

Bitterroot AUDUBON



JANUARY 2021

NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 35, NO. 5

Find the Zoom meeting link following the January program article or an upcoming email for the January Zoom meeting invite

Grassland Birds and Saving Their Habitat

By Kay Fulton

Birds are excellent indicators of ecosystem health. Therefore, it is of great concern that four species of grassland songbirds have declined by over 75% since the 1960s. These ‘canaries of the prairies’ indicate that habitat loss and degradation are threatening North America’s largest terrestrial ecosystem.

-Kevin Ellison, Grasslands Ecologist,
Northern Great Plains

environment that will sustain these birds and allow them to thrive. Kevin has more than 25 years of experience conducting research in avian ecology. Originally from “Tallgrass Country” in Illinois, Kevin developed an interest in grassland birds and eventually studied the relationships between grassland birds and grazing management in Montana, the Dakotas, and Saskatchewan. He began working for WWF in 2013. He works with their “Sustainable Ranching Initiative” (SRI), assessing avian data, doing bird surveys, banding birds, and tracking their habits and migration, as well as working with over 50 ranchers in the region.



On Monday, January 18, 2021, Kevin Ellison will present what promises to be a fascinating program on the alarming decline of grassland birds. He will explain what the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is doing to preserve and restore grasslands in the Northern Great Plains (NGP) and thus to create an



Courtesy Kevin Ellison

Chestnut-Collared Longspur.

The Northern Great Plains (NGP) span 180 million acres across five U.S. states and two Canadian provinces. WWF has prioritized this region because of its intact habitats and biodiversity. As with grasslands globally, the region’s grasslands are threatened primarily by conversion to annual row crops. WWF’s geographic focus in the US portion of the NGP is 35 priority counties (61 million acres) comprising the areas of highest species diversity and

the most intact grasslands. 2021 marks the 10th anniversary of WWF's Sustainable Ranching Initiative (SRI), a program that focuses on working with ranchers and private landowners in the NGP to conserve intact grasslands. Because more than 70% of remaining grasslands occur on private land, the SRI strategic plan centers on protecting, sustainably managing, and restoring native grasslands. So far, the SRI's emphasis has been on *rancher engagement* through **grassland bird surveys**, capacity-building efforts, conservation award programs, and science communications like the Plowprint Report.



*Courtesy Emily Vandebosch
Photo of January's presenter, Kevin Ellison.*

To learn more, join Bitterroot Audubon on January 18th at 7:00 P.M. via ZOOM. See below for the information/invitation from Micki Long, BAS President. The Public is invited. If you need more information, contact Kay Fulton at 406-360-8664 or kavinmt@cybernet1.com

HAPPY NEW YEAR!!

Note that there is no passcode for the Zoom meeting. If you are on your computer, just click on the link following "Click Link to Join Zoom Meeting." You should not have to use the Meeting ID. If you are calling in, try the Tacoma number first. People calling in will need to use the Meeting ID. Members will also receive this invite via email.

Micki Long is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting:

Topic: BAS Program Jan 2021

Time: Jan 18, 2021 07:00 PM Mountain Time (US and Canada)

Click Link to Join Zoom Meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84769296903>

Meeting ID: 847 6929 6903

One tap mobile:

+12532158782, 84769296903# US (Tacoma)

+13462487799, 84769296903# US (Houston)

Dial by your location:

+1 253 215 8782 US (Tacoma)

+1 346 248 7799 US (Houston)

+1 669 900 9128 US (San Jose)

+1 301 715 8592 US (Washington D.C)

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+1 646 558 8656 US (New York)

Meeting ID: 847 6929 6903

Find your local number:

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Letter from the President

By Micki Long, BAS President

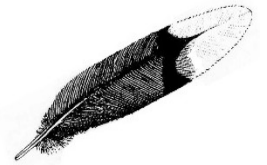
Happy New Year, everyone!

I hope you enjoyed the holiday season, even if some traditions had to be

abandoned, at least for this year. I did participate in the Stevensville Christmas Bird Count, which is always fun. I birded with one other person but in two cars—so there was a great deal of stopping to point out the rough-legged hawk on a wheel line or compare notes about how many house sparrows were in the bushes by a house with multiple feeders.

