



oice of the Meadowlark

Newsletter of the
Meadowlark Audubon Society
of the Big Horn Basin and Northwest Wyoming

Volume 15, Number 1

Autumn 2014

President's Letter



Dear Members,

I hope you've been enjoying our relatively cool summer! I don't know about you but it has been so wonderful not cowering in the heat. I feel like getting out into the

field and filling in the birding skills gaps I have. Going on recent field trips and birding with friends, you realize what you can improve upon and pick up new ideas to better your skills. Socially, I find a lot of value in building my network of fellow birders. The best place for that is on the ground, spending time birding with each other.

At the Nature Conservancy's Ten Sleep Nature Preserve, I improved my skills through tips that local birding expert CJ Grimes kindly shared. Using a smart phone app with bird calls is a fantastic way to conveniently repeat the calls that confuse us until they are a part of your own vocabulary and mental recognition. Also, being at the preserve reminds you of how important habitat types are. The preserve is a relic of the larger ponderosa pine forest type that once spread throughout the Bighorn Basin. Thus, we saw ponderosa pine and open forest associates including Pygmy Nuthatch, Western Wood-Pewee, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Williamson's

Sapsucker, and others. It is a unique habitat type in the Basin and offered many people a few new birds for their big year or their own personal life list. Find your own niche habitat and I bet you will be surprised at what you find!

As a member of Meadowlark Audubon Society, you are respected for your passion at what you do. You have good reason to take pride in your membership and the contributions we make as a Society. We give back much to our community as we accomplish our goal of conserving and educating the public about birds and their habitats.

One real way we can share our passion is by volunteering to lead field trips for the public. This past May, several Meadowlark members offered field trips for participants of the second annual Spring Into Yellowstone Wildlife and Birding Festival. Reading through some comments made by attendees, I learned that field trips were very popular and well-received, and that participants hoped to have more like them in future SIY Festivals. If you would like to lead a field trip, please contact me and we will set you up with advertising on our webpage and Facebook site.

Thank you to everyone who shares their knowledge, because as you know the more you understand the more you can appreciate. I hope to see you out in the field!

Happy birding!

— Destin Harrell

Spring and Fall Bird Monitoring at Beck/Alkali Lake Complex

As longtime Meadowlark members know, our Society has been monitoring the Beck/Alkali Lake Complex Important Bird Area (IBA) each spring and fall. We began monitoring the Beck/Alkali IBA in the fall of 2005 and have continued doing so each spring and fall since then, thanks to many dedicated and experienced birders. Monitoring provides an index to trends of bird species numbers and occurrence from year to year. Data gathered records variations in bird populations from year to year and is designed to help researchers track and understand these changes. The long-term goal is to help protect this area and the birds which use it.

This past spring's count went well. As usual there were a couple of days of perfect weather when it was a complete joy to be outside, but there were more cold blustery days when you just wanted to get the count finished so you could get inside a warm building and have something hot to drink! Of course it is always pleasant to meet your "birding friends" again and to look forward to seeing birds in their beautiful breeding plumage.

Once again this year we saw a good variety of birds each week, but it seemed like the actual number of birds was down. We did get to see "our" loons again this year, as well as White-faced Ibises. We were happy to see the warblers and shorebirds when they showed up in the later part of the spring count. Osprey built nests in both nesting sites, and it was always exciting to see the Sandhill Cranes and Great Blue Herons.

On the seventh week of the count, we were thrilled to see goslings following their parents on the water. As a special gift, we were also lucky enough to see a fox and her four pups on the east side of the Buchanan Wildlife Area. Viewing all of this with the snow-capped mountains as a backdrop really made it worthwhile to get up early and get a little chilled in the mornings!

This year's fall count begins on Monday, September 15, and will continue each Monday for nine weeks (through November 10) during the fall bird migration period. Survey volunteers meet about 20 minutes prior to the start of each Monday's count at McDonald's restaurant in Cody, or volunteers can show up at the first monitoring station behind Taco John's at the west end of Beck Lake at the start time.

Here are the start times for monitoring:

September 15	7:56 a.m. Mountain Daylight Time
September 22	8:04 a.m. MDT
September 29	8:12 a.m. MDT
October 6	8:22 a.m. MDT
October 13	8:30 a.m. MDT
October 20	8:39 a.m. MDT
October 27	8:48 a.m. MDT
November 3	7:57 a.m. Mountain Standard Time
November 10	8:07 a.m. MST

We welcome anyone who is interested in viewing and identifying birds—or maybe just enjoying being out viewing nature in general—to join us for the count. Stay for lunch afterwards to share an enjoyable ending to an enjoyable morning!

