

Bitterroot AUDUBON



OCTOBER 2021

NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 36, NO. 2



Courtesy Ivan Phillipsen

Ivan Phillipsen and Friend

Mate Choice and Sexual Selection

By Micki Long

Back in the spring, I stumbled upon a podcast called *The Science of Birds*, created and hosted by Ivan Phillipsen. I was hooked after the first episode I listened to, which was on "Vision in Birds." Since then, I have listened to most of the 34 episodes, including "eBird and Citizen Science," "New World Warblers," and "Cats vs. Birds." As I write this, the most recent episode is on wetlands, a key habitat for many birds and other animals.

For our October presentation, Ivan will talk about a fascinating, complex aspect of the biology of birds: mate choice and sexual selection. Sexual selection is a special case of natural selection, when females and males choose their partners, not at random, but based on specific traits. Such traits include plumage color, song, and behavior. Sexual selection of mates has resulted in some spectacular features in birds. Many of the traits we love most about birds are consequences of sexual selection.

From the podcast website:

Ivan has loved animals and nature his whole life. His first obsession was with amphibians and reptiles. This interest led him to graduate school, where he studied amphibians. After earning a

Master's degree in Biology and a PhD in Zoology, he did postdoctoral research on aquatic insects. Ivan likes creepy, crawly things.

Along the way, his love of nature expanded to include plants, fungi, and all animals, including

birds. Birds have become Ivan's greatest passion. He's an avid birder and co-owns a birding ecotour company called Wild Latitudes.

If you want to check out the podcast before Ivan's presentation, you'll find the podcast episodes here: <https://www.scienceofbirds.com/podcast-episodes>

You are invited to a Zoom meeting.

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

Register in advance for this meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/join/zoom/register/tZcrduCsqTguEtIs76oPdGN4NrzNcyIcO6bG>

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.

Letter from the President

By Micki Long, BAS President

I have spent considerable time in the last few months reading, thinking, and admiring old-growth trees and stands, which are a critical backbone of forest habitats. In addition to providing habitat for raptors, woodpeckers, songbirds, bats, and small mammals, old-growth and large trees store massive amounts of carbon. For a good overview of carbon storage by large trees, see <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/ffgc.2020.594274/full>. There are many articles on the internet about the value of old-growth forests. However, I recently heard another benefit of these old giants in a talk given by Dr. Jerry Franklin, Professor Emeritus in the School of Environmental and Forest Sciences at the University of



Washington. Dr. Franklin pointed out that old-growth trees have very deep root systems that bring moisture and nutrients to the surface, which helps invertebrates, small mammals, and forest habitat as a whole. My notes are incomplete on this brief aspect of his talk, but I plan to learn more by reading his most recent book *Ecological Forest Management*. Like so many, I love to walk among giant old trees. I love learning that their magic works not just for my heart and soul but for many components of forest ecosystems. My appreciation for old-growth trees continues to grow!



Courtesy Micki Long

Looking up through the branches of an old-growth Ponderosa Pine.

Moving from trees to birds, as most of you know, the Trump Administration changed the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), limiting its scope. Under the Trump Administration rule, companies cannot be fined for incidental take, “the unintentional but predictable killing of birds, often at industrial sites” (<https://www.audubon.org/news/trump-birds-drop-dead>). The move was opposed by conservation groups, the general public, scientists, tribal governments, and international treaty partners. As the same Audubon article cited above states, the weakened MBTA would allow “companies and individuals to kill migratory birds as long as they didn’t mean to.” Many feared that companies would no longer take reasonable precautions to avoid killing birds.

Temporarily, at least, migratory birds will soon regain the stronger protection of the pre-Trump MBTA. On September 30th, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) made public a rule revoking those limitations of the MBTA. On October 4th, the rule was published in the *Federal Register*; the revocation will be effective 60 days from that publication. The restoration of powers

under the century-old MBTA is great news, but our commitment and diligence is still required. The Service published, also in the *Federal Register* on September 30th, an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPR) with “the intent to solicit public comments and information to help develop proposed regulations to authorize the incidental take of migratory birds”

(<https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-department-ensures-migratory-bird-treaty-act-works-birds-and-people>). The October 4th ANPR publication will open a 60-day comment period. It will be very important for us to contribute comments about a permitting system for the incidental take of birds. For more information (and maybe a clearer explanation), see the DOI article: <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-department-ensures-migratory-bird-treaty-act-works-birds-and-people>. Sorry for all the acronyms!

