosted by the long growing period of the young. By remaining with the parents, the young have more opportunities to learn necessary skills. Since most corvids are cooperative brooders, their young can learn from different members of the group.

When compared to dogs and cats in an experiment testing the ability to seek out food according to three-dimensional clues, corvids out-performed the mammals. A met analysis testing how often birds invented new ways to acquire food in the wild found corvids the most innovative birds. Some corvids demonstrate the capacity for imagination, something believed to be otherwise unique to humans. For example, they remember previous relevant social contexts, use their own experience of having been a thief to predict the behavior of a pilferer, and can determine the safest course to protect their caches from pilfering.

There are many examples of unique cleverness. One Carrion crow was documented to crack nuts by placing them on a crosswalk, letting the passing cars crack the shell, waiting for the light to turn red, them safely retrieving the contents. A group of crows in England took turns lifting garbage lids while their companions collected food.

Members of the corvid family have been known to watch other birds, remember where they hide their food, and then return once the owner leaves. Corvid also move their food around between hiding places to avoid thievery, but only if they have previously been thieves themselves.

New Caledonian crows are famous for their highly developed tool fabrication. They make angling tools of twigs and leaves trimmed into hooks. They then use the hooks to pull insect larvae from tree holes. Again, great apes are the only other non-human animals known to use tools in such a fashion.

Folklore often represents corvids as cleaver, and even mystical animals. Some Native Americans believe that a raven created the earth and despite being a trickster spirit, ravens were popular on totems, credited with creating man, and responsible for placing the Sun in the sky.

These are some of the reasons I'm fascinated with the Corvid family, although while playing golf at the Country Club their dominance and raucous behavior can be infuriating.

Missoula Christmas Bird Count

The Missoula Christmas Bird (CBC) will be held on Saturday, December 19, 2009. The count area is a circle with a 7.5 mile radius which is centered at the intersection of Reserve St. and I-90. The area will be divided up and covered by individuals and small groups. It includes portions of the Rattlesnake, Grant Creek, Pattee Canyon, Maclay Flat, Big Flat, Kelly Island, Mullan Road, and urban "hot spots". You can participate by being a feeder watcher or joining a group. If you would like to take part in the count, contact Larry Weeks at 549-5632 or bwsgenea@onlinemt.com. We also tally

unusual birds not reported on count day that are seen during count week. This year, count week runs from Wednesday, December 16th through Tuesday, December 22nd. If you see an unusual bird during count week inside the count circle, be sure to report it to Larry. The count day will end with a potluck dinner that will be held at the home of Ruth & Russ Royter, 520 Highland Park Dr. (telephone # 728-7984). Potluck guests are welcome to arrive at the Royter's beginning at 6:00 PM. Dinner will commence at 6:30 PM. Please bring your favorite potluck offering, or A – L, bring a salad or dessert, and M – Z, a hot dish. After the potluck, we will tabulate the count results.

Besides being a fun day, the results are published in the American Birds magazine, and along with the other counts throughout the hemisphere, contribute base information for a variety of studies. The CBC is an expensive production and participates are encouraged to contribute $5.00. This contribution is not mandatory to participate but I strongly urge everyone to consider it a worthwhile donation.

Field Trips by Larry Weeks

Saturday, September 26, 2009: Nine people traveled to Flesher Pass to visit Rob Domenech's raptor banding site. Three of the participants had planned to watch raptors with Fred & Kathy Tilly, but due to a misunderstanding, did not arrive at a locked gate in time. Therefore, all nine ended up in the blinds. Rob and his crew of four (Tyler, Vince, Steppe, and Brooke) operate two blinds with bow traps using rock pigeons and starlings as lures. Birds captured during our visit included a red-tailed hawk and a female Cooper's hawk. One golden eagle approached to within a few feet of a rock pigeon but backed off at the last second. A sharp-shinned hawk and a northern goshawk also made approaches on the lure birds. Overall, it was a slow day which was complicated by strong gusty winds. However, the blind people sighted at least 11 golden eagles and Fred Tilly recorded 24. Other raptors sighted included a bald eagle and a broad-winged hawk. Six of the participants encountered a small flock of dusky (blue) grouse on the hike to the blinds. A total of 18 species were seen during the outing.

Saturday, October 10, 2009: Thirteen birders braved a 10 degree start to the October field trip to Smurfit-Stone. The air must have been very dry because there was no fog in the Missoula Valley. However, we did have to deal with the vapors from the wastewater discharges at our first stop. There were several shorebirds in Pond 3, which included killdeer, larger plovers, pectoral sandpipers, and a least sandpiper. We concentrated on the large plovers and were able to confirm black-bellied plovers by their black arm pits. Then one of the large plovers lifted its wings which did not have black arm pits and we realized that there was at least one American golden plover. Later, a black-bellied plover and the American golden plover walked next to each other and the differences in body size, bill size and color was very obvious. A nearby sludge pond contained about 50 killdeer, 20 pectoral sandpipers, 6 large plovers, and one Baird's sandpiper. Most of the ducks were present in large numbers as we toured the ponds. Raptors included several merlins, at least 2 northern harriers, red-tailed hawks, American kestrels, and bald eagles. A walking tour of the habitat at the South end of the property produced several surprising birds. Megan Fylling heard a golden-crowned kinglet in a large hawthorne shrub. In the attempt to locate the golden-crowned kinglet, we found a ruby-crowned kinglet and 2 hermit thrushes. A little later, we were by some willows by a slough with some ice near the banks, when yellow-rumped warblers appeared everywhere we looked in large numbers. It was equivalent to a bird fallout. Mixed in with the warblers were more ruby-crowned kinglets, American goldfinches, white-crowned sparrows, dark-eyed juncos, and cedar waxwings. A red-naped sapsucker was also a surprise. We tallied 60 species, and had a bonus sighting of a 6-point bull elk and his harem of 13 cow elk.

