September 2024

Birding Observer

Newsletter of the Five Valleys Audubon Society

CALENDAR

Tuesday, Sept 3rd, 6:00-7:45 pm: The board meeting will be held in Cooper Space A (North) of the Missoula Public Library.

Sunday, Sept 8th, 8:00-10:00 am: This month's Town Bound Birding Series will take you for a leisurely walk along the Bitterroot River and the surrounding habitats. Park and meet the field trip leader at the whitewashed blockhouse at the corner of LT Moss Road and Gen Foster Ave.

Monday, Sept 9th, 7:00 pm: Denver Holt, Founder of the Owl Research Institute, will talk about Long-eared Owls at our September program meeting. See details to the right.

Sunday, September 15th: All-day field trip to the Pablo Reservoir to look for migrating shorebirds. Meet at 8:00 am in the northwest corner of the Adams Center parking lot. Rose Leach will lead this field trip.

Saturday, September 21st, 10:00 am: Beginning Bird Walk at the Lee Metcalf NWR. Meet the field trip leader at the Visitor's Center and expect two miles of level hiking.

37 Years of Long-eared Owl Research

Please join us at our first chapter meeting of the new semester on Monday, September 9, 2024, at 7:00 PM as we kick off the season with the eminent Denver Holt from the Owl Research Institute. You will not want to miss this one, as Denver will present his fascinating talk: Key Highlights of 37 Years of Long-eared Owl Research in Missoula Valley.

For over 35 years, Denver Holt and the ORI have been dedicated to pursuing in-depth and lasting studies that illuminate the world of the elusive Long-eared Owls and their intricate ecology. Are Long-eared Owls monogamous across seasons? Are they considered the most communal of owl species? Has there really been a 90% decline in their numbers over the last 50 years? These are some of the topics Denver will cover during his insightful overview.

Denver Holt is the founder and president of the Owl Research Institute (ORI), a nonprofit he started over 35 years ago. Today, it is one of the premier owl research centers in the world, just as Holt is one of the leading experts. He is a widely published author of numerous scientific papers and assisted in the publishing of a children's science book on owls. He has also been featured in many articles from National Geographic to the New York Times, as well as in many television programs. Denver has educated and entertained people from all walks of life and enjoys guiding, meeting new people, and expanding his knowledge of wildlife and the natural world.

The meeting will be held in Room 110 in the Interdisciplinary Sciences Building (ISB) on the University of Montana campus. The building lies on the south end of campus on Beckwith Avenue between Maurice and Mansfield Avenues. Though not required by the university, FVAS honors the decision of those who wish to wear a mask. You may also watch the meeting over the zoom link listed below.

https://umontana.zoom.us/j/98926522274

Just A Word
By William Boggs

Hello fellow bird-enthusiasts.

I've been afflicted with a pet peeve in later life, and now, privileged to peep again, I'm going to confess it. It's a peeve about words, not birds; or really, it's about neither: it's about what we wish to see in the mirror, the face we put upon ourselves.

A quick background. My father, born in 1909, was in the first generation of American "birdwatchers"– that is, ordinary non-scientist, urban-dwelling citizens who noticed and loved birds. At twenty, he acquired a pair of surplus army binoculars. He owned the first edition of Roger Tory Peterson's original field guide. In the first springs of his marriage, he and my mother spent their weekends looking for migrating warblers along the bluffs of the Mississippi near St. Paul.

Later, in Maryland, they always kept a well-stocked bird feeder outside our dining room window. Our yard, roofed by ancient oaks and replete with flowering bushes, was rife with birdsong. As you can imagine, I grew up knowing from the first that birds were the best– a pure delight, a refreshingly lovely part of one's day, a reliable relief from all worldly cares. And I knew that those, like myself, who had embraced this secret truth were called "birdwatchers."

Fast forward several decades: my father's an old man, I'm middle-aged already, my son, with his sleek, high-powered binoculars, is going to college, and already spending his weekends in the field. He's a birdwatcher, too–with the keenest vision of all! But suddenly everyone wants to call him, and me, and even my father, a "birder." What we've done all our lives–love birds–is now supposedly an elaborate, well-defined activity called "birding." Why the switch? We're bewildered: we feel misnamed.