I’m looking forward to seeing you all on my computer screen for our October Zoom meeting!

Weeding and Watering for Our Pollinators’ Wildflowers

By Becky Peters

The population of our pollinators is declining. Planting Montana native wildflowers for our pollinators is a way to protect them while enhancing the health of our ecosystem.

And you can help us do that!

Bitterroot Audubon and Bitter Root Water Forum would greatly appreciate your help on **TUESDAY OCTOBER 12** and/or **TUESDAY, OCTOBER 26**.

First step: Our purpose is to weed and water the area of the Skalkaho Bend bench and the lower swale. We have plantings there that need to be taken care of this fall. We need to weed around them and get the soil ready for seeding native wildflowers this winter.

When: We’ll start at **10:00 both days and go till 4:00**, but folks can leave when they need to. We’ll gather and give out instructions, and make sure the release forms are signed. Then we’ll divide up into assigned areas and try to get as much done as we can.

What you need to bring: warm clothes for the weather, sturdy shoes, long pants and long sleeve shirt, knees pads if you’d like, leather gloves for pulling the thistle, etc., water and lunch. Some of us

will need pliers, shovels, and trowels so if you'd like to bring those make sure they are labeled. Bring your face mask to wear when near others. Black garbage bags for gathering the weeds will be supplied for you.

If you would like to help Bitterroot Audubon and Bitter Root Water Forum with weeding and watering at the Skalkaho Bend please contact Ellie at bswc.member@brwaterforum.org

Or Becky Peters at rpeters@montana.com with subject line: Skalkaho weeding.

We'll send you a Release Form and a Covid-19 Guidelines Form after you sign up to volunteer.

This project could not succeed without you. In a year and a half just imagine - the beautiful wildflowers will be blooming and the pollinators will be flying all over. The pollinators thank you and Bitterroot Audubon thanks you.

Then . . . wait for it . . . the Second Step: We scatter the wildflower seeds this winter!! So, stay tuned for another request where we get the seeds scattered around the plants on the bench and in the swale.

Kids' Corner: Cleaning Birdhouses

By Ada Bernauer (age 10) and Annie Bernauer

In May, our Girl Scout Troop built a bunch of birdhouses and hung them in the Victor Community Garden. We observed them throughout the summer and at the end of the summer opened them to peek inside. The birds made nests in all of them! The bluebird birdhouse pattern we used was from the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology's NestWatch website](#). The design allows us to open up one of the walls. That makes cleaning and observing a lot easier! Even though we hung them up late in the spring, we were excited to discover that they were all used.

Once we noticed that all the birdhouses were used, we read some articles about why you should clean out nests and how to do it. One of the reasons that you should clean out the nest is that if another bird comes to make a nest on top of the old one, the nest will be higher making it easier for predators to get. One other reason to clean out birdhouses is that the old nesting material may have parasites like mites in it. If a new bird moves in, the parasites could spread to the new birds.