I love this time of year. The Clark's Nutcrackers have come back to my feeders in large numbers, and the Great Horned Owls have intensified their hooting, as it's time to find good nesting sites. The owls that live near me have had great success finding and consuming voles, judging by the enormous owl pellet I found and dissected last week. I hope that means they will again nest in the woods around me, as they did last year, when I watched a fuzzy little owlet transform into a beautiful, fearsome (at least to voles) adult—and you can be sure she spotted me far more often than I spotted her! I am so thankful for such experiences.

In an earlier Letter from the President, I wrote about the legal victory in the fight to save the century-old Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). Despite the judge ruling that the Trump Administration's



interpretation of the Act, which eliminates penalties from the incidental taking (as opposed to intentional taking) of birds by industry, the Administration is, in the words of National Audubon, “racing to finalize a process to weaken the same protection through a regulation change”

(<https://www.audubon.org/news/migratory-bird-treaty-act>). Let your elected official know that you support the Migratory Bird Protection Act, which reverses changes to the MBTA. Use the link in the cited article above to access a form letter through which you can contact your legislators, or, better yet, call or email with a similar message of your own; individual input is more effective than a form letter.

National Audubon also has an article on the clash between two conservation goals: the recovery of the still-endangered California Condor and support for clean energy, specifically wind farms. The article discusses the “uncomfortable truth” that conservation goals are not always compatible with one another:

<https://www.audubon.org/news/government-proposes-first-take-permit-condor-deaths-wind-farm>. Such conflicts lead conservation-minded individuals and groups to struggle with their priorities.

The two articles referenced above, on condors v. wind power and on the MBTA, are disturbing, but I found two other articles, one on the National Audubon site and one on the Montana Audubon site, that offer suggestions you might find particularly helpful during this pandemic. The focus of National Audubon’s article, “Seven Reading Recommendations from Audubon Editors;” is evident from the title. I would like to add one book I’ve enjoyed lately: *The Wonder of Birds*, by Jim Robbins. Not only is the book full of interesting information, but the author is based in Montana, and you will recognize some of the places and names he mentions.

During this time for socially-distanced activities, some are looking for new places to bird. An article on Montana Audubon’s site offers birding hotspots across the state:

<https://www.audubon.org/news/seven-reading-recommendations-audubon-editors> The American Bird Association’s suggests that people bird close to home during the pandemic, but “close to home” can be interpreted in various ways. For example, I

skipped a monsoon birding trip to SE Arizona but would drive for a day or so to spots around Montana.

Happy reading and happy birding! I hope to see you at the Zoom program on January 18th.

Local Chapter Member Renewal

By Heather Miller

BAS membership renewal for 2021 is due by January 31st. It is only \$15. Renew online through the BAS website to support Bitterroot Audubon: <http://www.bitterrootaudubon.org/membership> and click on the "Join Now" button to pay with credit card. You can also renew through mail by sending your name, address, email, and check (made out to the Bitterroot Audubon Society) to:

Bitterroot Audubon Supporting Member
P.O. Box 326, Hamilton, MT 59840

Harlan’s Hawks in the Bitterroot

By Dave Lockman

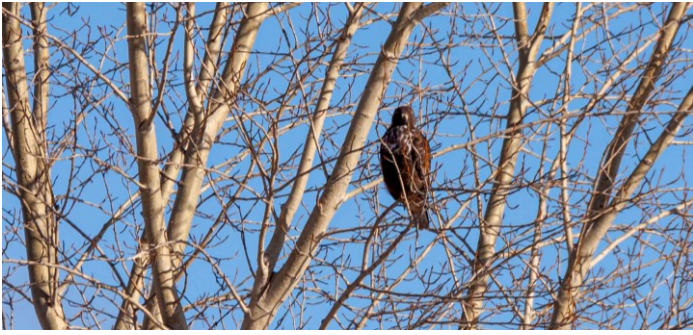


Courtesy Bob Danley

Intermediate morph Harlan's hawk, Lee Metcalf NWR.

