



# oice of the Meadowlark

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

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## President's Letter

The days are getting longer and we have more fun field trips and work days planned for the spring and summer, so look for those opportunities in the newsletter and website. The board has been really busy putting these activities together and conducting business. So much so, that we all are getting stretched a little thin. Everyone has agreed to volunteer again for another term if elected during the annual meeting; however, we could really use more people and more ideas to keep this wonderful organization vigorous.

It is the membership, after all, that makes us "Meadowlark Audubon." We must organize and work together to keep it going. New board members are needed so that veterans can see the end of the tunnel and eventually retire. Dedicated veterans are what have kept the programs and organization alive. There are still previous board members who still support our organization behind the scenes. Tasks like maintaining the website, sending out publicity and ensuring hospitality for every meeting. Yet we have many other tasks that must be done and we need many people to contribute.

## Annual Election 2011

It's time to cast your vote! Meadowlark Audubon Society's annual election of officers and directors for 2011-2012 will take place at the April 14th general meeting. All members in good standing are eligible and invited to vote. The Nominating Committee was made up of Destin Harrell, John Rumm, Lisa Marks, Donna Haman, Rosemarie Hughes and Sean Sheehan.

**President:** Destin Harrell (2-year term)

**Vice-President:** John Rumm (1-year term)

**Secretary:** Rosemarie Hughes (1-year term)

**Treasurer:** Lisa Marks (1-year term)

**Directors (1-year term):** Sean Sheehan, Donna Haman, Dave Buckles

We are actively seeking nominations for up to three (3) more individuals to join the Board of Directors. If you are interested in becoming a Board member, please contact Destin Harrell, 307-899-0147 or [destin\\_harrell@hotmail.com](mailto:destin_harrell@hotmail.com).

We are currently operating with six board members, which is one away from the minimum set out in our Constitution and By-Laws. I would like to make it a goal to see three new directors who can help with the workload and provide for a robust board. I don't like to operate at the minimum; we should try for the maximum. Please contact any board member, or me,

or show up at one of our board meetings, which always start at 6 pm, one hour before the general meeting begins. If you can't serve yourself, at least think about encouraging someone you know to volunteer, or nominate someone to the board. You will learn the process and see another side of our organization that is rewarding and fun.

Thank you so much for your interest and support!

— Destin Harrell



*Photographed by Meadowlark Audubon member Dave Buckles on December 27, this Golden-crowned Kinglet is an uncommon winter visitor to Cody.*

## **Kinglet Crowns Cody Christmas Bird Count Week**

Forty-two birders, including two children, spent the day after Christmas following their assigned routes in pursuit of every bird they could find in Cody's 15-mile diameter Christmas Bird Count Circle.

A break in the cold weather provided temperatures that ranged from 10° to 50° Fahrenheit during the day, with calm to light winds in most of the area. Birders covered a combined total of 357 miles by car

and foot, and were rewarded with 62 species totaling 8,390 individual birds. This year's gold star for traveling the farthest distance to participate in the count goes to Vic and Donna Fondy, who joined us from Whitewood, South Dakota.

Counts of several species exceeded or matched their previous highest totals. Among these were Canada Geese, with a high count of 2,604 birds, up over 1,000 from the previous high count in 1997; fifty-two Northern Pintails, equaling their previous all-time high in 1992; and three elusive Marsh Wrens found along the Shoshone River, tying their 2004 total.

If you think you've been seeing more American Robins than usual this winter, you are probably right. Their count was 530, compared to our previous high of 384 in 2001. Another bird you also may have started noticing is the Eurasian Collared-Dove. We sighted 38, the fourth consecutive year we tallied them. There are many reports of this species expanding its range northward and westward throughout the state, and they are commonly seen in both farmlands and around feeders in town.

Single birds seen of a species on this year's count year included Northern Goshawk, American Kestrel, Prairie Falcon, Steller's Jay, and Common Redpoll. Other birds seen in low numbers included two each of Gadwall, Great Blue Heron, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Killdeer, Hairy Woodpecker, and American Dipper. Birds of interest seen during count week—three days before and after the official count day—included Northern Shrike, Brown Creeper, and, most notably, a Golden-crowned Kinglet. The latter species breeds

in spruce-fir forests in the mountains of western Wyoming and occurs in small numbers at lower elevations each winter. In our area, however, it had been reported only once before during a CBC week, in 1990. Thanks to Dave Buckles, we now have photo documentation of this species.

Chuck Neal led the evening tally of the day's results, assisted by Susan Ahalt. Following the tally, half of the birders joined in a pot-luck supper held in the Christ Episcopal Church meeting room.

We would like to extend thank-you's to Sunset House Restaurant for providing the soup and crackers for the pot-luck supper, Christ Episcopal Church for allowing us to use their meeting room and kitchen, Chuck Neal for leading the tally and lending his expertise, Susan Ahalt for her continued support, and all the landowners who generously gave permission to access their private lands. A special thank-you goes to all the participants, both in the field and at feeders, who so cheerfully gave of their time and effort to make this year's count a success.

If you would like to join us next year, please contact Joyce Cicco, [jcicco00@tritnet.net](mailto:jcicco00@tritnet.net), (307) 527-5030, or Susan Ahalt, [thebirdlady@tctwest.net](mailto:thebirdlady@tctwest.net), (307) 527-7027. Next year's Cody CBC will take place on Saturday, December 24th.

— Joyce Cicco

## **Geese, Starlings, Larks Top Kane's 2010-2011 Christmas Bird Count**

The 2010-2011 Kane Christmas Bird Count was held on December 18, 2010. Fourteen birders took part,

including a young first-timer, Lily Kania. The weather was calm, cloudy and cold, with temperatures ranging between 9 and 17 degrees Fahrenheit. While lakes and ponds were frozen over, varying amounts of open water were found on rivers.