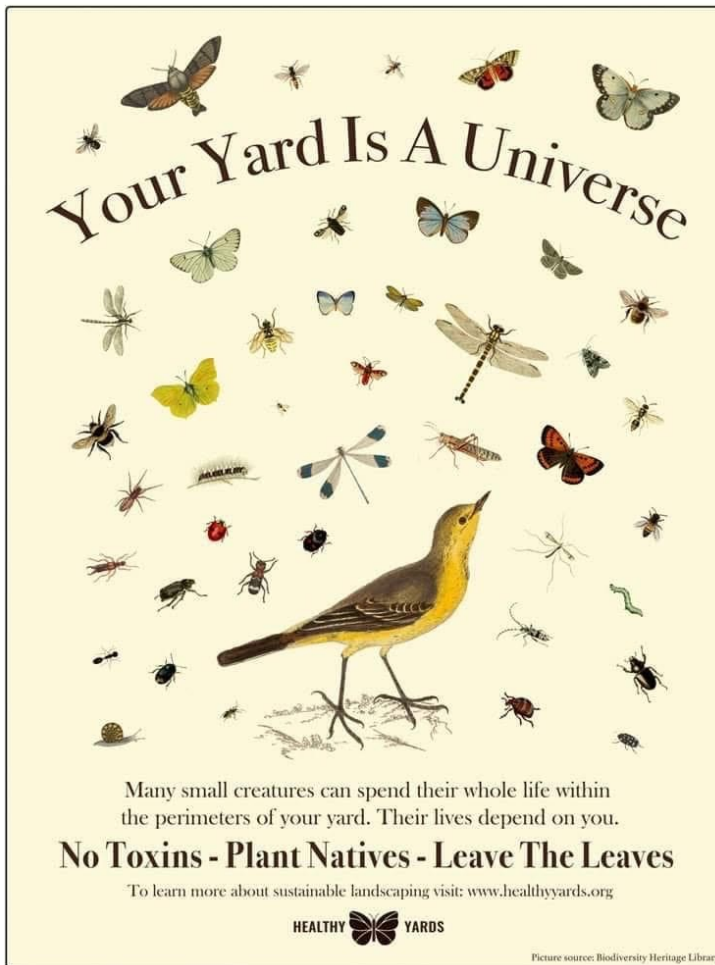
Courtesy Annie Bernauer

Ada Bernauer inspecting a nest removed from a birdhouse

The best time to clean out birdhouses is in the fall and winter. If you clean the nests out too early, the birds might still be in residence. If you clean them too late in the spring, new birds could already be building another nest on top of the old one. You should also do it when it's cold in case one of the birdhouses has a wasp nest in it like one of ours did. Wasps are not as active when it is cold making it safer and easier to clean out the wasp nest.

Since we knew there might be parasites and bird droppings in the nests, we put on gloves to protect our hands. We wondered what the nests were made of so we decided to dissect them after removing them. We used magnifying glasses for a closer look. We found a lot of different materials in the nests such as different types of grasses, brown twine, mud, and even a piece of packing tape! We also found lots of feathers, many of them looked like soft, white down feathers. Some of the feathers were shades of brown, gray or black and white. We used our book [Bird Feathers: A Guide to North American Species](#) and the book [A Field Guide to Western Birds' Nests](#) to see if we could figure out what kinds of birds built the nests in our birdhouses. It was so fascinating!

This was a really fun homeschool science project. My five-year-old brother said, "It was really cool!" Now the birdhouses at the Victor Community Garden are all cleaned out and ready for new birds in the spring. Since all the birdhouses were used, we are planning to make more this winter. If we get big enough lumber donated, we're going to make an American Kestrel birdhouse too since we see them around the Community Garden!



SAVE THE DATES: Local Christmas Bird Counts

John Ormiston, Hamilton CBC Compiler

The 35th Hamilton Christmas Bird Count will go live December 18. We really need to turn out in significant numbers to count all the birds in the Hamilton circle (154 square miles) in one day. We'll meet at The Teller at 7:30 A.M. to organize parties to cover the 6 segments of the 7-mile radius circle. Lunch at around noon at The Teller will feature Bill's secret recipe chili and Oreos and we'll reorganize to cover areas not counted in the AM. Please save the date and participate in this citizen science activity. I know you'll have a great time with birds of a feather.

The Stevensville CBC is likely to occur on New Year's Eve, meeting at the Stevensville Ranger Station. Dave Lockman organizes and compiles the data for the Stevensville CBC. There's another chance to test your winter endurance and winter birding skills on the Big Hole CBC, organized and compiled by Kate Stone, at a date to be announced during the first week in January, 2022.

