

# Bitterroot AUDUBON



MARCH 2020

NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 34, NO. 7

## ARE MONTANA'S HIGH MOUNTAIN STREAMS CAUSING THE DROP IN HARLEQUIN DUCK POPULATIONS?

*By Chris Hammond*

Beautiful harlequin sea ducks spend most of the year in salt water, surfing with sea gulls and cormorants along the Pacific Coast, from Alaska to Seattle. But they migrate east to breed and nest in high, fast-moving Rocky Mountain streams. In icy waters, these ducks mate for life, although the colorful males stay in the breeding grounds for approximately six weeks before returning to the coast, while the females and chicks stay behind and don't return until September. Unfortunately, harlequin ducks are suffering a serious population decline, and biologists are searching for the causes, identification of which will help them shape their conservation efforts. To help them find answers, biologists from agencies in British Columbia, Alberta, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming have expanded a previously existing project, The International Harlequin Duck Migration and Connectivity Project.



*Courtesy Chris Hammond*

*Male and female Harlequin Ducks.*

Chris Hammond, a nongame wildlife biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (Region 1), participates in the project and for our March 16<sup>th</sup> program will share his summary of the project to date, preliminary analyses, and intriguing new information emerging from this research.



*Courtesy Bruce Moffat*

*Harlequin male with research antenna.*

As a FWP wildlife biologist based in Kalispell, Chris is responsible for survey, inventory, management, and conservation of, primarily, nongame wildlife species. He also works on mitigation projects that involve conservation easements, acquisitions, habitat restoration, and potential species reintroductions. His undergraduate and graduate work focused on the ecology of common loons in northwest Montana. He is a co-chair of the Montana Common Loon Working Group, a co-chair of the Harlequin Duck Working Group, and a member of the Bald Eagle Working Group, Herp Working Group, and Bat Working Group. He has authored the following conservation documents with assistance from the respective working group members and other colleagues:

- Montana Bald Eagle Management Guidelines: An Addendum to Montana Bald Eagle Management Plan (1994)

- Montana Bald Eagle Status Report 2009,
- Conservation Plan for Common Loons in Montana, and
- FWP Northwest Montana Terrestrial Climate Change Species Monitoring and Conservation Plan.



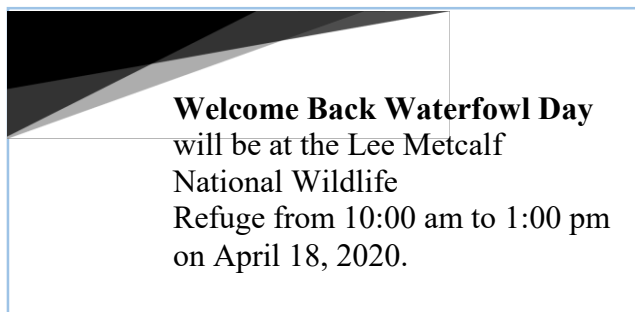
*Courtesy Chris Hammond*

*Mist netting setup for Harlequin Ducks.*

You can read an interesting article about Chris Hammond's work and The International Harlequin Duck Migration and Connectivity Project in the Oct 22, 2019 Montana Outdoors article.

<https://issuu.com/montanaoutdoors/docs/harlequin>

**Join us and learn about harlequins, a bird that many of us have never seen--and may not ever see-- from a "duck whisperer" on Monday, March 16<sup>th</sup> at 7PM at the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge. The meeting will be held in the Visitor's Center of the Refuge located north of Stevensville, just off the Eastside Hwy. Turn west onto Wildfowl Lane. The public is invited. Contact Mike Daniels for more information, 381-9800.**



## Letter from the President

*By Becky Peters, BAS President*



**We've lost a quarter of our birds since 1970.** (Three Billion Birds Study in *Science*)

Some of our most common avian species of birds do not get the funding to save them like our waterfowl species who have benefited from the decades of habitat restoration, etc. So which birds are we losing? It's the sparrows, juncos, finches, blackbirds, warblers, swallows and Western Meadowlarks that we are losing. They come to your homes, to your feeders, to your trees, to your public lands.

We can help those species in various ways, but we have to act quickly! You can help them right now at your home! If you have an outdoor cat you can especially help those species!! I've written about keeping your cats away from birds before and this letter is about it again because the snow is melting and your outdoor cats may be meowing to get outside. So I am about to lose some of our BAS readers who might not agree. If you can hang in there, please do. We need you more than ever to do something about saving those birds that I just listed. And I am well aware that some cats are slow movers (ex: Susan's cat!) and that they wouldn't kill a hummingbird if it landed on their nose. However, keep reading!

From <https://www.tyrantfarms.com/5-ways-to-stop-your-cat-from-killing-birds-and-other-wildlife/>:

"Five Ways to Stop Your Cat from Killing Birds and Other Wildlife"

"According to Peter Marra, a conservation biologist and director of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center in Washington, D.C., **cats kill somewhere between 1 to 4 BILLION (yes, billion with a "b") birds each year in the United States and have caused a minimum of 33 extinctions through the decades**"

So here is a very quick rundown about what you can do if you have an outdoor cat:

**1. Make your outdoor cat an indoor cat.** It can't be better than this! It might take small steps. Keep your outdoor cat indoors especially during breeding and fledgling time. Plus, your indoor cat will probably live 6x longer than an outdoor cat.

**2. If you have a cat determined to be outdoors then get, or make, a Birdsbesafe collar.** Birds did not evolve with cats; they don't know that cats are predators. So if your cat wears a brightly colored collar slipped over his quick release collar then the birds can see him from a far distance. This also gives the fledglings an extra help during a particularly vulnerable time for them. Bells reduce bird fatalities by 41%, collars by 87%. (And the cats can still hunt rodents! Yes!!)