Winter is a great time for raptor watching in the Bitterroot. There are more species and greater numbers of raptors here than during the summer, and the leaves on the cottonwoods they often perch in are gone, allowing for better viewing. But along with the greater numbers and species diversity present in the winter comes a new complication: increased numbers of dark Buteos, which can be difficult for anyone to identify correctly.

One uncommon but regular winter visitor to the Bitterroot is the Harlan’s hawk. These birds used to be classified as a separate species, but are now classified as the Harlan’s subspecies of Red-tailed Hawk (RTHA). Harlan’s breed in Alaska and the Yukon, and winter mostly in the southern Great Plains, but small numbers winter in many open valleys across the western U.S. We found three on the 2020 Stevensville CBC.



Courtesy Bob Danley

Intermediate morph Harlan's hawk, Lee Metcalf NWR.

Most Harlan's hawks that winter in our area are the intermediate morph or color phase. These birds are a dark brownish-black all over, but typically have some conspicuous white vertical streaking in the breast. Other characteristics to look for are distinct areas of white in the face, especially between the eye and the base of the bill but also narrow white rings around the eyes, white streaks in the forehead, and a white throat often streaked with black. The front half of the underwings is dark, which obscures the patagial bars on the front of the wing that are characteristic of RTHA in flight. The western subspecies RTHAs that are common here usually have a completely dark brown face and throat, without the white areas typical of Harlan's. A confirming trait is the tail color, if you can get a look at it. Harlan's usually has a dirty white to grayish tail color on top, sometimes with some dark banding and sometimes with a minor amount of rufous. But a hawk with a solid rufous tail on top is a "normal" RTHA, not a Harlan's, regardless of body color. Beware juvenile RTHAs, which have a grayish-brown tail.



Courtesy Bob Danley

Intermediate morph Harlan's hawk, Lee Metcalf NWR.

Of course, other dark Buteos can also be found here. Intermediate (aka rufous) morph western RTHAs are uncommon but regular here summer and winter. They have a dark head and throat and rufous tail like "normal" RTHAs, but the breast and belly are a

beautiful dark rufous-brown color that often obscures the belly band. The upperparts are dark brown, but in poor light these birds can look black. True dark morph western RTHAs are pretty unusual here in my experience. They're blackish-brown to black all over, but retain the rufous tail. And dark morph rough-legged hawks are also uncommon winter visitors. They're usually blackish all over, but have a variably banded black and white tail.

These dark Buteos are challenging, and often take some time to make the proper ID. You often need to get good views from the front, back and in flight to really be sure of what you're looking at. There are some dark Buteos that I just can't ID for sure. But the more I look at them, the easier they become. Look for white in the face, throat and tail, and good luck!

Calendar of Events

- Nov-Apr:** Project Feeder Watch, see Micki Long's [November](#) "Letter from the President" for more details.
- Jan 18:** ZOOM Audubon Meeting/Program, details to be announced, 7PM, Zoom Board Mtg. 5PM.
- Jan 31:** Chapter-only membership renewal due, \$15.
- Feb 15:** ZOOM Audubon Meeting/Program, details to be announced, 7PM, Zoom Board Mtg. 5PM.
- Mar 15:** ZOOM Audubon Meeting/Program, details to be announced, 7PM, Zoom Board Mtg. 5PM.
- Apr 19:** ZOOM Audubon Meeting/Program, details to be announced, 7PM, Zoom Board Mtg. 5PM.
- May 17:** ZOOM Audubon Meeting/Program, details to be announced, 7PM, Zoom Board Mtg. 5PM.

Feathered Dinosaurs

By Judy Hoy

A new species of feathered dinosaur was reported as discovered by a team of paleontologists in Liaoning, China, published May, 2017 in *Nature Communications*, a peer-reviewed British journal. The skeleton of the three-foot long dinosaur was well preserved, showing asymmetrical feathers, feathers that are wider on one side than on the other. The feathered dinosaur looked much like a chicken, but with short jaws containing teeth rather than an upper and lower bill and a long bony tail. Also, it had claws on the end of some finger bones on its wings. Its long bony tail was covered in feathers that resembled a modern raptor's tail feathers.

