

Bitterroot AUDUBON



NOVEMBER 2020

NEWSLETTER

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SEE MICKI'S EMAIL FOR NOVEMBER ZOOM MEETING INVITE

THE ICONIC GREAT BLUE HERON

By Kay Fulton



Courtesy Bob Martinka

Great Blue Heron.

How lucky we are in the Bitterroot Valley to be able to see Great Blue Herons (GBHE) regularly. What have been your memorable experiences with them? I live right by the Bitterroot River and their presence is almost commonplace for me. I've watched one standing in the middle of the river, catch a fish, which was then cross wise in his bill, and then he tossed it up and swallowed it headfirst. Frequently I've been scolded by one for getting too close when he was hanging around in the trees and the most awesome time was watching one at the Lee Metcalf Refuge stand over a gopher hole, one leg up, waiting to nail one as it came out of its hole! Speaking of the refuge, how many of you have observed that huge rookery (nesting colony) in the Ponderosa Pine trees near the ponds? It is an amazing sight to watch the Herons build their nests and fly back and forth to them, no doubt taking

food. We are lucky indeed! But recently, I was brought back to reality when I read about major research being conducted by Montana Audubon and the Montana Natural Heritage Program. Amy Seaman, MA Director of Policy and Science, wrote:

The Great Blue Heron is a Species of Concern in Montana, a result of a 2.2% annual population decline measured by Breeding Bird Surveys from 1966 – 2010. Greater concern for colonial nesting species like the Heron is imperative, because they rely on intact river and streamside habitat to establish their nesting colonies or rookeries, and because impacts to one breeding site can impact many individual birds. While numerous rookery sites are active across the state, and many of us have seen large and conspicuous heron rookeries, some of their nesting locations around the state are quite challenging to find.



Courtesy Janice Miller

Great Blue Heron rookery.

Despite these difficulties, standardized surveys and rookery counts are key to conserving this majestic wader. That's why Montana Audubon partnered with the Montana Natural Heritage Program to see if

it was possible to find rookeries using high-resolution satellite imagery from Google Earth and National Agricultural Imagery Program. They have been scanning over selected riparian corridors looking for new and known rookeries, including a section of The Clark Fork- Grass Valley. This search method is what led Montana Audubon to create a new Great Blue Heron citizen science project in 2020. This previous spring was a pilot year for conducting this program, drawing over 30 Volunteers to monitor over 50 rookeries statewide, not to mention, 8 surveys taking place within the Bitterroot valley!



Courtesy Bo Crees

Satellite imagery of a rookery.

Montana Audubon staff heading up this research and documenting the results are Carmen Borchelt, Big Sky Watershed Corpsmember, and Bo Crees, Avian Data Specialist.

Carmen grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. She has a Bachelor of Science in Resource Conservation from University of Montana. She has worked in Glacier and Grand Teton National Parks and for the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks at Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park. She loves conservation and is excited to be at Montana Audubon.

Boaz (Bo) grew up in Israel, where he gained a deep appreciation of nature while hiking with his father. He moved to Michigan with his family and then West for outdoor adventures. He graduated from the University of Montana with a BS in Wildlife Biology and has been in many bird research projects. He has worked as a wildlife technician in every western US state, British Columbia and

Mexico. He has worked with Montana Natural Heritage Program and Bird Conservancy of the Rockies.

JOIN BITTERROOT AUDUBON NOVEMBER 16TH AT 7:00 P.M. ON ZOOM TO HEAR FROM CARMEN AND BO AS THEY WALK US THROUGH THE INS AND OUTS OF THIS UNIQUE PROGRAM. MICKI LONG, OUR BAS PRESIDENT, WILL BE SENDING ALL OF YOU AN INVITATION TO JOIN THE MEETING VIA EMAIL. BE SURE THAT YOUR WIFI IS WORKING AND DOWNLOAD THE ZOOM APP BEFORE NOVEMBER 16TH.

Letter from the President

By Micki Long, BAS President



By the time you read this newsletter, we'll be out of the deep freeze. Autumn will have returned, and we can more easily go outside to bird. Yesterday, I watched a beautiful rough-legged hawk soar above me as I walked with one of my dogs. What I really wanted to see was a Northern Saw-whet owl. I've been told that my woods provide good habitat for those small but fierce owls. Just for a second, I thought about using my iBird app to play the owl's "too-too-too" calls. But I resisted, even though it is not breeding season, so playing calls is more acceptable. Every time I think about playing a call or song, I remember an experience I had in Arizona, birding with an acquaintance in Florida Canyon, where I (and several others) had spotted a rufous-capped warbler that had wandered up from Mexico. Sue had not seen one and was desperate to find it. She started to play its song, and it was spring! I asked her not to do that during breeding season. She ignored me and continued to play the song. I was happy that the bird did not respond.