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at 307-587-4190.

— Donna Haman

Kudos to . . .

Meadowlark Audubon Society, for receiving a "Certificate of Appreciation" from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for its work in helping install vent screens over vault toilet pipes in campgrounds along the North Fork of the Shoshone River in 2013.



Jennifer and Neil Miller, for receiving Meadowlark Audubon Society's 2014 Distinguished Service Award.

On behalf of the Society, Alice and Denny Flyr presented them with a certificate and copies of two books: Douglas Faulkner's *Birds of Wyoming* and Mark Cocker's *Birds and People*. In accepting the award, Jennifer and Neil write, "Thank you for recognizing us with the MAS 2014 Service Award. What a surprise when Denny and Alice Flyr gave it to us here in Basin! We humbly accept the honor, knowing that there are many in our society who deserve it, too. They'll be next!"



Lyn Stallings, Meadowlark member, named "Birder of the Year" by *Bird Watcher's Digest* and Swarovski Optik for her essay, "November Snow," published in *BWD's* March/April issue. Lyn received a new pair of Swarovski SLC 10 x 42

binoculars and a birding trip to Costa Rica, which she and her husband, Meadowlark vice president and newsletter editor, John C. Rumm, took this past July.

Ceirra Carlson, recipient of this year's Deb Woodbrige Memorial Scholarship. Ceirra graduated from Greybull High School and will be attending Sheridan College, where she plans to study environmental engineering.

Some Regional Birding Hotspots Worth Visiting

Editor's Note: Though their birding trip to regional hotspots took them away from the area for part of this past April, longtime Meadowlark members Rex

Myers and Susan Richards found time to appear at the Meadowlark Annual Meeting and volunteer their services as Meadowlark's new Treasurer. We deeply appreciate all they do for the Society!

Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge

Headed to Salt Lake City or the Green River area? Make sure to visit Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge along the way! The name comes from the Shoshone and means "river of the prairie hen." Over 27,000 acres of land straddle 36 miles of the river. At least 222 species of birds inhabit or migrate through. We've had great luck with Trumpeter Swans, Bald and Golden Eagles, a good variety of ducks, and plenty of sparrows if the little devils hold still. Greater Prairie Chickens occur on sage flats above the Green River; so far, however, we haven't seen them.

Trumpeter Swans at Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge. USFWS photograph.



You can quite literally take 15 or 20 minutes out of your trip and be rewarded, or drive more of the refuge roads and visit an excellent visitors' center. Staff have feeders and spotting scopes set up to show you what's nearby. It's worth your time.

Camas National Wildlife Refuge

Hamer, Idaho, north of Idaho Falls, is home to this 10,000-acre refuge, fed by Camas Creek. Unfortunately, the creek has run dry the last couple years and what water there is comes from pumps. As a result, wetlands are minimal, but can be productive. Ubiquitous Canada Geese, coots, Yellow-headed and Red-winged

Blackbirds abound. During our visit in April, we also saw Northern Shoveler, Trumpeter Swan, and Lesser Scaup. The refuge is five miles north of Hamer on paved road, with a five mile gravel loop around mostly dry ponds right now.

Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge

Birding doesn't get better than this 74,000-acre refuge. Its bird list has more than 200 species but it doesn't say you may see hundreds or thousands of something. In our mid-April visit, we saw 46 species, from Great Egret and American White Pelican to Long-billed Curlew (half a dozen), Marsh Wren, and more Northern Rough-winged Swallows than we could count or imagine. The refuge is west of Brigham City in Utah, and is accessible via 12 miles of pavement, with a 12-mile gravel loop road at the end. Salt and fresh water marshes are everywhere, but mostly fresh water are visible from roads. We saw Clark and Western Grebe side-by-side. There is an excellent Visitor Center, where we also saw Pied-billed Grebe. This is destination birding at its finest.