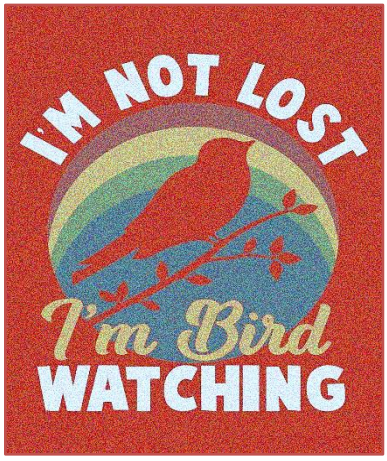
So, here's my peeve: "birding" (the term) is about power, not love. If you don't think so, consult any good dictionary published before 1960 and you will find that the verb "to bird" means "to shoot or catch birds." And a "birder" does that: kills or ensnares. That's it: no other meanings. As usual, the etymology is revealing. In place of one who watches is substituted one who kills.

"Oh, but–" you protest. I know, I know. "Birding" in its contemporary usage, you'll tell me, is simply meant to imply a more active involvement than merely "watching." It's meant to do justice to all the mastery involved in being conversant with birds. A "birder" is one who captures, instead of being captured by. In place of one who kills is substituted one who knows.

Yes. But the original meaning of "to bird" still hovers over the modern one: emphasizes, it seems to me, the central place of human action, if not appropriation, in the equation. So often, it is about how many species one's seen in an hour, a day, a year, a life. It's about how much one knows about plumages, songs, habitats; how impressive one's identification prowess is; how skillful or lucky one's been in the field; what excellent pictures of birds one's taken. It's reflexive: it always circles back to complexes of human pride, rather than to the simplicity of human affection. "Birding," in contrast to "birdwatching," seems to denote still another arena where our competitive instincts hold sway.

Recall, I confessed at the beginning that this little obsession of mine with how our common enthusiasm is described is a peeve–nothing more. It just reflects a private uneasiness about the fact we've chosen a term so laden with echoes of disruption and aggression, over one so suggestive of mild, devoted observation. It's just about a taste, a wish for a public naming that lets humility in. It doesn't matter... We all want to see a White-headed Woodpecker–who cares why?

Anyway, I'm almost 80.
Just let me be a birdwatcher 'til I die.



Summer Field Trip Summaries
By Larry Weeks

Saturday, May 25th: The weather for the field trip to the Bandy Ranch was mostly cloudy with occasional rain. The first stop was at the Clearwater River. There was a pair of Hooded Mergansers, a Gray Catbird in the riparian area, and a Belted Kingfisher flyby. The next stop was along Cottonwood Creek on the dirt road to Upsata Lake. There was a Northern Waterthrush and a Yellow Warbler in the riparian area and a Cinnamon Teal in the creek. A Bald Eagle flew by and was being harassed by a Long-billed Curlew. As we progressed on the road, there were Savannah and Vesper Sparrows on the fencing. Tree Swallows and Mountain Bluebirds were both hanging around a nest box, but the bluebird was entering the box. Then there was a Common Raven on the ground and 2 Long-billed Curlews were dive-bombing the raven. The curlews probably had a nest nearby. We stopped by a large field near the ranch and found a lone Sandhill Crane and another Long-billed Curlew. The shrubs along the road had Rufous Hummingbird, Wilson's Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and a flock of Pine Siskins. When we got to Upsata Lake, I was surprised at the lack of vehicles. We found a Red-necked Grebe, Yellow-headed Blackbirds and a Wood Duck on the lake. Nearby willows had had a Least Flycatcher and a White-crowned Sparrow. We couldn't find a Common Loon on the lake, but we had two loons fly overhead. A large cattail swamp had Virginia and Sora Rails, Common Yellowthroats and Marsh Wrens. The hike around the marsh was not very productive. We then hiked into the Bandy Reservoir and were greeted by a female Common Goldeneye with eleven ducklings. Other waterfowl included numerous Ring-necked Ducks, a Bufflehead, Mallards, and 2 Trumpeter Swans. Two Common Loons came close to the shore and provided one of the best looks of the day. There were 14 people on the trip, and we ended up with 63 species.

