

OCTOBER 2011

BIRDING OBSERVER



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

Calendar

- * **Monday, October 3rd:** Jim Brown will host the October board meeting.
- * **Monday, October 10th:** Montana Audubon's Janet Ellis will speak at our October program meeting.
- * **October 11-14th:** The 22nd Biennial Conference of The Trumpeter Swan Society will be held in Polson. See article on page 5 for details.
- * **Saturday, October 15th:** Submission deadline for the October edition of the *Birding Observer*.
- * **Saturday, October 15th:** Monthly beginning bird walk at Lee Metcalf NWR from 10am-Noon. Meet field trip leader, Pat Little at the Refuge Visitor's Center. Learn basic skills for bird identification, including use of binoculars and field guides, key field marks, and much more. Families with children and birders of any level are welcome! Advance sign up not required. If you have any questions, please contact Pat at 493-7115.
- * **Saturday, November 5th:** Half-day field trip at Maclay Flat. Meet at the Maclay Flat parking lot at 10:00 AM.



Blowing in the wind: How wind energy in Montana affects birds & other wildlife

Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon's Program Director, will present our program Monday, October 10 at 7:30 p.m. in room L14 of the Gallagher Business Building on the UM campus. As the threat of global warming looms ever larger, alternative energy sources like wind power become increasingly essential to meeting our country's energy demands. Montana ranks as one of the best places in the United States to build new wind farms. A few large-scale wind farms have already been built, and many new projects are slated for construction across the state. This development must be managed responsibly, because poorly sited wind farms can cause significant damage to birds, wildlife, and habitat. Learn what Audubon's concerns are on this important issue.

Janet has lobbied for Montana Audubon since 1983, and was hired to staff its office on a year-round basis when it opened in 1989. Her work focuses on protecting wildlife and wildlife habitat through public policy, with an emphasis on land use planning, stream setbacks, wind energy, and more. She has received several awards for her work, including the Conservationist of the Year Award from Montana Audubon, the Montana Wildlife Federation, and the Montana Environmental Information Center; and Special Achievement Awards from the Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

Peeps from the Board: Himalayan Snowcock

By Jim Brown

We finally saw the Himalayan Snowcock in the Ruby Mountains of Nevada. This was a challenging and fun adventure but not a piece-of-cake. The Snowcock is referred to by the local folks who know the bird as a mountain goat with wings. The Snowcock is a 3 to 6 pound member of Galliformes, an order of fowl that includes pheasants and grouse. It resembles a Chukar Partridge on steroids. What makes the bird so



exciting to see is where it lives and what you have to do to find it. The Snowcock is native to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tibet and similar areas. Between 1963 and 1979 numerous releases were made by Nevada Department of Wildlife in five mountain ranges. Today about 1,000 birds maintain a sustainable population in two mountain ranges, the Ruby and adjacent East Humboldt mountains near Elko, Nevada. It is the only place outside of its native range where the species occurs. They live at high elevations spending most of their time on ridges and rocky ledges at 10 to 11 thousand feet elevation. They feed on grasses, sedges and forbs year-round. Typically they fly down slope in early morning then walk and hop uphill to feed, often clucking and clacking. A sentinel bird keeps watch so they are wary and difficult to approach.

Last summer Paul and Beth Loehnen and my wife Sue and I went to the Ruby Mountains and hiked into an alpine area where they were known to frequent. We heard them calling but could not locate one to see it. After returning to Missoula I told my family that I was going back and would not return until seeing a Snowcock. They said not without us. So this summer our son and daughter, their spouses and four grandkids (now stronger hikers than Sue and I) met in Lamoille at the foot of the Ruby Mountains. The plan was to get up at 2:30 am, eat a bite, then drive to the trailhead and be ready to hike at 4:00 am. We needed to be on a bench at 10,000 feet elevation in a large cirque by first light. This meant gaining 1,200 feet of elevation in the dark by hiking on a trail for 2 miles to a lake, then climbing off trail to the bench about 300 feet above the lake. On our way to Nevada Sue and I stayed at a Bed & Breakfast in

Salmon, ID and explained our plan to a curious owner. The look on his face suggested we were crazy when he said "after you see the bird what do you do?" We "said enjoy the moment," which seemed to confirm his suspicion about our mental state.

