

# Bitterroot AUDUBON



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NEWSLETTER

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## THE CLARK FORK RIVER- GRASS VALLEY IBA

We birders are so fortunate to live in close proximity to two Important Bird Areas (IBA's) that were identified as member sites of the "IBA Program" which includes 32 in Montana. There are over 2,000 sites in the US as a whole, as well as many more worldwide. The IBA program is a **global** initiative to identify sites supporting critical bird habitat and to stimulate conservation. The Bitterroot River IBA has been the focus of attention of Bitterroot Audubon for the last two years. This month we will have the opportunity to learn about the Clark Fork River-Grass Valley IBA from Jim Brown who, along with other members of the Five Valleys Audubon, has been instrumental in that IBA's establishment. He will describe this accomplishment as well as the conservation projects they have undertaken. The Clark Fork-Grass Valley IBA encompasses about 25,000 acres of river corridor and adjacent uplands between Missoula and Huson. The process was begun by conducting bird surveys to create a database of bird occurrence that provided a scientific basis for its establishment. Since then, the Five Valleys Audubon has been involved in telling the IBA story to others: organizations, city/county planners, and public hearings. They are now invited to review subdivision proposals in Missoula County. Their conservation accomplishments have included conservation easements and enlargement of development setbacks in riparian areas.

Jim is a 30<sup>+</sup> year veteran of the U.S. Forest Service with a master's degree from Yale University and Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. He has written extensively about wildland fire science and other fire related topics. He is a past president of the Five Valleys Audubon & Montana Audubon.

Come join Bitterroot Audubon on Monday, January 18<sup>th</sup>, for Jim's stimulating presentation. The program will begin at 7:00 pm at the Forest Service Headquarters in Hamilton, 1801 N. First Street (Highway 93) at the north end of Hamilton. Enter the building from the west side. The public is invited. For further information, contact Kay Fulton, 642-3794.

## Big Hole Christmas Bird Count

*By Kate Stone*

Twenty-six people participated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Big Hole Christmas Bird count. Weather was warm for the Big Hole (24° F when we started) and stayed relatively nice for the day, with brief bursts of snow mixed with sunshine. The group observed 23 species, including seven species new to the count: downy woodpecker, golden-crowned kinglet, gray-crowned rosy-finch, gray jay, great gray owl, marsh wren, and northern flicker. The top species was the snow bunting, although the 126 we saw was fewer than the 195 seen in 2008. Next was the black-billed magpie (100) followed by the rough-legged hawk (93). A full species list is available on the Bitterroot Audubon website. Thanks to everyone who participated!



Winter Birding in the Big Hole

Photo by Karen Griffing

## Letter from the President

By Peter Allen

With Christmas Bird Counts completed, I find myself thinking about the enormity of the effort. I re-read the article about the Stevi Bird Count (great publicity!) and thought back to the CBC article, also in the *Ravalli Republic*, about 10 days ago (more great publicity). If I were a biologist wanting to study nationwide trends in population, how would I go about collecting data if there were no Christmas Bird Counts? What an enormous task it would be to try and organize volunteers all over the country to collect and submit reasonably accurate observational data!

Somehow or other, however, more than 46,000 observers all over the United States, as well as many other parts of the world, find the will, the time, and the expertise to observe local birds in set areas and submit their data in prescribed ways. All who participate, whether as field observers or feeder watchers, add to the scientific effort, and can take pride in the results. Special appreciation is due to the hard-working compilers – John Ormiston, Dave Lockman, and Kate Stone.

Oh, before you rest on your laurels, consider that the *Great Backyard Bird Count* is scheduled for next month. Time to collect **more** data! See below.

## Great Backyard Bird Count is Coming!

The next *Great Backyard Bird Count* takes place **February 12-15, 2010**. The National Audubon Society and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology are calling on everyone to “Count for Fun, Count for the Future!” Participants did just that in record numbers for the 2009 count, submitting more than 93,000 checklists and identifying 619 species – more than 11.5 million birds. **Let’s break some more records this year!**

To learn how you can be a part of the GBBC, go online to <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/howto.html>.



## Christmas Bird Count

By John Ormiston

By all accounts from the 27 count day field observers, the 23<sup>rd</sup> annual Hamilton Christmas Bird Count lacked bird activity. Interesting – because the numbers show we had an above average count. We recorded 66 species and 6680 birds compared to the average of 65.4 and 6,521. Okay, so it wasn’t a stellar year, but those only come along once in a while. We added



two species, Double-crested Cormorant and Yellow-headed Blackbird, and “missed” Wilson’s Snipe for the first time in the history of the count. We’ve seen 22 species every year, and 31 species only once.