True Confessions of a Couch Potato Birder
By Poody McLaughlin

Identifying birds by sound is fascinating and compelling. By hearing a song or chip coming from the tree canopy or a shrub, a birder has a step up on locating and then identifying the bird -- especially those zippy warblers. It's especially gratifying to identify a bird by sound and have that ID confirmed by sight. I thrill at the song of a hermit thrush (or any of the genus *Catharus*). Maybe a chickadee call will lead me to other species of the feeding flock or best yet, to a hidden owl.

So it goes that my passion for bird sounds in the field has created a new venue from which to identify bird sounds: television. Commercials were the first lure, perhaps due to their annoying incongruity: as a bald eagle soared gracefully over the car lot, it opened its bill and cried out the distinctive "keeeeeer" of a red-tailed hawk. This nonexistent eagle x hawk hybrid must have sold lots of SUVs, since the commercial appeared all too frequently. A Febreze commercial forever linked that product in my mind with the song of a savannah sparrow. Perhaps the only benefit to the seemingly endless repetition of commercials is that, as with this commercial, the sparrow sang so frequently I was able to make a positive ID.

In tense, action-packed thrillers, if there's a night scene with even the smallest of natural areas, expect to hear a great horned owl.

Outside the world of commercials and TV dramas, the greatest source of TV bird songs is golf. There's a lot of quiet time in golf, quiet time that birds fortunately choose to exploit. Tiger Woods can be lining up a crucial putt or drive and a northern cardinal will take that moment to belt out his "whurty whurty whurty whurty." Blue jays, robins, house wrens, and northern mockingbirds also proclaim their territory loudly to a national audience. In addition, golf provides good visuals for some bird species. Water hazards in golf are habitat for mallards, great egrets, cattle egrets, and great blue herons.

In other sports venues, gulls and pigeons are regular attendees. During San Francisco Giants' baseball games I've identified Heermann's and ring-billed gulls and a red-tailed hawk. But the best TV bird appearance was during a nighttime NFL football game at which a sora picked up bugs on the sidelines and in one of the end zones. To his credit, announcer John Madden kept drawing the camera's attention to the sora, which appeared oblivious to the human antics on the field. Madden didn't let up until someone on staff correctly identified the bird for him.

Which leads me to the inevitable birder query: how does one list birds seen or heard on TV? Are different lists required for virtual vs. real birds and song vs. sight? With listing criteria I tend to be inclusive, although birds on nature shows don't belong on this list. My life list of TV birds totals 16. Of those, I'm most proud of that elusive savannah sparrow.

Funds Available for Wildlife Projects
Submitted by Janet Ellis of Montana Audubon

Montana Audubon will offer grant money totaling more than $1,400 to fund projects that benefit wildlife. Preference will be given to research and/or education projects that focus on nongame wildlife and their habitats. The funds may be used for mileage, supplies, equipment, printing, and communications.

Applications must be postmarked on or before December 15, 2009. Grant winners will be notified by February 1, 2010. Audubon Wildlife Fund guidelines can be requested by mail (Montana Audubon, P.O. Box 595, Helena, MT 59624), phone (406-443-3949), or downloaded from our website (www.mtaudubon.org).

New Members:

Gregory D. Crook	Margo Kidder	Kristi Lawrence
Norman Nickman	Christine T. Reck	Robert W. Weaver

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George A. Seielstad	Steve Seninger	Jeannie Siegler
Robin Paul Silverstein	Carrie Ann Smith	Suzann Stickney

Dale Thompson

Flammulated Owls and Citizen Monitoring 2009

A sincere thank you to all of the hard-working volunteers who donated their time to the Citizen Monitoring program for Flammulated owls! Missoula-area volunteers searched for owls on 11 transects and detected owls on 7 of these. Overall we detected over 40 owls! To read more about the project and our findings, please see the citizen science section of the Montana Audubon website (http://mtaudubon.org/birds/citizen.html#flam). Montana Audubon and the Avian Science Center at the University of Montana are grateful to all of the citizens who donated their time staying up late at night in hopes of hearing one of these secretive migratory owls. We hope that you enjoyed your time in the field and hope we will see you again next year! We could not have done this without you!

Thanks, Megan Fylling & Amy Cilimburg

Join The National 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*, as well as 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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City:_____ **State:**_____ **Zip:** _____

[ ] $20 for an individual or family

[ ] $15 for students and seniors

Please make the check payable to National Audubon Society and mail to: National Audubon Society, Membership Data Center, PO Box 51001, Boulder, CO 80323-1003. **N53 7XCH**

Join The 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: _____

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

Phone: _____

Email (optional): _____

[ ] $15 is enclosed for Chapter 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.

Five Valleys Audubon Society

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