Our hike under partial moonlight and brilliant stars was moving, almost surreal. At the bench we set up our scopes and began listening and looking. With 10 sets of eyes and ears

I was optimistic that if a Snowcock was in the cirque we would find it. Several in our group thought they might have heard a cackle or whistle call. But time kept going by with nothing concrete to go on. Suddenly my son said that he had the bird or a hawk sitting on a ridge about 1/2 mile away. Indeed it was a sentinel Snowcock looking into the cirque. That was the moment that birders (crazy people) enjoy. The bird sat there for awhile then flew down into the cirque. It took lots of scanning and looking by everyone to relocate it. Then four other Snowcocks flew into the cirque and one bird flew to a nearby slope and began strutting with tail spread as it fed uphill. After enjoying the birds in the cirque for an hour or so most of our group climbed out the cirque through a narrow crevice. Near the top of the climb a flock of about 30 birds flew overhead within 30 yards of us. Continuing on to the top of the mountain we walked into a large flock of tame acting Black Rosy Finches feeding in the cushion plant community. We flushed several more Snowcock and mountain goats--they have a lot in common with where they live. The Snowcocks hurled themselves off of rocks using gravity to rapidly accelerate out of sight. They fly amazingly fast.

The B&B owner's question, "after you see it, then what," has more of an answer of course, one that we often think about or feel but perhaps don't articulate enough. The Snowcock experience and other experiences like it gives us an appreciation of the wonders of nature and the unique niches many forms of life have evolved to fill. I worry that in our highly urbanized world too few people are gaining this appreciation of nature.

In the days when explorers were finding new species around every bend in the trail, some birds were given names by misapprehension or accident, and an example is a summer resident of our western mountains that was initially identified as two species. The confusion began in 1851 when John Cassin collected specimens of a bird in California which he named *Picus thyroideus* and called the black-breasted woodpecker for the black spot on its breast resembling a shield. A few years later J. S. Newberry, the surgeon accompanying Lt. Robert Stockton Williamson's Pacific Railroad Survey in California, collected specimens of a very different looking and more colorful bird that he named *Picus williamsonii* to honor Lt. Williamson in 1857.

Then, in 1858, Baird and Cassin devised a new genus, *Sphyrapicus*, from Greek and Latin words meaning hammer and woodpecker, into which they placed all the sapsuckers. It took 16 years, but in 1873 ornithologists realized that the specimens collected by Cassin were all females, those collected by Newberry were males, and they were two sexes of the same species. The two were consolidated under the name of the first published species, *Sphyrapicus thyroideus* (Cassin), and called Williamson's Sapsucker.

On the other side of the globe are found the Birds of Paradise, of which the first specimens to be seen by Europeans came to Portugal as dried skins in 1522 with survivors of Ferdinand Magellan's expedition around the world. When, in 1760, Linnaeus described, cataloged, and named a particular species of these rare birds, it seems that neither he nor any other naturalists had actually seen the living bird, or even a whole specimen. All they had were dried, boneless, skins bearing colorful feathers, but no feet—just skins of a bird said to live a mythical life entirely in the air without ever landing or perching. So Linnaeus called it *Paradisaea apoda*, the footless bird of paradise.

Now *a poda* means "without feet," and that appellation has been attached to a genus (*Apus*), a family (*Apodidae*), and order (*Apodiformes*)—100 or so species in the order worldwide—of birds entirely unrelated to the Bird of Paradise. We call them swifts and, despite their taxonomy, swifts do have feet, although small and unsuitable for standing or walking, so swifts rarely land on the ground but, when not flying, cling to vertical surfaces, and glue their nests to those vertical walls with saliva. And that is the substance of bird nest soup.

August 20, 2011: Rose Leach and Terry Toppins led the field trip to Ninepipes and Kicking Horse Reservoirs. The focus of this trip was shorebirds at Logan Pond. Although the shorebirds had been good at Logan Pond prior to the field trip, it was not very productive during their visit. The only shorebirds were 1 greater yellowlegs, 5 Baird's sandpipers, 2 spotted sandpipers, and 1 least sandpiper. You have to remember that it only takes a peregrine falcon fly-by to disrupt the shorebirds. There was also a gray partridge at Logan Pond. Along Piedalue Road, they found a marsh wren and about 1500 bank swallows sitting on the wires. On the dirt road from highway 93 to Kicking Horse, a small pond had solitary, Baird's and least sandpipers. Kicking Horse had the best birds of the day which included a common loon and 2 Caspian terns. A small pond west of the reservoir had 3 solitary sandpipers. There were 11 people on the field trip, who recorded 51 species.

September 10, 2011: Paul Loehnen led the field trip to the Lee Metcalf NWR. The group walked the entire length of the Kenai Trail. Most of the ducks were still in eclipse plumage which made them difficult to identify but they did see 3 wood ducks in bright plumage. There were yellow-rumped and yellow warblers in the bushes at the beginning of the trail and they found about 10 American white pelicans in Pond 10. Other birds included several great blue herons on fence posts and a pair of sandhill cranes. At the Wildlife Viewing Area, there was a solitary sandpiper and a greater yellowlegs along the Bitterroot River. There were 6 people on the field trip and they had 49 species.



