

# Bitterroot AUDUBON



OCTOBER 2020

NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 35, NO. 2

## **NO OCTOBER MEETING, BITTERROOT AUDUBON VIRTUAL PROGRAM SCHEDULED FOR NOVEMBER**

**BITTERROOT AUDUBON WILL GO  
VIRTUAL AT THE NOVEMBER 16TH  
MEETING 7:00 P.M. ON ZOOM!!  
JOIN US ON THIS NEW ADVENTURE!!!**

*By Kay Fulton*

Many of you are already familiar with how to this new technology, but just in case here are a few steps to follow:

1. Prepare by ensuring you have internet connection and a functioning device (laptop, desktop, tablet, or mobile phone, etc.).
2. Download and install the Zoom meeting app on your device and create a free account using Zoom's webpage.
3. In the beginning of November, Micki Long, our BAS President, will email everyone an "Invitation" to participate in a Zoom meeting which will include a link. Click on it to join!

The November 16<sup>th</sup> meeting will include some "getting re-acquainted" basic business items, announcements, and an exciting program by Montana Audubon entitled "THE GREAT BLUE HERON PROJECT." The two presenters will describe their research and results and share pictures of the various heron rookeries in Montana. Detailed description and pictures will be in the November newsletter. Be sure to look for it.

ALSO, A PRACTICE SESSION HAS BEEN SCHEDULED FOR OCTOBER 28<sup>TH</sup> AT 5:00 P.M.

For those of you who would like to make sure that you know what you are doing!

Again, all members will get an email from Micki Long inviting you to the practice session. You can

simply go through the logging in process and spend 15 minutes getting acquainted

OR

For those who would like "in-person" help you can go to the Hamilton Library and meet with Daniel Ray in the Community Room. He can accommodate 9 participants and you must contact him ahead of time to let him know you want to come.

Daniel's email is:

[daniel@bitterrootpubliclibrary.org](mailto:daniel@bitterrootpubliclibrary.org) or call 406-363-1670.

COVID restrictions will be in place: masks & social distancing. If you need help with a device, bring it.

If you don't have any device you can still come and watch the practice on a large screen, which you can also do in November for the meeting. See the upcoming November newsletter for more details.

Consider the following brief treatise on our new normal:

### **"THE VIRTUES OF VIRTUAL" Using Technology to Learn about Nature During the Coronavirus Pandemic**

*By Philip W. Williams*

In today's world, we are finding ourselves looking for different ways to accomplish everyday tasks, ranging from working, educating ourselves, and socializing. Technology has stepped up as an assistant to help us fulfill some semblance of our everyday lives in a somewhat normal, albeit modified, way. Perhaps this is an opportunity to recognize the role technology plays, and can play, in

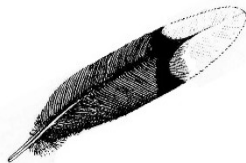
nature and natural resources management. While nature and technology seemingly lie at opposite ends of the “natural” vs “unnatural” spectrum, technology can indeed serve as a bridge to better connect us to nature and help us learn about it and ourselves. While I have previously written an article and delivered a presentation about the subject of nature in technology, a less theoretical bridge of nature and technology involves using technical applications to help us simultaneously socialize and learn about the natural world. Specifically, Bitterroot Audubon members can stay connected with their board and public presentations during a time of public health concerns using the video conferencing platform, Zoom.

Thank you for your continued interest in using technology such as Zoom to stay connected with your Bitterroot Audubon. As always, if you have any questions, concerns, or comments, please reach out to us. We wish you all a very safe and enjoyable autumn as we all continue to foster our passion for learning about the natural world.

### **Letter from the President**

*By Micki Long, BAS President*

It's the first day of October as I write this letter, and the number of Covid-19 cases in Montana and in Ravalli County are on the rise.



As much as we would all love to see and hug one another, an in-person BAS meeting is not safe. The board has decided to hold a Zoom meeting in November. More information is available elsewhere in the newsletter, in an article by Phillip Williams. While not ideal, there are some benefits to virtual meetings: No driving at night; watching out for deer, elk, or, even escaped bison. No bad seats. Personalized volume control. No whispering neighbors. Our own bathrooms. And, best of all, our pets can sit on our laps!