In my mind, Sue was guilty of violating two of my ethical birding principles. Not only do I avoid using a recording in most situations, I also avoid doing something that makes my birding partner of the day uncomfortable. The American Birding Association's Code of Birding Ethics is not quite as strict as my own principle on playing recordings but does assert that birders should limit its use. For a full list of those principles, see <https://www.aba.org/aba-code-of-birding-ethics/>

The ABA's site now includes ethics for birding during the pandemic. With the caveat that I always

told my daughters and now my granddaughter that I prefer “rear end,” “derriere,” “bottom,” or even “keister” to “butt,” here is their one sentence summary of their advice: “Keep your eyes on the sky and your butt close to home.” The site says that pandemic birding ethics are covered by their Code, but they have added some additional recommendations, including the one that we should try not to travel too far from home to bird. They concede that everyone’s living situation is different; here in Montana, although many of us enjoy birding within walking distance of our homes, we often have to—or want to-- drive to a good birding spot. The reason to stay close to home, according to the ABA? They point out that anytime we get in our cars to drive to a birding spot (or, even when we walk in the woods), we risk needing emergency assistance, straining a system already bursting at the seams with Covid-19 patients.

So, I will be extra careful when I drive to Lee Metcalf, Bass Creek, or other good birding spots. But I will drive to those places when I want to see birds other than the ones that frequent my yard and surrounding woods. I often see familiar BAS faces when I bird in those spots. I hope to see you from a safe distance (hmmm.... that’s what I say about Mountain Lions).

Be safe, everyone!

Why do Birds Wipe Their Bills?

By Micki Long

Most birders have seen a bird wiping its bill back and forth along a branch or fence post. The explanation that comes most readily to mind (at least to my mind) is that the bird is cleaning its bill. And researchers have confirmed this explanation for some bill-wiping. Cleaning happens most often when birds have had a messy meal. I have three suet feeders in my yard, so I see this behavior fairly often, especially in Clark’s Nutcrackers. This fall, I’ve had many Steller’s Jays who enjoy the suet, and I’ve seen them wipe it off their bills.

But I’ve also seen birds who don’t appear to have anything on their bills wiping them back and forth on a branch. For some of these cases, a little knowledge of bird anatomy is helpful. An article published last year on the National Audubon website says, “Like fingernails or hair, the outer portion of a bird’s beak is made of the protein keratin and grows nonstop”

<https://www.audubon.org/news/heres-why-birds->

[rub-their-beaks-stuff](#). Wiping their bills helps them maintain the proper shape for eating. The article also suggests that birds may hone their bills into different shapes appropriate for the foods they eat in different seasons!



Courtesy Micki Long

Steller's Jay.

An experiment described in the Audubon article adds a third possible reason for birds to wipe their bills. They may be leaving “preen oil” on branches or other surfaces to attract a mate. This courtship function is very different than the social function posited by an older theory, one claiming that birds wipe their bills in an attempt to displace another bird. The article dismisses this theory, much to the chagrin of some who posted in the comment section following the article. Interesting and fun reading!

The bill-wiping article is just one example of the engaging pieces I’ve read on the National Audubon and Montana Audubon sites. But, for me at least, it’s easy to let months go by without looking at them. So I would like to invite a couple of members to join me on a committee to periodically visit these two sites and recommend articles to our fellow BAS members, via our Facebook page, website, or newsletter. This is an easy way to contribute to our community during what could be a challenging winter. If you want to join me on this small committee, please email me at mickilong@gmail.com

Nighthawk Journeys

By Kate Stone

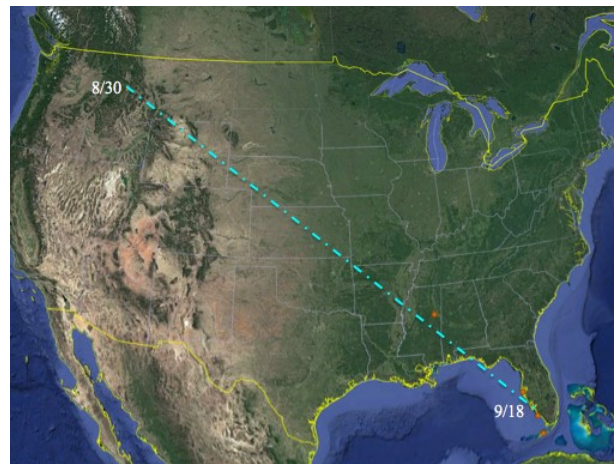
Sometimes it’s difficult to predict how important places in our valley might be, or how they might connect us to the larger world. Earlier this summer, I expanded some of my Common Nighthawk research from the MPG Ranch near Florence to a special property east of Hamilton. The Weber

Ranch is owned by Brien and Gayle Weber, and was one of the first properties conserved primarily for wildlife values under Ravalli County's Open Lands Bond Program. It is protected in perpetuity by a conservation easement held by the Bitter Root Land Trust, with the support of our county dollars. It has extensive sagebrush foothills interspersed with shrubby draws and conifer woodlands. At first one might think its wildlife values are mostly geared towards ungulates like elk. But we knew from Brien's observations that the property also hosts large numbers of Common Nighthawks. Nighthawks are a designated Species of Concern in Montana, and like many insectivores, may be experiencing population declines. We don't understand why or where in their life cycle problems might be happening. Many people locally report a decline in one of the classic sounds of summer: nighthawks "peenting" in the air from approximately Memorial Day to Labor Day. I've been working on nighthawk research on the MPG Ranch for several years, documenting mostly nesting and roosting sites and some local movement during the breeding season. Last year we started using small nanotags to help track their movements outside of the valley. These tags rely on a communal network of receiving stations all over North America called the Motus Wildlife Tracking System. We have a number of stations regionally, so we can detect local movements and when critters arrive and depart. This year I was able to deploy 16 tags on local nighthawks, including one on a male nighthawk at the Weber Ranch.