The Audubon field trips to Freezout Lake and the Rocky Mountain Front have been especially successful in finding a diversity of birds associated with the productive wetlands of the Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and species obligately linked to grassland and prairie habitats along the Rocky Mountain Front. During the field trip to the area in May, several participants asked questions concerning the ecology and management of the sites that we visited. The following discussion addresses some of the questions that came up while we were looking for interesting birds such as the red knot, stilt sandpiper, upland sandpiper, and McCown's longspur.

Freezout Lake

Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA), established in 1952, is primarily managed by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks to promote waterfowl and upland game-bird production, hunting and viewing and is a key staging area during spring and fall migration of waterfowl and shorebirds. An estimated million waterfowl, including snow geese, tundra swans, ducks, and shorebirds utilize the area. Of the 227 bird species that have been observed at the WMA, 67 species, including 12 waterfowl and 27 other water-bird species, nest within the area.

Prior to large-scale irrigation on surrounding lands, Freezout Basin contained several shallow, non-discharging lakes that would evaporate during dry years. With the construction of Greenfields Irrigation District on the Fairfield Bench, water from groundwater seepage and irrigation canal discharges increased and permanently flooded the shallow lakes. A drainage canal system from Freezout Lake to the Teton River was constructed to prevent flooding of roads and surrounding agriculture lands. Water quality has been a concern at the WMA. Return flows from agriculture increase salinity, nutrients, and selenium concentrations in the various ponds. Selenium concentrations periodically exceed the aquatic-life criteria for chronic toxicity and can impact many bird species.

Upland habitats on the WMA are predominantly composed of non-native grasses, with shrubs and trees being restricted to shelterbelts. The dense stands of

introduced grasses provide excellent habitat for the vesper and savannah sparrow, western meadowlark, ring-necked pheasant, short-eared owl, and nesting waterfowl. Dabbling ducks such as mallard, teal, widgeon, and gadwall nest in upland grasslands, often a considerable distance from water. The wetlands, dominated by cattails and bulrushes, provide nesting habitat for the red-winged and yellow-headed blackbirds, black-necked stilt, white-faced ibis, grebes, Franklin's gull, and some ducks. Mergansers, buffleheads, and goldeneye are cavity nesters, whereas other divers such as the redhead, canvasback, lesser scaup, and ring-necked duck, usually nest in emergent wetland vegetation. The islands are used by colonial-nesting species such as double-crested cormorants, California and ring-billed gulls, and common terns.

Rocky Mountain Front

The native grasslands along the Rocky Mountain Front, a dwindling North American habitat, provide breeding and foraging habitat for a number of native species including the upland sandpiper, Sprague's pipit, McCown's longspur, marbled godwit, sharp-tailed grouse, ferruginous hawk, prairie falcon, and long-billed curlew. These grasslands and riparian strips also are frequented by grizzly bears as they extend their ranges from the secure mountain habitats back to the prairies where Lewis and Clark first observed them.



The Trumpeter Swan Society 22nd Conference

The 22nd Biennial Conference of The Trumpeter Swan Society (TTSS) will be held in Polson, Montana, October 11th-October 14th, 2011. The conferences of TTSS provide the only public forum in North America that brings together private citizens, conservation groups, policy makers, swan managers, and researchers to examine the status and needs of Trumpeter Swans in the U.S. and Canada and to work together to make all populations secure.

The 22nd Conference will focus on both the successes and challenges involved with long-term management of trumpeter swans. The conference will put special emphasis on the status of swans in the Western United States, including updates about the status and management of the Pacific and Interior populations of Trumpeter Swans. There will be progress reports on topics such as lead poisoning in British Columbia and Washington State and expansion of Trumpeter Swan populations elsewhere. Learn about Trumpeter Swan restoration efforts in western Montana, as well as challenging issues facing swans in the Pacific Northwest. Presentations will explore restoration accomplishments, lessons learned and future challenges to Trumpeter Swan conservation. In addition, the Conference will include sessions on the biology, habitat concerns, and management of Trumpeter Swan populations throughout North America.

We strongly encourage private partners, agency managers, and biologists involved in Trumpeter Swan restoration, management and research to participate, and we invite all who are interested in Trumpeter Swans to attend the conference. Find details about the conference at: www.swansociety.org/22nd-trumpeter-swan-society-conference.html.



Research has shown that North American grassland birds have declined by more than 50 percent over the last few decades. Grassland bird populations in the Great Plains are exhibiting steep declines due to losses of habitat from conversion to cultivated agriculture and fragmentation. Fragmentation occurs when large expanses of habitat are transformed into a number of smaller patches, isolated from each other by habitats unlike the original. Habitat fragmentation is one of the most commonly cited threats to species extinction and loss of biological diversity. Negative effects of fragmentation are likely because at some point, each patch of habitat will be too small to sustain a local population or an individual territory. Habitat fragmentation is of substantial concern for species associated with native grasslands (i.e., Sprague's pipit, chestnut-collared longspur, and grasshopper sparrow). These species have been shown to be "area-sensitive", which means that they are more abundant or occur more frequently in larger patches of grassland habitat.