Wood Duck
Photo by Mick Thompson

Common Loon
Photo by Amber Hart

June 11th – 14th: Twelve people participated in the 4-day field trip to Bowdoin. The first night of camping was at James Kipp Recreational Area. We had Field Sparrow and Green-tailed Towhee nearby and several species in the campground such as Yellow-breasted Chat, Bullock's Oriole, Least Flycatcher, Gray Catbird, and Swainson's Thrush. A stop at Dry Creek the following day had Long-billed Curlew and Burrowing Owl. A side trip to Camp Creek Campground near Zortman had several Ovenbirds, Red-naped Sapsucker, flycatchers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Cedar Waxwings. At a roadside "cut" on highway 191 we had a Rock Wren respond to its song. At a large prairie dog town near the Matador Ranch, we had at least 5 Burrowing Owls. There were Marbled Godwits, Long-billed Curlews and Upland Sandpipers in the road. Midale Road had Lark Buntings and another Burrowing Owl. Trafton Park in Malta had Eastern Screech Owls both nights. Also, Chimney Swifts in downtown Malta. The lake at Bowdoin had multiple American Avocets, White-faced Ibis, and most of the ducks. Grasslands had Grasshopper, Vesper and Savannah Sparrows. We had 6 Loggerhead Shrikes by the Milk River but failed to find a Dickcissel near Sako.

July 8th & 9th: The drive to Freezout Lake was interrupted with a side trip towards Wolf Creek from the four-corners to look for a Sprague's Pipit. After several stops and playing for the pipit, Rose Leach and Thomas Kallmeyer heard the pipit. The first stop at Freezout was at the dike south of the outhouse. There were several American Avocets, Western Grebes, White Pelicans, Wilson's Phalaropes, and most of the ducks. The "garage" area had Least Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewees, Eastern Kingbirds, and several Western Kingbirds. The "neck" area had Eared Grebes, more avocets, Double-crested Cormorants, and Willets. There was a Swainson's Hawk nest east of the Duffy Road. We located a Golden Eagle perched on Rattlesnake Butte, but we did not find an active nest. Bellview Road had Bobolinks, Wilson's Snipe and both longspurs. Three of us walked around the Stage Stope Inn and found a Common Grackle. We were approached by a local resident who warned us about grizzly bears using the residential area.

Bobolink
Photo by Terry Sohl

The following day, we drove to Benton Lake and found a Short-eared Owl and a Grasshopper Sparrow near the entrance and Upland Sandpipers on the road to the headquarters. The first lake had Pied-billed Grebe, both Common and Forster's Terns, Black-crowned Night-Heron, White-faced Ibis, and many Franklin's Gulls. We finally found a Black-necked Stilt on the second Lake. On the return trip to Missoula, we made several stops for specific birds to increase the Birdathon total. The first stop was near Simms on a jeep road about seven miles into the grasslands where we found a Burrowing Owl. Skunk Creek had Veery, Aspen campground had White-crowned Sparrow, Lincoln had all three species of hummingbirds coming to feeders, and Nevada-Ogden Rd an American Dipper and several Vaux's Swifts. There were eight people on the trip, and we had 125 species.

Pied-billed Grebe.
Photo by Brad Imhoff

Bass Creek Field Trip Summary
By William Boggs

June 1, 2024: Ten participants gathered at the Bass Creek-Larry Creek Road intersection on the sunny morning of June 1 for the annual Bobolink field trip. This one was a little different from previous years in that the Bobolink colony had switched fields–most of the birds were in a field with very tall native grass adjacent to and northeast of their usual home. After hearing the traditional brief talk on Bobolink natural history, the group (with the prior consent of the landowner) walked into the tall grass of the northeast field and, utilizing a faint tractor track, traversed the field along a small tree line and then out to the tall-grass center. With the result that everyone, keeping good silence, was surrounded with male Bobolinks singing in the grass, singing on the wing then gliding down, singing on fenceposts and little trees, and chasing females in wild low swirling flights, eventually to disappear in the grass. Also, everyone was treated to excellent views of several female Bobolinks posed on fence wires (together with quite a few Savannah Sparrows and Common Yellowthroats).

After two hours of immersion in Bobolinks, we took a quick break at Bass Creek campground up the road, then walked the Ruffatto conservation trail which winds for a mile along the Bitterroot River across from the Metcalf Refuge. There we encountered many of the usual suspects (such as Spotted Sandpipers, Swainson's Thrushes, Yellow Warblers, Western Wood Peewees, Least Flycatchers, Catbirds, Goldfinches), but also had the privilege of hearing a Northern Waterthrush singing loudly on territory, over and over. Then we went home, 33 species for the better.

"Some keep the Sabbath going to church, I keep it staying at home, with a Bobolink for a chorister, and an orchard for a dome."