October is also the time of year I start looking forward to Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project FeederWatch, when watching birds at my feeders turns into citizen science. In 1976, the Long Point Bird Observatory in Long Point, Ontario began an Ontario Bird Feeder Survey. Wanting an understanding of large-scale movements of birds, Long Point needed to expand to a continental-wide count. They asked Cornell Lab to join in the effort.

The Fall 2020 *Audubon* magazine includes a story called “Sanctuaries Under Strain,” about the pressures facing the nation's National Wildlife Refuge System. The refuges exist to protect habitat for wildlife, but cuts in budgets and staff combined with a growing number of visitors threaten the system. The article says that the “refuges have long been overlooked and undervalued.” One of the refuges highlighted in the article is the Bitterroot Valley's Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, well known to and loved by members of Bitterroot Audubon. And our own Deb Goslin, a former biological technician at the refuge, was interviewed for the article and points out some of the consequences of losing staff due to budget constraints. Read her comments and the entire article in your print copy of the magazine now; the online version will be available within two weeks.

In the winter of 1987-88, over four-thousand participants enrolled; last year, over 20,000 counted birds in their yards.

Project FeederWatch asks participants to count birds at their feeders and in their yards from November until April. That may sound like too much counting, but the project is very flexible. You can count every week or just one week in the season, and you count only two consecutive days in a week. On those days, you can count for a brief period or for hours. And you can change the days and your viewing periods from week to week.

The weekly reports help scientists understand the abundance and distribution of over 100 species that winter in North America. The information can reveal long-term population trends, changes in winter ranges, which foods attract various birds, how disease spreads among birds who visit feeders, and more.

Writing about Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project FeederWatch motivated me to review seasons past. I actually do miss all the snow in NE Ohio's lake effect snow belt. Many weeks of the winter I recorded over 6” of snow on count days. I had many Blue Jays, Northern Cardinals, and Tufted Titmice, and even some White-throated Sparrows

and Fox Sparrows. While I would like more snow here, I wouldn't trade those Ohio birds for Mountain Chickadees, Townsend's Solitaires, and, especially, the Clark's Nutcrackers. One counting day last year, I had twenty-one 'Clarks!' While looking over the FeederWatch site again, I played with the "Explore" tab and made graphs, looked at Bird Summaries for various states, and read reports by lab scientists—so interesting and fun!

Project FeederWatch is supported entirely by participant fees, which are \$18 for nonmembers and \$15 for Cornell Lab members. It's money well spent.

Enjoy the rest of the newsletter, and, of course, happy birding!

### **Montana's Birds: Tough Enough to Stay, Tough Enough to Leave**

*By Sherry Ritter*

Why is Montana's state bird the Western Meadowlark? It spends most of the year nowhere near our great state! Maybe we should instead celebrate a species that "toughs it out" through our long, cold, snowy winters. But who really is tougher—those who stay behind or those who leave?



*Courtesy Mick Thompson/Creative Commons*  
*Red-naped Sapsucker.*

Of the 264 bird species that have been verified as breeding in Montana, 143 are year-round residents and the other 121 are only here during the warmer months to nest and raise their offspring. We also have more than 40 species, like the Rough-legged Hawk, that migrate south to Montana for the winter. To those species, this is the perfect place to winter.



*Courtesy Jerry McFarland/Creative Commons*  
*Northern Flicker.*

Why do some birds migrate? Migration is all about energy efficiency. Believe it or not, migratory birds save energy by flying thousands of miles. The energy cost of flying long distances to breed in Montana is balanced out by the energy savings of nesting and raising young in a place where there are lots of mosquitoes, flies, insect larvae, berries, and other foods. It is not that those resources aren't available where the migrants come from (that is, their "wintering areas"). There is just a lot less competition for food in Montana during the summer compared to many migrants' wintering areas that they must share with hundreds of resident species. On the other end, the energy cost of flying thousands of miles back to their wintering grounds is offset by not having to eke out a living in the frozen landscapes of Montana.

Why do some birds stay for the winter? Staying put also is all about energy efficiency. Competition from summer migrants is gone, leaving more limited food choices, but plenty for those well-adapted to getting them. Many species can tolerate cold temperatures as long as there is abundant food and they can find shelter. There's no need to move away.

As an example, let's compare two woodpeckers, the migratory Red-naped Sapsucker and the year-round resident Northern Flicker. Sapsuckers have short



tongues with stiff hairs. After they create shallow holes (sap wells) in trees and shrubs to release sap, those tongues are perfect for capturing it. Sapsuckers also catch insects. This reliance on sap and insects that aren't available in Montana winters may explain their need to migrate. Energetically, it's worth the long flight.