Antelope Island State Park

There's a \$10 fee to drive the causeway from I-15 south of Ogden to Antelope State Park, and it's worth every penny. We did it in April and saw 30 species of birds in the morning—all the time our visit allowed. Of course, we saw the Utah state bird (California Gull) aplenty, but who knew there were so many Avocets and Eared Grebes in the world? Reports indicate that even more show up in the fall, along with Snow Geese. Drive to the road's end at Fielding Garr Ranch and wander the copse of trees around the ranch buildings for warblers and flycatchers. Great Horned Owls nest there regularly. We did an owl trifecta with Burrowing Owls (near the visitor's center) and a Barn Owl (in the bison hay barn). The Visitor Center is worth stopping at to look for Loggerhead Shrikes. We've got this state park on our "do again" list. Very nice!

— Rex Myers and Susan Richards

The Unexpected Tern

On every trip afield, it is the halts, the pauses, the moments when activity ceases, that mark encounters of special interest.

— Edwin Way Teale, *A Walk Through the Year* (1987), 59

If you've been watching birds for any length of time, odds are that you keep a life list and check off a new species the first time you see it. Birders even have terms—"lifer" or "life bird"—to denote a species which is seen in the wild, positively identified, and thus "list-worthy." Such a life list can encompass the birds of a given region (e.g., your county, your state), a country (e.g., the United States), or even the entire world.

Listing can be fun, rewarding, and gratifying. It can also be challenging, frustrating and all-consuming, especially when a sought-after species proves elusive.

If you keep a list, it's also likely that you're willing to venture afield—and sometimes far afield—in an effort to seek out new lifers. Should your travels—whether for business or for pleasure, or both—take you to an area where you've never been before, you'll almost surely try finding birds that don't occur in your own region. And, in advance of your trip, you'll pore over field guides, checklists, and books about where to find the birds you hope to add to your list.

This past year, I've been doing a lot of traveling, and, whenever possible, have tried to build in time to do some birding. In May, I took advantage of a business trip to Michigan to look for Kirtland's Warbler. An endangered species, Kirtland's Warbler nests in young stands of jack pines. Until recently, its breeding range was confined entirely to a few counties in north-central Michigan, though the range has expanded to neighboring areas of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, as well as Wisconsin and Ontario.

The warblers spend their winters in the Bahamas and return to their nesting grounds in mid or late May. My business trip fell in the last week of May and took me to Claire County, just south of the breeding range, so I was in the proverbial “right place at the right time” to try adding Kirtland’s Warbler to my list.

If you know where to look, you could try finding a Kirtland’s on your own. The male’s call, an emphatic series of notes that sound like “*chip-chip-che-way-o*” or “*chip-chip-chip-twe-tweet*,” is loud and easily heard as the bird sings atop a young jack pine. But when they’re not calling, the warblers are pretty elusive little birds, and much of their nesting areas are closed to public visitation during nesting season. However, thanks to the good folks at Michigan Audubon Society, working in conjunction with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, free guided tours are offered in Hartwick Pines State Park, in the heart of the breeding grounds.

And so it was that just after sunrise on the morning of Saturday, May 24, a caravan of a dozen or so vehicles made its way along winding country roads and into the sandy scrublands. We stopped and parked along a stand of low, scrubby pines that stretched off as far as the eye could see. No sooner had we piled out of our vehicles than our guide, a young MAS volunteer, had us hush to hear a calling warbler. We spotted it within minutes, its buttercup-yellow throat and streaked, blue-grey back clearly discernible against the cloudless sky.

Soon, it seemed like there were warblers everywhere. One would pop up into view from within a stand of pines, burst into song, and then jump back down, to be followed by another close by, like a warbler-esque version of the “Whack-a-Mole” game. Cameras whirred and clicked, binoculars were raised to eyes, and spotting scopes were hoisted into position. Everyone in the group had ample opportunity to observe the warblers.

True to form, I’d prepped myself beforehand to see Kirtland’s Warbler, reading everything I could find in order to learn all I could about its field marks and habits. And in this instance, anticipation did not exceed the actual result, at least not entirely. Knowing that this was, more than likely, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I was glad that I had the chance to check this rare species off on my life-list.

. . . And yet . . . And yet I felt letdown afterwards. The effortlessness which we’d spotted the grail-bird made me somewhat ungratified. It was too easy. For a bird like that to be truly “list-worthy,” it should have been something I really struggled to find.