Family Saves an Osprey

By Kathie Butts

This August our son, daughter, their spouses, and their children came for a family reunion. We have an established Osprey nest that the children enjoy walking to and saying good morning to the birds. As they walk they talk about the birds all the way. The kids have a newly considered respect for the family life in that nest. The amazing thing is that by August the baby Osprey chicks are nearly as big as their parents. They are well prepared for their migrations in one more month to Central and South America

One morning the kids were looking through the binoculars and saw that one of the birds was having a terrible time. They got Grandpa who realized that the troubled bird was one of the chicks and was tangled in baling twine, hanging from the nest by a talon and flapping its wings trying to regain footing into the nest. One of the parents, flew around the hanging bird and with a speed that was anything but gentle, slammed into the hanging chick in the air and sent it tumbling . . . into a huge thorny wild rose bush on the edge of the Big Ditch. Where it sat. It just sat still in the wild rose bush. We went back that afternoon; the chick was still sitting in the same spot in that thorny wild rose bush.

They had seen the ball of baling twine that was holding that bird tight in the wild rose. They knew it might be impossible to get close to the fledgling, plus they worried about the parent's response and so, they duct taped various utensils to the ends of long PVC pipes. The plan was working well, they cut away thread after thread of the baling twine, but then after the last cut the fledgling fell in the Big Ditch! The bird tried to flap its wings and move toward the bank of the ditch but all day in one position with no food or water proved to be too much. The fledgling quit flapping and just seemed to be giving up and started to float towards deeper, faster water under the bridge Grandpa feared that fledgling would be lost very soon so Grandpa took matters in hand and jumped in after the bird, (remembering to throw his cell phone on the bank) and took off following the bird. He got that baby Osprey and held it while he made their way up the steep bank. Then the other dads started cutting more baling twine from that poor bird's legs and talons. The fledgling sat silent, didn't move, and didn't fuss. Neither parent flew around them or left their vantage spots, watching on the power poles overlooking the ditch.

AWESOME HIGHWAY CLEANUP

By Skip Horner

Our semi-annual highway cleanup will take place on Wednesday, October 13th, at 4PM.

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.

Questions? Call Skip at 369-5367

Once the fledgling was free of twine, it was placed on a post of a gate on the other side of the bridge. Grandpa and the dads left the bird with some frozen cod hoping to help it make it through the night. That was all that could be done at that point. The next morning the cod was in the same place and the fledgling was on the ground. While Grandpa was telling the bird that he had no way to help it up to the nest the bird just lifted off! It couldn't make it to the nest but did make it to the neighbor's roof. While it rested there, a parent Osprey flew by with a 12-inch trout in its talons. Trout must be a preferred fish over frozen cod. That baby Osprey saw the trout --- took off and made it to the nest! It left on schedule last week for Central and South America. A strong flying young Osprey that we hope to see again in the spring. We know the birds know who Grandpa is – they would fly around the house calling whenever he was outside. Both parents and both their young. They sat on the roof of the house across the street and watched him. Our Grands were calling their Grandpa – Ninja Grandpa after his epic lesson in how people and wild things should get along.

Let's Pick Up that Baling Twine!

By Becky Peters

Every year I hear about some osprey or animal tangled up in baling twine. The humans caused the problem so we can solve the problem. Apparently we can't go back to sisal twine like I played with on my uncle's farm. Many of those plants producing sisal are closed. So now we have a polypropylene twine because it is stronger and cheaper and the hay bale stays together better. However, it does not rot

as it sits there on the ground on in the ground. So, what do we do?

Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society has set up a recycling program for the baling twine in their area:

<https://yvaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Informational-8.5-x-14-Handout-6-6-19.pdf>



This person is holding an Osprey tangled up in baling twine.