**3. Spray, neuter and/or adopt.** I don't need to say any more here! Don't let them make more cats!

**4. You can buy and then teach your cat about an in-ground electric fence.** (PetSafe In-Ground Fence). I have no idea about these and since our cats are only indoor cats I have not researched this. The [www.tyrantfarms.com](http://www.tyrantfarms.com) article does explain a lot more if you are interested.

**5. If you can't adopt a stray cat you found then take it to a no-kill shelter.** If you let it stay outside and keep feeding it then what you will have is a healthy, well fed predator who can now catch anything that moves and flutters- birds! - more easily. Yes, feral cats that have been fixed are wonderful but when returned to the wild still kill birds.

I'm going to add two more ways that cat lovers/bird lovers can personally, easily, help the birds:

**6. Build a "Catio".** More and more indoor (and outdoor) cat owners are building these. They can be portable and you place them out in the shade on the grass and then move it to other places as the sun moves. Or you can open a window and let the cat out into an "addition" you put to your house, in the shade! <https://catiospaces.com/> and DIY <https://catioworld.com/diy-catio/>

**7. Talk to your neighbors** if they have an outdoor cat and ask them to keep their cat indoors. Especially encourage them to keep their predator in at night while the diurnal birds are more likely to be in torpor, or roosting with other birds, or near the tree trunk and therefore are more defenseless. Then you can also share this list with them. Thank you!

*Tell your outdoor cat it's my fault! ;-)*

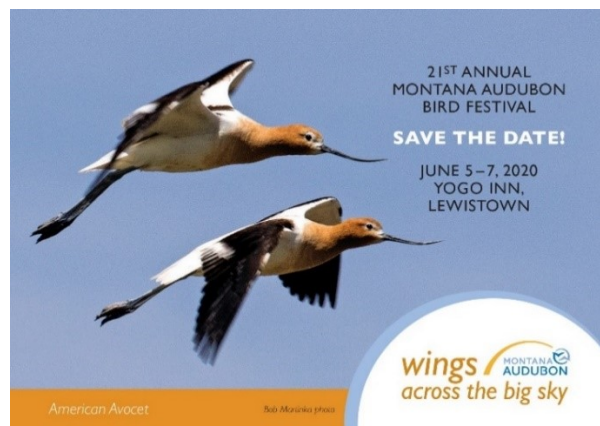
## Wings Across the Big Sky Festival

Montana Audubon will host its 21st annual Wings Across the Big Sky bird festival at the Yogo Inn, in Lewistown on June 5<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020! This

# Calendar of Events

- Mar 16:** Audubon Meeting/Program "Harlequin Ducks & Climate Change" by Chris Hammond, Lee Metcalf NWR, Stevensville, MT, 7PM, Board Mtg. 5PM.
- Mar 21:** Beginner Bird Walk at Lee Metcalf NWR, Stevensville, MT 10AM-12PM.
- Apr 18:** Welcome Back Waterfowl Day, Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge 10AM-1PM.
- Apr 20:** Audubon Meeting/Program "Grassland Birds, Wildlife & Ecology" by Kristy Blye, Forest Service/DNRC Building, Hamilton, MT, 7PM, Board Mtg. 5PM.
- May 18:** Audubon Meeting/Program "MPG Ranch: History & Research" by Kate Stone, Lee Metcalf NWR, Stevensville, MT, 7PM, Board Mtg. 5PM.
- Jun 5-7:** Wings Across the Big Sky Birding Festival, Lewistown, MT

longstanding event rotates around the state each year and celebrates Montana's native bird species, typically drawing hundreds of wildlife enthusiasts from across the state and beyond. Front and center will be two days of field trips to destinations in stunning Central Montana, along with traditional festival on-site activities such as our Friday keynote speaker, interactive Saturday afternoon presentations, Montana Audubon Conservation Awards, Cakes for Conservation auction and more. **NEW THIS YEAR!** We are excited to announce we are planning an optional, pre-festival grassland science conference Thursday and Friday, June 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, also to be held at the Yogo Inn. More information will be forthcoming as planning proceeds. Visit the "Outreach" section of Montana Audubon's website: [www.mtaudubon.org](http://www.mtaudubon.org) or call 406.443.3949.



## What's the story, Story?

By Jim Story

**Question:** *How much of what we hear/read about birds and animals is anthropomorphism?*

**Answer:** Anthropomorphism, the ascribing of human characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions to animals is quite common, depending on the information source. As an example, I recently watched a nature show about lions where the narrator stated, "The male lion will kill the cubs of a new lioness in his pride to insure that only his genes are perpetuated." The absurd statement implies that the male lion actually knows his

genetic legacy is at stake, which of course is not true. The truth is, male lions will kill cubs but we don't know why. We can speculate but we just don't know.

Anthropomorphism is often applied to birds too. But try as we might to think of birds in human terms, birds operate mostly by instinct. Regarding birds and their intentions, an ornithology professor I know once said, "Birds are simply "hard-wired little robots."

*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).*

## News and Notes

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

New to birding? Beginner Bird Walks at the refuge are held the third Saturday of each month. Meet at the Refuge Visitor's Center on February 16th at 10AM for a two-hour bird walk. Bring binoculars if you have them. Contact the refuge at [\(406\) 777-5552](tel:4067775552) for more information.

### **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



*White-breasted Nuthatch.*

*Courtesy Robin Dewey*

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and on Facebook!

### 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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Bitterroot Audubon Society  
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