Habitats along the Front include a zone of limber pine, on the slopes that abut the vertical limestone reefs that provide the spectacular backdrop that dominates the view shed as Blackleaf Canyon is approached. The near-total mortality to the limber pine zone, resulting from infection of five-needle- pine blister rust is striking. Limber pine, like western white pine and white-bark pine, has little resistance to this introduced pathogen. The loss of limber pine is predicted to have negative effects on Clark's nutcrackers, which forage on pine seeds.

Other natural amenities of the Front, peripheral to birding, include the native wildflower displays on the shallow, rocky soils that support cushion plants typically associated with alpine ridges and rock gardens. The calcareous Blackleaf fen is an uncommon Montana habitat that harbors several rare plants. Calcareous fens are wetlands charged by cold mineral-rich groundwater, which inhibits that decomposition of organic material; consequently, peat accumulates as a quaking mat several feet thick.

In summary, the combination of Freezout Lake wetlands and native grasslands along the Rocky Mountain Front provide an un-paralleled opportunity to observe many birds those of us living in western Montana rarely see.

Bluebird numbers down from last year....

Eighty-three baby bluebirds fledged from the twenty-eight MBT (Mountain Bluebird Trail)-maintained boxes on Waterworks Hill and the North Hills of Missoula. This number was down from the record 142 bluebirds fledged in 2009 and the 106 bluebirds fledged last year.

The cold spring apparently caused many birds to start their clutches later. As a result, very few bluebird parents laid second clutches. One couple that did raise a second clutch fledged their last batch of youngsters on August 26th, a record late date for this area!

Western Bluebirds used 13 boxes to fledge 49 young. In addition, sixteen WBB young died (including eight in two separate clutches that were mysteriously “snatched” from Box W5 – at least 4 of these were already dead; raccoons?). Four WBB eggs were unhatched.

Mountain Bluebirds used eight boxes to fledge 34 young with one dead and three unhatched. Tree Swallows used 4 boxes to hatch an undetermined number of young (one box was “shared” with WBBs. The WBB young died and the TSs quickly moved in after we cleaned it out).

Violet-Green Swallows used one slot box under our shed to fledge at least two young. (To read more about *slot boxes for swallows*, see article in the November issue of *Birding Observer*.) Four boxes were not used by anyone.

When hiking Waterworks and the North Hills open space areas, we ask that birders help us conserve bluebirds in these ways:

- Please do not open the boxes.
- Please do not put up new bluebird boxes close to existing boxes. Bluebirds are territorial.
- Please do not put up any boxes that you are not going to maintain. You can do more harm than good.

For those that would like to do more:

- **Join MBT.** Mountain Bluebird Trails is an organization dedicated to bluebird recovery. It was started by the “Bluebird Man of Ronan”, Art Aylesworth, in 1981. Since Art’s death in 1999, his mission has been continued by a small but able group of bluebirders. Membership is a bargain at \$10 per year for an individual. Go to www.mountainbluebirdtrails.com for more info.
- **Assist with field trips.** Sentinel High School students help to maintain boxes on Waterworks Hill. I would welcome adult volunteers to accompany us on fall maintenance hikes or spring monitoring hikes. Contact Kathy Heffernan, 543-4097.
- **Maintain boxes.** Most of the hill is adequately populated by boxes put up by MBT or others. For bluebirds, more is not better. Bluebirds do not like crowded housing conditions. However, there is a stretch of box-less fence in good habitat south of the Randolph Homestead and adjacent to the Allied Waste easement. If a volunteer could commit to monitoring boxes approximately once per week April – August, we will put them up. This stretch of fence is easily reached from the Homestead or Orange St. Trailhead. Contact Kathy Heffernan, 543-4097.

We hope for greater numbers of bluebirds in the Missoula area in 2012!



Junior birders, Maria McEvoy and Maya Heffernan, help to monitor boxes on Waterworks Hill.

Welcome New Members:

Robert Brandenberger
William & Robin Nichols
Guy Smith

Jeff Herman
Carolyn Rossell

Thank You



Thanks to our Returning Members:

Virginia L. Bolten
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Katie Deuel Thomas
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Send an email request with your name to Vick Applegate at k7vk@arrl.net.

We will alert you each month when the newsletter becomes available on our website:

<http://www.fvamisoula.org/>

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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.

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\$20 for a one-year membership
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Please make the check payable to National Audubon Society and mail to: National Audubon Society, Membership Data Center, PO Box 422250, Palm Coast, FL 32142-2250. **C1Z N53 OZ**

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Email (optional): _____

\$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.

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