“To truly reduce the amount of loose polypropylene baling twine in the environment, an effort is needed by everyone. Baling twine should be recycled for four important reasons:

- Baling twine is a polypropylene #5 PP plastic. It is a nonrenewable resource that can and should be recycled, same as #1 water and soda bottles and #2 milk jugs. #5 PP is recycled to make the outdoor pots and tubs that are commonly used by all of us. Other recycled products include food containers such as margarine, yogurt, and deli containers. It is also used for winter clothing insulation.
- Loose uncontained twine can cause injury, suffering and sometimes death by entanglement for birds (especially Ospreys), wildlife and livestock. Ospreys have an affinity for twine and incorporate it into their nests where the nestlings and adults can become entangled. Without human intervention, the birds most certainly would die. Canada Geese ingest twine and sometimes die. Livestock ingest twine. Deer and antelope are seen every year with masses of twine or net wrap on their antlers

Calendar of Events

- Oct 13:** Highway Clean-up, 4PM, see announcement in this newsletter.
- Oct 18:** **ZOOM** Audubon Meeting/Program. 7PM, Mate Choice and Sexual Selection.
- Nov 15:** **ZOOM** Audubon Meeting/Program. 7PM, Bitterroot Phenological Society
- Dec 18:** Hamilton Christmas Bird Count, Teller Wildlife Refuge, 7:30AM.

and horns making it difficult for them to see, eat or defend against predators. In 2018, two bull elk had their antlers entangled together and had to be euthanized by MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks officers.

- Twine dangling from Osprey nests on utility poles can cause costly power outages and can lead to wildfires.
- It is a nuisance for highway mowing and field equipment causing costly breakdowns.”

I have no idea if anyone in Ravalli County has a recycling program for baling twine, but wouldn't it be wonderful if we had one? I know that concerned people call the electric companies to come and take the twine out of Osprey nests but that is after a problem exists. How about a prevention program? As far as I am concerned we created this mess so we should create the solution. Any ideas? Is there a 4H Program maybe? What I do on my part now is I pick up the twine when I am walking or biking. We clean it up and then add it to our recycling bins. Feeble attempt, I know, but it's a start. What if we all do as much as we can? Please!

Around the Web

By Micki Long

The data collected through eBird and other citizen science programs can help experts track changes in bird populations. We are living in a perilous time for many birds and other species, as illustrated by the recent announcement that 22 species have become extinct. To learn more, see <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/ivory-billed-woodpecker-and-22-other-species-declared-extinct-180978785/>.

Deb Goslin drew my attention to a beautiful short video by Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The short is

about a migrating bird who is drawn to the city, with all its dangers, by bright lights.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNV0WUH7JYk>.

Did you know that under the previous Administration's rule, submissions to the Duck Stamp contest had to include hunting images in submitted work? Neither did I. While the rule still applies to this year's contest, hunting images will not be required in future contests. To learn more about the Duck Stamp, see <https://www.audubon.org/news/check-out-these-hilarious-entries-new-duck-stamp-contest>. Be sure to click on the Flickr gallery link to see contest entries.

A Memorable Encounter with an Ivory-Billed Woodpecker

By Judy Hoy

It was sad to hear that 23 species of animals, including the Ivory-billed Woodpecker were declared extinct and removed from the endangered species list. Based on current evidence, it is likely that the woodpeckers are not extinct. I was interested in the Ivory-billed Woodpecker beginning long before I was privileged to see one in the late 1970's. We were traveling through the Mark Twain National Forest in Missouri on our way home from a trip to Washington, DC. A large black and white woodpecker flew across the road in front of us from a tree on the left side of the road, continuing to fly in the open across a small meadow. It then spread its wings and flew up to land on the trunk of a large deciduous tree on the north side of the meadow. I saw the size of the bird and the ivory colored bill when it flew across the road in front of us. Then when it flew up to land I could clearly see its whole back and the top of its wings. The two white stripes on each side of the body and the wide white area on the top of the wings were very visible, so I knew it had to be an Ivory-billed Woodpecker. I didn't know at that time that the Ivory-billed Woodpecker was already thought to be extinct (no Internet then). We didn't have a camera along, so there was no way to prove I saw it. Since I didn't want anyone collecting it, I never told anyone about it until one was reported in Louisiana in 2004. Likely, if there weren't so many dead ones in specimen drawers, there might be more live ones in the wild. In 2005, I emailed an ornithologist who was looking for the woodpeckers and he said he had also seen one in the Mark Twain National Forest in the late 1970s, but

without a photo he didn't report it either. There are videos of what definitely looks like Ivory-billed Woodpecker taken recently by an ornithologist who continues to actively search for them. We can all hope the current declaration of their extinction is premature.