In contrast, the Northern Flicker has a strong head and beak used to drill into bark to get insects. Its tongue is so long that it wraps around the skull. The flicker snakes its tongue through beetle and ant tunnels to get the energy-rich insects wintering in the tree. Energetically, it works out better for the flicker to stay year-round in Montana than to fly elsewhere.

You have to respect such energy-conscious beings. Therefore, I now accept that the Western Meadowlark is tough enough to represent Montana.

### Keeping the Deer Out

*By Kate Stone*

Montanans have a varied relationship with ungulates in the landscape. Many people both enjoy hunting and rely on a successful harvest to feed their families. Ungulate populations are also over their management objective in many parts of the state, causing damage to crops and agricultural resources, threatening lives and vehicular damage through roadway collisions, and putting intense pressure on establishing or regenerating native vegetation. Within our Bitterroot River Important Bird Area, healthy riparian vegetation—some of the most important habitat for a myriad of birds and other wildlife—is severely limited in many places due to ungulate browsing, largely by White-tailed Deer. These relatively recent hooves on the landscape (circa early 1900s) truly take a toll on bird habitat.



*Courtesy Kate Stone*

*Before-and-after photos of deer exclosure installation. A single woody stem is joined by many companions over a period of several years. Note the difference within and outside of the exclosure in 2020.*



*Courtesy Kate Stone*

*Before-and-after photos of deer exclosure installation.*

In October 2012, a crew of Bitterroot Audubon volunteers worked to install a series of small ungulate exclosures on the Bitterroot Springs Ranch near Bell Crossing. We used standard 6-ft wire fencing and t-posts. I recently met with ranch manager Roy Fenster to see how the exclosures worked over eight growing seasons. As expected, fairly simple fencing resulted in major growth of all types of woody vegetation, including ponderosa pine seedlings, cottonwood sprouts, small shrubs like snowberry and wild rose, and large shrubs like serviceberry and alder.

Though our exclosures are a small drop on a large landscape, targeted protection of small areas for just a few years can get plants above a browse line and really boost habitat value quickly. If you're a landowner and would like some donated fencing materials to help protect native habitat features, please let us know (contactus@bitterrootaudubon.org). Thanks to Bitterroot Springs Ranch for hosting these exclosures.

## October Big Day

By Micki Long

Last May 9th, a neighbor, Deb Goslin, and I headed up our road with binoculars, joining 50,000 people around the globe to bird on Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Big Day of Birding. Of the 53 species we saw or heard in 4.5 hours that day, the most abundant was the Clark's Nutcracker, my favorite bird! Those of you who have enjoyed the Big Day in the past or who want to participate in the future don't have to wait until next May. Cornell Lab also has an autumn Big Day, this year on October 17<sup>th</sup>. You can bird for hours or just minutes, miles from home or in your yard. Your submitted observations will help Cornell scientists understand bird abundance and distribution. For more on the October Big Day, see

<https://ebird.org/news/october-big-day-2020-bigger-than-ever>

Have you hesitated to participate in Big Days or other Cornell citizen science projects because you have to use eBird? If you need some help to start using eBird or to more fully use all of the app's functions, take all or part of a free Cornell Lab course. The course is divided into 5 parts, so you can choose which segments meet your needs:

[https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/product/ebird-essentials/?\\_hstc=60209138.217190d39ac468aecef6630399891857.1600180197969.1600375218300.1600957610022.3&\\_hssc=60209138.1.1600957610022&\\_hsfp=1335760068](https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/product/ebird-essentials/?_hstc=60209138.217190d39ac468aecef6630399891857.1600180197969.1600375218300.1600957610022.3&_hssc=60209138.1.1600957610022&_hsfp=1335760068)



Courtesy Micki Long

Clark's Nutcracker.

## Support Audubon Adventures Program

By Betsy Ballard

Bitterroot Audubon Society board members will be contacting teachers and homeschoolers in the Bitterroot valley for grades 3 through 5 this fall to see if they are interested in a gift of Audubon Adventures curriculum. These curriculums are graciously available through the donations from Bitterroot Audubon Society members. If you would like to donate, the total cost of one printed classroom kit is \$45.95.

You can mail donations to:

Bitterroot Audubon Society  
PO Box 326, Hamilton, MT 59840.