Emily Dickinson

"The Bobolink is the happiest bird of our spring... he rises and sinks with the breeze, pours forth a succession of rich tinkling notes".

Washington Irving

Glacier National Park Field Trip Summary
By Janet Allison

June 24-27, 2024: A group of 11 birders set out on a sunny early summer morning with Glacier National Park as the destination for 4 days of birding and camping. Driving up along the Blackfoot River to the Bonner fishing access we got spotting scopes on a beautiful Peregrine Falcon perched on the cliff. Further along, we stopped at Rogers Pass, where there were various warblers and Pine Siskins. From there we headed on to Freezout Lake and ate lunch; on the auto tour around the lake, we heard a Sora and encountered Grasshopper Sparrows, Clay-colored Sparrows, Marsh Wrens, Vesper Sparrows, over 400 American White Pelicans, Marbled Godwits, spinning Wilson's Phalaropes, a Lesser Yellowlegs, and a Long-billed Dowitcher. Continuing along U.S. 89 Thomas Kallmyer led us to a Ferruginous Hawk Nest, where we scoped two parents busily feeding five young! Nearby there were more Clay-colored Sparrows, Vesper Sparrows, etc. We arrived at Chewing Black Bones Campground, and saw Ospreys, nesting Red-naped Sapsuckers, several Northern Waterthrush, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Veerys, numerous Yellow Warblers, Buffleheads, House Wrens, a Pileated Woodpecker, and one Black Tern, among other birds. Many White-Crowned Sparrows were hopping throughout the campground singing away. We heard the eerie calls of Common Loons on the lake through the nights and early mornings. In addition to the lovely bird-filled surroundings, we shared two delicious potluck dinners.

On July 25, another beautiful sunny day, we hiked from Many Glacier Lodge to Grinnell Lake, joined by two friends of Andrea and Don. On the trail we saw a Dusky Flycatcher, Ruby-Crowned and Golden-Crowned Kinglets, Swainson's Thrushes, Fox Sparrow (singing beautifully), MacGillivray's Warblers, Yellow-rumped Warblers, a Common Yellow-throat, Townsend's Warblers, Western Tanagers, a Rufous Hummingbird, Willow Flycatchers, a Cordilleran (Western) Flycatcher, Cedar Waxwings, Chipping Sparrows, a Wilson's Warbler, and Lazuli Buntings. The wildflowers were spectacular all along the trail. At Lake Josephine we found Spotted Sandpipers, Steller's Jays, and a Common Loon. At Grinnell Lake, there were Common Mergansers and Northern Waterthrushes, as well as a herd of Bighorn Sheep on the hillside above the lake. Several of us took the short side trail up to Hidden Falls, and were serenaded by Swainson's Thrushes, a MacGillivray's Warbler, Hairy Woodpeckers, a Steller's Jay, and an American Dipper splashing near the beautiful falls; we also saw a Brown Creeper. Back at Chewing Black Bones Campground we added a Ring-billed Gull, Western Wood-Pewees, and American Goldfinches to the campground list.

Golden-crowned Kinglet
Photo by Thomas Kallmeyer

After breaking camp Wednesday morning (June 26) we hiked the Red Eagle Lake trail. We encountered many species along the trail, including Lincoln's Sparrows, Cassin's Finches, and, most exciting, a pair of Black-backed Woodpeckers in an older burn. At a large pond, we ate lunch and watched a variety of flycatchers (Olive-sided, Willow, Least, Dusky, and Western Wood-Pewee) and Northern Waterthrushes, one of which flew in very close to us. We then headed west over Going to the Sun Road to Fish Creek Campground where we shared another excellent potluck dinner and enjoyed a Swainson's Thrush sitting on a post next to us as we ate. During the evening, we found a Pileated Woodpecker, among several other species. Because of some intermittent rain showers, we set up a tarp over the tables, which proved to be a good idea.

We awoke to continuous rain on Thursday, which caused some participants to skip the Howe Lake hike and head home. The hardier group found several woodpeckers including Lewis's, Downy, Hairy, Pileated, Northern Flicker, and six Red-naped Sapsuckers. There also were Wilson's Snipes, a Gray Catbird, a Rufous Hummingbird, Mountain Bluebirds, Chipping Sparrows, Hammond's Flycatchers, as well as numerous other species. A pair of Trumpeter Swans flew over and away from the lake, and the group heard a Hermit Thrush and a Common Loon. There were nearly 70 bird species observed.