What's the story, Story?

By Jim Story

Question: *Is there a lot of variation in bird feet?*

Answer: Yes. Because birds lack forelimbs, their hindlimbs are highly evolved to fit their various lifestyles. Except for loons and grebes, most birds are digitigrade, meaning they walk on their digits or toes. The bones that would have been part of a "foot" have been incorporated into the leg. Most birds have four toes, while a few have only three and the Ostrich has two. The toes of birds are arranged in one of four patterns depending on their lifestyle. Most perching birds have three toes pointing forward and one pointing back. Most woodpeckers, Osprey, owls, cuckoos, and some swifts have two toes pointing forward and two pointing back. Many of the birds in this latter group can rotate one back digit to the side to enhance their grip. A third arrangement has three toes forward and one back, but two of the forward digits are fused for much of their length (kingfishers). Finally, some swifts have two toes pointed forward and two backward, but the two back toes can be rotated forward. All birds have a claw at the end of each toe. The claws of perching birds are curved while the claws of larger ground birds are straighter.

Most swimming birds and snow-walking birds like ptarmigan have webbing between their toes. The amount of webbing can range from full webbing between all four toes (pelicans, cormorants), full webbing between the three forward toes (ducks, geese, loons, etc.), partial webbing (grouse, some sandpipers), and toes with fleshy lobes (coots, grebes, phalaropes).

The wide variation in bird toes is a marvel of evolution and is certainly an important reason for birds' tremendous success.

(Source: Wikipedia: Bird feet and legs)

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

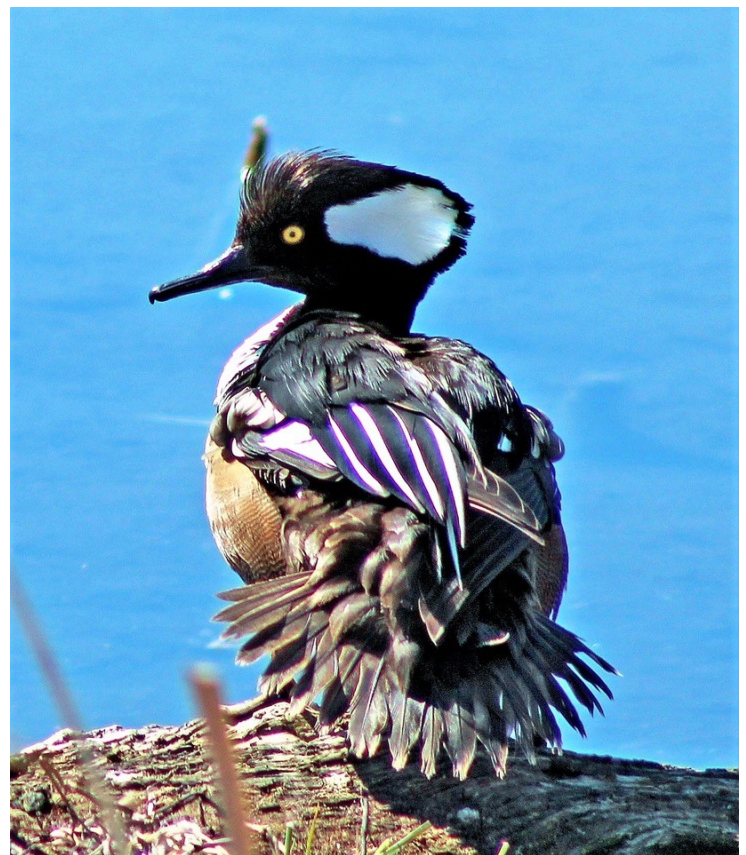
CANCELLED DUE TO COVID-19 UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

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



Hooded Merganser.

Courtesy Carol Babel

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Send this application with \$15 to:



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