Donations by November 15 would be most helpful. The link below has information about the printed and online materials that are available. Thank you in advance for your help!

<http://audubonadventures.org/Purchase.htm>

## AWESOME HIGHWAY CLEANUP

By Skip Horner

Our semi-annual highway cleanup will take place on Tuesday October 13 at 5PM. We'll meet and park on the west side of Bell Crossing and clean miles 60 to 62 north and south from there. Bitterroot Audubon's name is on those big highway signs, so come out and help us look good. Bring your own gloves. We'll supply hi-viz vests and large plastic bags.





## What's the story, Story?

By Jim Story

### **Question: How did birds evolve a bill?**

**Answer:** The bill is a result of birds' investment in flight. Bird forelimbs have been committed almost entirely to flight, so the bill was evolved to fulfill the normal duties of forelimbs. A bird's bill (or beak) consists of the upper and lower jaws ensheathed in a layer of toughened skin. In most birds, the horny outer layer peels and is continuously replenished from underneath. The bill has many uses relative to food: it is used for eating, catching, cutting, crushing, carrying and killing food. Bills are also used for preening, excavating, and nest building. I'm always amazed when examining a nest and considering that the bird made the complicated, sturdy nest with nothing but its bill! I couldn't duplicate their abilities with my two hands and ten fingers!

*Local birding expert Jim Story answers your questions about birds and their habits. Jim welcomes your questions at [jstory4689@gmail.com](mailto:jstory4689@gmail.com).*

### **Being Called a Bird-brain is No Longer Derogatory**

By Judy Hoy

A new paper just came out that many of us have been hoping for published in *Perspective Neuroscience*, it is titled: "*Birds do have a brain cortex-and think*" by Suzana Herculano-Houzel. Science 25 Sep 2020: Vol. 369, Issue 6511, pp. 1567-1568 DOI: 10.1126/science.abe0536 <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/369/6511/1567.summary> The author says, "... birds, and particularly Corvids (e.g ravens), are as cognitively capable as monkeys and even great apes. Because their neurons are smaller, the pallium of songbirds and parrots actually comprises many more information-processing neuronal units than the equivalent-sized mammalian cortices." Many new studies are referenced including a study that shows that the bird pallium has similar organization to the mammalian cortex. They say that birds can think, reason, and learn similarly to mammals. The new studies show that birds are definitely intelligent individuals and not little genetic robots.

### **2020 MAPS Bird Banding Season Summary**

By Dave Lockman

Some BAS members may not be aware that the Bitterroot National Forest has been running two bird

banding stations near Lake Como since 1993 as part of the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship program (MAPS) coordinated by the Institute for Bird Populations. Our two MAPS sites were set up through a partnership with BAS, and BAS members have often helped run the stations in the past.

Here's a summary of the COVID-influenced, socially distanced BNF MAPS 2020 bird banding season that wrapped up the first week of August. I handled 134 birds at Lick Creek (19.1 birds/session), which is somewhat under the last 10-year running average of 162. This continues a decline from the latest peak of over 200 birds/year from 2015-2018. Lick Creek has gone through several cycles oscillating between under 100 birds/year handled at the low points to over 200/year at the high points. Each low and high point seems to last for several years, and then it cycles back in the opposite direction. No idea why, maybe broader weather patterns or other vagaries of nature? At any rate, the most frequently caught species were Swainson's Thrush and MacGillivray's Warbler, followed distantly by Townsend's Warbler, which is typical for that site. 23 species total.

Rock Creek, on the other hand, was booming. I handled 274 birds there (39.1/session), which really kept me hopping. I had two 50 bird sessions in a row, and the slowest day still produced 27 birds. I stopped even bothering to haul my lunch in there, and I didn't put net 9 up most days to save a little time. That site only has a 6-year history, but this was the second busiest season we've had there, behind only the 324 birds we handled the first year in 2015. The most frequently caught species were Swainson's Thrush, Common Yellowthroat, Cedar Waxwing, Yellow Warbler and American Redstart. Again, a fairly typical species distribution for that site. 34 species total. Combining both sites I handled 408 birds representing 41 species in 7 six-hour banding days at each site.