Which is why what happened afterward was so rewarding. Our caravan returned to the Hartwick Pines Visitor Center, which had not yet opened when we’d first arrived. Entering the center, I noticed a bank of windows running along one wall, and beyond it, an observing balcony, outfitted with several feeders, jutting out into a grove of oak trees along the backside of the building. I stepped out onto the balcony and almost immediately came nearly face-to-face with a Scarlet Tanager, which flew up to a lower branch and began preening. It was a thrill to see this brilliantly-colored species, which I’d glimpsed briefly only once before, more than two decades ago. Now, the tanager in front of my eyes seemed determined to show off as much of its plumage as possible, turning this way and that as it raised and lowered its black wings.

Moments later, something resembling a flying lemon hurtled out of another tree and landed on the feeder, to be joined seconds later by another, lighter-colored bird: a pair of Evening Grosbeaks, the male looking vibrantly, insistently yellow. In short order, two more male Evening Grosbeaks showed up, along with several Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, a Red-breasted Nuthatch, and a host of chickadees. To top it all off, the greenish-yellow female Scarlet Tanager joined her mate, a Red-eyed Vireo appeared in a nearby tree, and a Hermit Thrush and an Eastern Towhee began

scratching their way through the leaves below the trees. It was a veritable passel of passerines.

And the day became even more rewarding. That afternoon, having wrapped up my business, I was driving back on the interstate toward Detroit when I passed by a stretch of wetlands, festooned with lily pads. I pulled off at the next exit, made two left turns, and doubled back north on a road that paralleled the wetlands. There was an observation platform on the left, and I stopped to scan the area. At first blush, it seemed barren of birds, but as I watched, they came into view: a skein of Ruddy Ducks, riding low in the water; an Osprey, lighting from a distant platform, hovering momentarily, then diving and catching a large fish; a flurry of Bank Swallows, swooping and turning. None of these were new to me, but observing them this way, unperturbed as they went about their own business of being birds, was a riveting experience.

Deeply satisfied, I was turning to leave when something dark-grey and flying low to the water flashed before my eyes. I caught a quick glimpse of boomerang-shaped wings and a forked tail. It looked like a tern, or rather the shadow of a tern, for no tern but one could possibly be so dark. As the bird circled back and hovered over the marsh, my heart skipped a beat—it was that tern, the Black Tern, a species entirely new to me and one which I had not expected to find. It swooped and soared and dove, and others joined it, their sharp cries of “*kirk! kirk!*” echoing across the marsh.

This unexpected sighting—a “random tern of events,” if you will—more than made my day. It gave me a gentle reminder about what I enjoy most about watching birds, and what has sustained me during the more than five decades I’ve been doing so: the pure, unadulterated pleasure of seeing them in their element.

No question about it, the life-list has its own allure. But better than all the life-birds on it is the opportunity to experience birds as they live.

— John C. Rumm

Watchable Migrating Waterfowl

The fall migration of waterfowl southward from Alaska, Canada and the upper Northwest is about to begin. Lakes, ponds, rivers and wetlands in northwest Wyoming offer resting spots for migrants as they pass through. Pacific storms and shifts in the jet stream may funnel rarer species our way. Here are some to watch for:



Seen in this photo as a light streak in front of the eye, the yellow “teardrop” of the Tundra Swan is a diagnostic field mark: the larger Trumpeter Swan does not show such a yellow spot near its bill. Detail of photograph by Mark Marschal, 1979, courtesy Yellowstone Slide Library, NPS.

Tundra Swan: Regular migrant, mid-Oct.-early Nov. Often flies in large flocks (50+ birds). Slightly smaller than Trumpeter Swan (52” versus 60”) and has a narrower neck and thinner bill. A yellow “teardrop” on the base of its bill may be visible at close range. Typically noisier than Trumpeter when flying.

Greater White-fronted Goose: Rare migrant, early Oct.-late Nov. Typically found mixed in with flocks of other migrating geese. Grayish-brown; irregular black bars on chest and white underparts; white forehead patch; pink or orange bill. Yellow legs and feet.

Snow Goose: Regular migrant, late Sep.-early Dec. White and dark morphs (forms). White is

entirely white, except for black primaries; face may have rust stains from feeding. Dark (“Blue”) morph is mostly dark above, with a white neck and varying white and dark underparts. Both forms have a pink bill with black “lips,” and pinkish legs and feet.