Waterfowl – Canada Geese and Mallard – always account for the largest proportion of the number of birds seen; this year we saw 1,034 Mallards and 1,345 geese. We recorded high counts for Mourning Doves (107); Eurasian-collared Doves (31); Steller’s Jays (39), and Great Horned Owls (12). Eurasian-collared Doves were first seen just last year, but their presence in and around Hamilton is rapidly increasing.



Our 23 feeder watchers came through with 2 species not seen by field observers. We also had reports of 4 species observed during count week, but not on count day: Snow Goose, Cedar Waxwing, Merlin, and Prairie Falcon.

The Teller once again provided our meeting place and a chance to compare notes and feed ourselves at noon. Bill Good provided, for the 23<sup>rd</sup> time, his secret recipe chili and a good helping of Oreo cookies. Thank you, Bill, and thank you to all the field observers braving the brisk winter weather to count birds.

A full species list is available on the Bitterroot Audubon website. For complete results of all CBC’s, go to National’s website, [www.audubon.org/bird/cbc](http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc).



## Stevi CBC 2009

By Dave Lockman

This was the 45<sup>th</sup> year for the Stevensville Christmas Bird Count, the second oldest in Montana. We had pretty decent weather and little snow on December 27<sup>th</sup>, although several cold snaps this fall and early winter turned most of the ponds to ice. This year we had about 26 birders out in the field, and another 20 or so feeder watchers recording the birds they saw on Count Day. Results are still preliminary as not all the data has been turned in, but it looks like we found 83 or 84 species. This again gives us the highest species total for any CBC in Montana, and the only one over 80. We found two new species for the Stevi CBC, Western Grebe and



White-throated Sparrow, which brings our cumulative species count to 155 over 45 years. Other uncommon birds seen included Great Gray Owl, Spotted Towhee, Virginia Rail and Common Grackle. Wayne Tree and

the crew at the Lee Metcalf NWR found 56 species on the Refuge alone, including almost every waterfowl species one could reasonably expect to find here during the winter. They set a new record for the number of species seen on the Refuge during a CBC.

We found record numbers of two species relatively new to our area, Eurasian Collared-Dove and California Quail. We also found lots of raptors, but waterfowl numbers seemed lower than average, even though the number of waterfowl species was up. And it wasn't a great year for finches and their relatives. Common Redpolls were very hard to find, and Red Crossbills, which are usually fairly common here, were either completely absent or present in very small numbers (some of that data I'm missing). Waxwings, which are another typically abundant group, were similarly scarce. I found one small flock of 13 Bohemians just before dusk on Count Day, but that's about it. Thanks to all who participated, and we hope to see more of you next year.

## Thank you! Allegra

Bitterroot Audubon would like to thank Allegra Print and Imaging for their generous donation of \$250 worth of printing. The Bitterroot Audubon Important Bird Area committee used these funds to print a species checklist for the Bitterroot River Important Bird Area (IBA). The checklist will be mailed to landowners within the IBA as part of our outreach effort, and will also be available to the general public. Look for them at our January meeting!



## What's the Story, Story? By Jim Story

**Question:** How long can birds live?

**Answer:** Precise information on bird longevity is hard to obtain. Some of the best information has come from annual bird banding data. For example, long-time bird bander John Ormiston has documented that a Swainson's Thrush that he has routinely captured over the years in a net near Hamilton is 12 years old. But, the longevity of



that thrush is probably unusual. Generally, the larger the bird, the longer it lives. Birds don't usually die of "old age." They simply run the gamut of risks each year until they are killed. The annual risk of being killed varies

from about 70 percent in small temperate-zone songbirds (adult life expectancy about 10 months) to about 3 percent in Royal Albatrosses (life expectancy over 30 years).



## Dreaming Big

By Fred Weisbecker, Conservation Chair

I recently read with great interest an article in the Billings newspaper about the American Prairie Foundation. The foundation envisions a Serengeti of the Northern Plains. They are currently buying up ranches in eastern Montana from ranchers having problems hanging on with their cattle operations. They are offering top prices for the land and the Foundation has some of America's richest people on the Board to accomplish it. Their vision is to recreate a vibrant wildlife community unseen since the days of Lewis and Clark. They have already spent 8 million dollars acquiring 11 ranches. Their hope is to include 3.5 million acres in a great preserve. 108 bison are already roaming on some of the land. There is some concern from local officials in regards to their community's future as the cattle ranches disappear but the Foundation envisions a new business model as the area becomes a world class wildlife tourist destination. Animals such as the ferruginous hawk, mountain plover, burrowing owl, black-tailed prairie dog, and the long-billed curlew will all benefit greatly from this land acquisition. As one person put it, this will put real meaning to the phrase "the last best place". It never hurts to think big when you are talking about sustainable ecosystems, so I say go for it.

Good Luck to the American Prairie Foundation.