Jianianhualong tengi, the new Troodontid or bird-like dinosaur lived 125 million years ago, and is considered one of the earliest known bird ancestors, because of its asymmetrical feathers. It is unknown whether it could fly, even for short distances. The authors of the study say, "Asymmetrical feathers have been associated with flight capability, but are also found in species that do not fly, and their appearance was a major event in feather evolution." Scientists can also now often determine dinosaur feather color by the shape of the melanosomes that remain in the fossil feathers, so artists show *Jianianhualong tengi* body feathers to be a rust color with black and grey-banded tail feathers.

Remarkable Birds of the World #5:

Southern Carmine Bee-eater (*Merops nubicoides*)

By Skip Horner



Courtesy Skip Horner

Photo of field guide plate drawing of the Southern Carmine Bee-eater (center) from Newman's 'Birds of Southern Africa.'

Many years ago I lived in a small house in Livingstone, Zambia, near the edge of Victoria Falls, where I managed the first season of whitewater rafting on the Zambezi River. We ran multiple one-day trips through the first ten rapids, deep in the basalt canyon, and several seven-day trips from the foot of the falls to the head of Lake Kariba, 50 rapids and 100 miles downstream. Just across the river was the new African country of Zimbabwe, recently created from the remains of white-ruled Rhodesia following their civil war.

One of our seven-day trips was notable for two racist Rhodesian guys who came along, men who hadn't gotten over losing the war, and their country. Their stories made us all queasy for the racist rants they tried unsuccessfully to camouflage with politically correct rhetoric. This was particularly hard to take with our support crew of local Africans

along, some of whom had also fought the war, and won, but were still looked down upon by the opposition. These stout young men remained stoic, however, as Africans largely do in the face of daily adversity.

Lower down where the river widens, we encountered a colony of Southern Carmine Bee-Eaters. These rapturous 14" birds flashed their brilliant crimson throats and backs, their turquoise crowns, rumps and lower bellies, and their long carmine tail streamers as they wheeled powerfully about snatching insects out of the air. They uttered a sweet hollow call, "scheeo, scheeo, scheeo, schrrrip-schrrip," that seemed to emanate from nowhere and from everywhere, more echo than song. Not an uncommon bird, it migrates throughout Eastern and Southern Africa, ranging from South Africa all the way north to Ethiopia and west across the Sahel to Senegal. It frequently hawks insect from a perch, sometimes even from the backs of larger animals, including the Ground Hornbill. It's attracted to range fires for the insects they flush. Highly gregarious, this particular flock numbered close to a hundred. We pulled into an eddy to drink in the dramatic midday spectacle. They had bored dozens of tunnels in a twenty-foot-high sandbank next to the river, a colony site they would use for several years before moving on. Each hole would be up to eight feet deep and house a nesting pair raising a brood.

Two local village men clad only in loincloths sat back in the shade of an acacia. They had placed twig snares in front of every Bee-eater hole. They would catch them, and eat them.

The Rhodesians were livid. They jumped out of the boats and made a show of destroying every snare, snapping them into bits and throwing the remains into the river, all the while angrily berating the local guys in Shona, their own language. The locals were stunned, speechless. But they simply walked away, hungry.

The Carmine Bee-eaters would live a bit longer and perhaps their broods would fledge successfully, but the locals were likely to return at some point with new traps. Such is life, and death, in the bush. So too is it difficult to judge people by a single parameter. The racist Rhodesians who cared deeply about wildlife. The hungry locals, reliant on wild meat, who cared only where their next meal came from.

Field Notes

December 28, 2020 A friend and I visited Crescent Lake in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in eastern Arizona, southeast of Show Low. It was a cold and very windy day with 30-40 mph wind gusts. On the open water there was a huge flotilla of birds, probably mostly coots, amassed in the water. When we arrived there were three juvenile Bald Eagles sitting on some patches of ice. We weren't close enough for me to get good pictures with my iPhone. Soon a couple of the eagles began to fly low over the ducks and coots, like they were dive-bombing them. Later, an adult Bald Eagle and two more juveniles joined in this aerial display. It was fascinating to watch! We didn't see any of the eagles catch a bird during the 45-60 minutes we watched them. After that time, it was clear the eagles were expending a lot of energy for naught, and three of them flew away. The others returned to sitting on the ice or the shore.