Despite the wet finale, it was a successful and very enjoyable trip.

News from Montana Audubon
Successful Black Swift Surveys

At the beginning of July, the Montana Audubon Black Swift research team began surveys in the far northwest corner of Montana, near Troy and Yaak. Three of the four sites surveyed were occupied by nesting Black Swifts- a great start to the field season! The team was thrilled to get wonderful looks of these elusive birds that nest exclusively in the mossy and wet spray zone of waterfalls. However, the path to Black Swifts is not all sunshine and roses… more like pre-dawn darkness and devil's club, with a healthy mix of mountain lions and steep, rocky terrain! In the latest post on the Montana Audubon website, the research team gives us a behind-the-scenes taste of what it is like to be in the field.

And, for a look at some of the photos the team took of nesting Black Swifts, be sure to check out the video at the bottom of the post!

Read the post & watch the video on the Montana Audubon website: Montana Audubon Kicks Off Field Season with Successful Black Swift Surveys

13 Fun Facts About Owls
Reprinted from Audubon.org, 2015

Owls are intriguing birds that easily capture the attention and curiosity of birders. These facts may help clear up a bit of their mystery and reveal what a hoot owls really are.

1.) Many owl species have asymmetrical ears. When located at different heights on the owl's head, their ears are able to pinpoint the location of sounds in multiple dimensions. Ready, aim, strike.

2.) The eyes of an owl are not true "eyeballs." Their tube-shaped eyes are completely immobile, providing binocular vision which fully focuses on their prey and boosts depth perception.

Saw-Whet Owl
Photo by
Greg Albrechtsen

3.) Owls can rotate their necks 270 degrees. A blood-pooling system collects blood to power their brains and eyes when neck movement cuts off circulation.

4.) A group of owls is called a parliament. This originates from C.S. Lewis' description of a meeting of owls in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

5.) Owls hunt other owls. Great Horned Owls are the top predators of the smaller Barred Owl.

Snowy Owl
Photo by Kurt Lindsay

6.) In fact, owls are insanely good hunters.

7.) The tiniest owl in the world is the Elf Owl, which is 5 - 6 inches tall and weighs about 1 ½ ounces. The largest North American owl, in appearance, is the Great Gray Owl, which is up to 32 inches tall.

8.) The Northern Hawk Owl can detect—primarily by sight—a vole to eat up to half a mile away.

9.) In fat years when mice are plentiful, usually monogamous Boreal Owls are apt to be promiscuous. Because easy prey means less work for parents feeding their young, males have been caught mating with up to three females, while females have been seen with at least one beau on the side.

10.) Barn Owls swallow their prey whole—skin, bones, and all—and they eat up to 1,000 mice each year.

11.) Northern Saw-whet Owls can travel long distances over large bodies of water. One showed up 70 miles from shore near Montauk, New York.

12.) Not all owls hoot! Barn Owls make hissing sounds, the Eastern Screech-Owl whinnies like a horse, and Saw-whet Owls sound like, well, an old whetstone sharpening a saw. Hence the name.

13.) Owls are zygodactyl, which means their feet have two forward-facing toes and two backward-facing toes. Unlike most other zygodactyl birds, however, owls can pivot one of their back toes forward to help them grip and walk.

Welcome New Members

Vincent Buzzas
Charlene Petet
Gail Weber
Steve Wing
Carol L Durnford
Christine Harrington
Barbara Nisbet
Donna Williams
Brenda Holland
Corinne Tribe
Ellen Weiss
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Join Five Valleys Audubon Society

Please support Five Valleys Audubon Society (FVAS). There are several ways to donate. All options include the *Birding Observer* newsletter and allow you to 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: https://fvaudubon.org/make-a-donation/

$_____$15 FVAS membership, includes newsletter sent via email.

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

$_____Free for students, includes FVAS newsletter via email.

$_____ Donate to our General Fund to support our habitat protection work within Missoula County, nonprofit organizations that care for birds, and education on birds and birding.

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

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_____ I would like to Volunteer. Please contact me. (Please provide an email address below.)

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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: https://act.audubon.org/a/join. 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 manages statewide issues and is responsible for its own fundraising. To assist in this important statewide work, you may contact MTA through their website: https://mtaudubon.org/. Please give generously to each organization. Although independent, we work together to protect what we all love.

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