Ross’s Goose: Uncommon migrant, late Oct.-Nov. Smaller than Snow Goose (23” versus 28-33”); stubbier bill without the Snow’s black “lips.” Like Snow, occurs in white and dark morphs, though the dark form is much less common. Travels in own flocks, but may also be present in mixed flocks with Snow.

Brant: Casual migrant, late Oct.-late Nov. A black and greyish-brown goose, smaller than a Canada (25” versus 30-43”), with a white “collar” replacing the Canada’s “chin strap,” whitish flanks (most often visible when flying), black legs, and a petite, pointy bill.

Greater Scaup: Rare but regular migrant, late Sep.-mid-Nov. Very similar to the much more common Lesser Scaup, but the Greater is slightly larger (18” versus 16-17”), has a rounder and flatter head with a green gloss (the Lesser’s appears purple), has more white on its sides when riding in the water, and shows more white in the wings when flying. Female is entirely pale-brown except for a white patch at the base of the bill and sometimes a paler white ear patch.

Surf Scoter: Rare but regular migrant, mid-Oct.-late Nov. Stocky, short-necked duck that is jet-black except for white patches on its head, and has a chunky orange-and-white bill. The female is brown with white spots on her head.

White-winged Scoter: Rare but regular migrant, mid-Oct.-late Nov. Larger than Surf Scoter (23” versus 21”). All-black except for white “teardrop” behind eye and white wing patch (often visible only while flying). Orange bill with black knob at the base.

Black Scoter: Very rare migrant, mid-Oct.-late Nov. Entirely jet-black, with a bulbous, orange and yellow bill.



Sporting a “punk rocker”-like crest, the Hooded Merganser is one of the most striking waterfowl in North America. Photograph courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Slide Library.

Hooded Merganser: Uncommon migrant, late Sep.-Oct. Smaller than other mergansers (17” versus 22-25”). A flashy duck. The male’s black, “punk rocker” head sports an elongated white crest, which may be raised or lowered. Rusty flanks; white breast with two black bars. Female is brown with a reddish, clown-like crest.

Red-breasted Merganser: Uncommon migrant, mid-Sep.-mid-Nov. Male has the green head and rufous-brown chest of a Mallard, but with a long, sharp red bill and a ragged crest. Female is grey, with a reddish neck, head and ragged crest.

Membership Renewals Due

Please note that Meadowlark **Chapter-only** annual memberships expire August 31st. If you have not already renewed your membership, we would appreciate it if you would take a moment to do so. Chapter-only dues are still only \$12 per year. Please send your dues to Donna Haman, Membership Chair, at PO Box 593, Cody, WY 82424. Thank you for your support!



Meadowlark Audubon Society of the
Big Horn Basin and Northwest Wyoming
P.O. Box 2126, Cody, Wyoming 82414

Calendar of Events

Unless otherwise noted, all events take place in the basement community room of Big Horn Federal Savings, 1701 Stampede Avenue, in Cody. Information is subject to change, so please make sure to check our website (<http://www.meadowlarkwyo.org>) for updates!

Thursday, September 11, 2014: Board Meeting, 6:00-6:45; Program Meeting, 7:00-8:30. Presenters: John C. Rumm and Lyn Stallings, *Birding in Costa Rica*. Location: EOC Meeting Room, Basement, Park County Courthouse, 1002 Sheridan Avenue, Cody.

Friday, September 26-Sunday, September 28, 2014: Cheyenne-High Plains Audubon Society's 40th Anniversary "Bird-day" Celebration, Center for Conferences & Institutes, Laramie County Community College, Cheyenne, WY. *This invitation is being sent to National Audubon Society chapters in Audubon Rockies's region (Wyoming and Colorado). A full program of activities is planned, including field trips and presentations by several nationally prominent speakers. Please see Cheyenne-High Plains Audubon's September newsletter for more details, or visit <http://home.lonetree.com/audubon> for more information.*

Note: There is no business or program meeting in October.

Thursday, November 20, 2014: Board Meeting, 6:00-6:45; Program Meeting, 7:00-8:30. Presenter: Beth Fitzpatrick (PhD Candidate in Ecology, Department of Ecosystem Science and Management, University of Wyoming), *Energy Development, Landscape Connectivity and Distribution of Greater Sage-grouse in Wyoming*.

Saturday, December 20 (Kane); Saturday, December 27 (Cody): 2014 Christmas Bird Count. *See the website and/or next issue of the newsletter for more details.*