It seems like most years we catch an unusual number of one or two species. This year it was Nashville Warblers. Normally we only catch one or two dispersing juveniles late in the banding season, and I don't think of them as breeders at either site. This year there were singing males at both sites for the first several sessions, and I caught 6 adults at Rock Creek and 3 adults at Lick Creek, all in breeding condition. I've also been hearing them

# Calendar of Events

- Oct 13:** Awesome Highway Clean-up, 5PM. Meet at west side of Bell Crossing.
- Oct 17:** Cornell Lab or Ornithology's "Autumn Big Day." See article in the newsletter for more details.
- Oct 28:** Zoom practice meeting, 5PM. See your email inbox for upcoming invite.
- Nov 16:** **ZOOM** Audubon Meeting/Program "Great Blue Heron Project" by Montana Audubon, 7PM, Zoom Board Mtg. 5PM.
- Nov-Apr:** Project Feeder Watch, see Micki Long's "Letter from the President" for more details.

much more frequently around the Forest than in years past. Not sure if their numbers are increasing locally, or if I'm just tuning into them more than I used to.

One new species handled for me personally was a second year male Cassin's Finch at Rock Creek. I was quite taken aback when what looked like a female by plumage turned out to have a well-developed cloacal protuberance, indicating definitively that she was a he. It was news to me that male Cassin's finches don't attain their reddish plumage until the prebasic molt following their second summer, but it says so right in the banding bible, and actually in my National Geographic field guide too. Who knew? Other especially memorable

## News and Notes

### **Bitterroot Audubon Scholarship Recipient**

With great pleasure Bitterroot Audubon announces Andrea Williams as the winner of this semester's Byron Weber Memorial Scholarship. Andrea is from Stevensville, and is majoring in Wildlife Biology at the University of Montana. Andrea came to our recent Board Meeting and our General Meeting, and spoke well about her life and her studies. We are very proud of her, the more so because she happens to be the younger sister of Philip Williams, our very first scholarship recipient. We give this scholarship twice a year to student studying a Natural Resources major at a Montana college or university. Preference is given to a Bitterroot resident. The money for the scholarship comes from our calendar sales, so buy a calendar or two and support higher education.

captures were a Sharp-shinned Hawk early in the season at Lick Creek, and three Gray Jays in one net the last day at Lick Creek. There were lots of juvenile Swainson's Thrushes, Yellow Warblers, redstarts and yellowthroats the last few sessions, so it seemed like the birds had a productive year too.

The most exciting catch of the season was a female Willow Flycatcher I recaptured at Rock Creek on 7/15. I realized her band was pretty old when I was processing her, but when I looked up her number later it turned out that John Ormiston had banded her as an adult female at the old Rock Creek site on 6/15/2010! We didn't see her again until we caught her once at the new Rock Creek site in 2016, and then twice in 2017, always in the net closest to the old Rock Creek site, which was across the creek and a little downstream. But then she disappeared again until this year. When I checked the Bird Banding Lab's longevity records (yes, they keep track of that), the current record for Willow Flycatcher was 11 years, 0 months. Applying the BBL's rules for birds captured initially as adults, this one had a minimum age of 11 years and 1 month when recaptured this time! So we have a third longevity record to set beside our current records of 12 years 1 month for a male Swainson's Thrush at Lick Creek, and 11 years 11 months for a male Black-headed Grosbeak at the old Rock Creek site. It's kind of awe-inspiring to know that you've held and safely released a little bird that has migrated so many thousands of miles over the years and keeps coming back to the same spot here in the Bitterroot.

### **Bird Walks at Lee Metcalf NWR, Stevensville, MT**

**CANCELLED DUE TO COVID-19 UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.**

**Call for Photos** Bitterroot Audubon is seeking images of birds for a feature in our newsletter: *Bird Shots*. If you have taken a great photo and would like to submit it for consideration, please email the jpeg image, with a brief description, to [BASeditors@gmail.com](mailto:BASeditors@gmail.com).

### **Bitterroot Audubon is on Facebook and Instagram**

If you use Facebook or Instagram, please look for Bitterroot Audubon and "Like" us!



# Bird Shots



© Mel Holloway

*Close up of an American Kestrel.*

*Courtesy Mel Holloway*



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### Officers

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### Chapter Only Membership

The Bitterroot Audubon Chapter Only Membership is \$15/year. These members will be supporting local chapter activities, receive the full color e-newsletter, and enjoy Chapter benefits. To join as a Chapter Only Member, complete this form.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
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City: \_\_\_\_\_  
State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Send this application with \$15 to:



Bitterroot Audubon Society  
PO Box 326  
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### NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION



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