Courtesy Kate Stone
Putting the leg band on Nighthawk #188 prior to release.

We know many nighthawks overwinter in South America. But what route do they take to get there? We presumed they'd make their way south from the Bitterroot, and perhaps travel through Mexico and Central America. To our surprise, we got four "hits" of Common Nighthawks tags on their way south: three on receivers in Florida, and one on a receiver in Mississippi. From signals detected at a receiving station at The Teller Wildlife Refuge in Corvallis, we know the Weber Ranch nighthawk left the Bitterroot on 8/30. Though we don't know the exact route taken, by 9/18 he had flown over 2,000 miles, and at least 100 miles a day, to be detected at Rookery Bay south of Naples, Florida. We had no idea they might take such an eastern route, and one that was fraught with hurricanes this year. Incredibly enough though, this distance may still be less than half of the migratory journey he undertakes twice a year. We hope to detect him again during the breeding season of 2021. Nighthawks show high fidelity to nest sites, though it is incredible that nighthawk populations make such long-distance journeys, facing challenges the entire time, and still exist.



Courtesy Kate Stone
The wings of nighthawk #188 that carried it thousands of miles to Florida!

Spotlights on the lives of individual birds help remind us of the wonderful and amazing things around us all of the time. Who would believe that what we do here in the Bitterroot Valley might be connected to spots in Florida or South America? I'm sure no one involved in the conservation of the Weber Ranch anticipated that the property might provide the context for such an interesting story. But it is a good reminder that much of the habitat used by birds throughout the valley exists on private lands. Thanks to the Webers for conserving the property, and thanks to the many other private property owners doing well by the wildlife we all enjoy.

**Remarkable Birds of the World #3:
Scaly-bellied Ground Warbler (*Tesia cyaniventer*)**

By Skip Horner



Courtesy Skip Horner

Field guide plate drawing of the Scaly-bellied Ground Warbler.

This bland but restless little 3.5 inch olive-green and grey bird has one of the most energetic migrations of any bird. In Summer she lives at 5000' in the undergrowth of the temperate forests in the Siwalik Hills of central and eastern Nepal. She bobs underneath decaying logs and wet ferns looking for a juicy meal, always near water. When disturbed she'll bounce back and forth sideways on a low perch (cute!), giving away her hiding place. Her distinctive song is a bright cheerful descending whistle followed by an explosion of tuneless notes, audible at some distance. As the seasons change, she heads

Calendar of Events

- 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.

for the lowlands. With almost no tail, and stubby wings that provide only a short, weak flight, she hops on long strong legs almost 5000' down the mountainside, up and over the intervening hills, across roads and trails, past villages, covering up to 50 miles to the hot and humid rain-forests of the Terai at 200' altitude. In spring, she sets off again, hopping 5000' and many miles back up to the temperate forest. Residents of Nepal are famous for covering great distances and much altitude on strong legs, and the Scaly-bellied Ground Warbler follows in that spirited tradition.

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 the Bitterroot Audubon Society at 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>

What's the story, Story?

By Jim Story

Question: *How can small birds, like the House Wren, sing so loudly?*

Answer: The answer lies in the songbird's vocal anatomy. Unlike we humans who create sound from the larynx at the top of our windpipe, a bird's song comes from deep within its body. Birds produce song in a structure called the syrinx, located at the bottom of the windpipe where the bronchial

tubes diverge to the lungs. The syrinx is surrounded by an air sac, and the combination works like a resonating chamber to maintain and amplify sound. Almost 100 percent of the air that passes through the syrinx is used to produce songs. In contrast, we use about 2 percent of the air that passes through the larynx to make sound. Also, even though it may sound like continuous singing, the syrinx allows birds to actually take miniature breaths between

each syllable of the song. The rapid replacement of air between each syllable maintains a constant pressure between the air in the lungs and the outside air, which explains why the song sounds like it is uninterrupted. (CBC, Bird Notes)

Local birding expert Jim Story answers your questions about birds and their habits. Jim welcomes your questions at jstory4689@gmail.com.

Safe Hugging During the Pandemic—Stay Safe Everyone



News and Notes

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.

**Bitterroot Audubon is on Facebook and
Instagram**

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

Bird Shots



Yellowlegs species, Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge.

Courtesy Larry Dewey

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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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Send this application with \$15 to:



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