I did not know that eagles hunted waterfowl until I looked this up. I watched some videos of this behavior that were successful. The eagle drowns the duck or other water bird by holding its head under water. The eagle then flies away, carrying the bird like any other prey. A good day for learning something new firsthand about eagles!

~Christine Coffin

January Thoughts or The Nature of Nature The moon lit up my yard that morning when I went out with the dogs at 6:30. Recently fallen snow in the surrounding Sapphire foothills reflected the full moon's light. I could see almost as well as during the day. The horses in the pasture watched us, as I'm sure they do each morning, though we usually can't see them. The trees and shrubs glowed in the bluish predawn. To the south, in the woods, the Great Horned Owls called to each other: the low, slow call of the male, the higher, faster response of the female, the duet beautifully haunting in the strange yet natural light that slowly became more blue.

Back inside, drinking coffee and looking out the picture window to the west, I watched the mountains across the valley, St. Mary's Peak most prominent, become more distinct from the low clouds hanging on their ridges. One of the dogs, Tess, sat on a chair across from me and watched for movement in the yard. She too loves to watch Clark's Nutcrackers sail down from the trees and

chickadees and nuthatches fly back and forth from shrubs to feeders. The undulating flight of birds in the distance, approaching the yard, marks them as woodpeckers, first a Downy and then a Hairy. The raucous calls of magpies, Steller's Jays, and Clark's Nutcrackers don't disturb the peace and joy I feel but add color and flavor to it.



Courtesy Micki Long

Great Horned Owl.

That morning, I couldn't help but argue with Tennyson, specifically with one of his most famous lines of poetry. Yes, Nature is "red in tooth and claw." Tess often finds—and eats-- bits of deer, mostly legs but once what seemed to be a trachea, evidence of lion kills in the woods across the pasture, evidence that nature is indeed bloody. Nature is also competition for survival: Clark's Nutcrackers fighting amongst themselves and with flickers, magpies, Hairy Woodpeckers, and Steller's Jays for the suet I leave them. She is angry, as anyone who has been chided by a red squirrel or chickadee for crossing some unseen perimeter is well aware.

But Nature is so much more than violence and aggression. She is joyful: raptors riding the thermals, circling and circling; young fawns romping in the yard like puppies. She is curious: a young Red-tailed Hawk flying low, right above us as we walk through a meadow surrounded by woods. Nature is brave: the Evening Grosbeak who landed on the rim of my pitcher as I neared the feeders, looked me in the eye, and jumped, feet-first, into the pitcher to gorge on black oil sunflower seeds. And she is nurturing: it won't be long before those Great Horned Owls have eggs to protect. They will take great care to protect their young, as will the coyotes, deer, and other wildlife passing through the yard and the foxes, magpies, and lions living in the woods.

And, Lord Tennyson, Nature is serene; she is peaceful: a pair of fawns resting under the tree, near the sleeping wild turkeys; a huge mama bear, lounging in the middle of the yard, her cubs nearby. (Yes, I scare them away, hoping they find a quiet and safe spot farther from my human home). Along with the wildlife, I am a creature of Nature, like all human beings but especially those who love exploring the woods and mountains, who love sitting on the banks of a creek and listening to the water playing over and around rocks, and who also stand outside, maybe with their dogs and horses, as the full moon bathes them in magic and owls serenade each other. ~Micki Long

What's the story, Story?

By Jim Story

Question: What is anting?

Answer: Anting is the process whereby birds pick up an ant and rub it on their feathers. Also, some

birds will lay on an ant nest with wings spread, allowing the ants to swarm through their feathers. More than 200 species of birds, mostly songbirds, have been observed anting. The purpose of anting is not well understood. The primary assumption is that the birds use ant secretions, primarily formic acid, as an insecticide or miticide to remove ectoparasites such as biting lice or mites. It is possible that the ant secretions also serve as a fungicide or bactericide. Some scientists suggest that the ant secretions may help in feather maintenance. Others suggest that anting is merely a form of self-stimulation. The ant species used in anting are generally members of two subspecies that don't sting and produce formic acid as a defensive weapon.

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

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



*Courtesy Robin Dewey
Downy Woodpecker, Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge.*

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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.

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