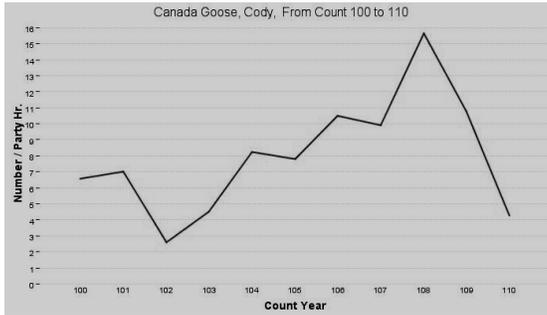
We tallied 47 species this year, totaling 10,268 birds. Species observed in large numbers included 2073 Canada Geese, representing the highest tally in five years; 2059 European Starlings; and an all-time-high count of 1536 Horned Larks. Two Great Blue Herons were spotted—only the second time since 1999-2000 we have tallied this species on Kane's CBC, while 17 Barrow's Goldeneye marked only their third appearance on our count since 2000.

Once again, we thank Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, which hosted the count tally. Many thanks to everyone who participated!

— Suzanne Morstad

## **Current and Historical Results of Christmas Bird Counts Available Online**

Thanks to the dedicated staff of the National Audubon Society, anyone with access to a computer can view both current and historical results from Christmas Bird Counts. The database is easy to use and enables a user to create data sets and view results in tabular or graphic form. For example, you can build a table to display results for different species within a given count circle (e.g., Cody, Kane) over a span of years, compare results among several count circles, or select one or more species and chart their count totals within a range of dates.



Sample graph showing Canada Geese totals on Cody Christmas Bird Counts, 2000-2010.

To view results of Cody, Kane or other Christmas Bird Counts, check out the National Audubon Web site at <http://birds.audubon.org/historical-results/> and follow the instructions found there.

— Joyce Cicco and John C. Rumm

## 2011 Spring Bird Count

The 2011 Spring Bird Count at Beck Lake will begin on Monday, March 21st. We will meet at McDonald’s at 7:45 a.m. to car pool and get coffee or some breakfast if desired. The count will get underway just west of the former Taco Bell/KFC restaurant building at one hour past sunrise (8:18 a.m MDT on the 21st). Also, since it can be chilly on early spring mornings, it’s a good idea to wear a hat and gloves!

We will meet each week for nine weeks to count and identify any birds we see. It is a great way to learn to identify birds, mostly waterfowl, as well as a terrific opportunity to meet other people who share an interest in birds.

Please come and join us for one or all count sessions if you are interested!

— Donna Haman

## Editor’s Notebook: Dying to Know More About Bird Mortality

*When we reach the last chapter in the life of a bird, many perplexing questions arise.*

— W.A.D. Lees, “A Bird in the Bush,” *The Ottawa Field-Naturalists’ Club* (1889)

As 2011 opened, media outlets reported on the strange events that had transpired in the small town of Beebe, Arkansas, on New Year’s Eve. Just before midnight, residents of Beebe were startled to find Red-winged Blackbirds falling from the sky. They landed on lawns. They landed on driveways. They landed on rooftops and roads. And not just a few—they fell by the hundreds. Authorities counted some 5,000 dead birds over roughly a 1.5-square mile area.

Even as efforts began to determine what killed Beebe’s birds, reports surfaced of other mysterious mass bird-deaths: 500 dead blackbirds littering a highway in Louisiana; 300 dead starlings covering the ground in Yankton, South Dakota; multiple reports of dead starlings in California. Similar occurrences were also reported abroad, in England, Sweden, Italy, Romania and South Korea.

As more and more reports trickled in, people began wondering if this apparent wave of mass bird-deaths was a harbinger of even worse things to come. It didn’t take long before a name was coined for the phenomenon: “Aflockalypse Now.”

Even before autopsies were performed on the dead birds, people began speculating about what had caused the mass deaths. Perhaps tornadoes had

sucked up the birds, or lightning had struck them. Others suggested a new strain of avian flu, or that the birds had been poisoned, either accidentally or deliberately. Conspiracy theorists charged that the government was responsible. Still others blamed sunspots, random electromagnetic or crystalline energy pulses, aliens, or a sinister force.

Autopsies and other scientific tests, however, showed that all the bird casualties were attributable to prosaic, readily explainable causes. Beebe's dead blackbirds, for example, had died of blunt-force trauma. On that unfortunate New Year's Eve, the roosting birds were startled by exploding fireworks. Disoriented and flying blindly in the dark, they flew into trees, buildings, or one another, sustaining massive, and ultimately fatal, injuries.

Moreover, as ornithologists and wildlife biologists pointed out, such mass bird deaths were neither rare nor remarkable. The truth is that they happen all the time. Yet because one seemingly mysterious event made the news, people began reporting similar phenomena, suggesting that these random and isolated occurrences were somehow linked.

Still, even though the mass bird deaths turned out to be unremarkable, their occurrence served to heighten interest in bird mortality. They helped underscore a singular truth: Despite all we know about how birds live, we know very little about how they die.

The circle of life is eternal, and so is the circle of death. Everything living eventually dies. What's true for bacteria, barnacles and beetles is just as true

for beeches, bats and birds. All around us, day after day, birds are dying.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that roughly 10 billion birds breed in this country each year; twice that many may be present during the peak of fall migration. As the FWS admits, however, "these figures represent only educated guesses"; the real totals could be considerably higher or lower. Assuming that the estimates are reasonably accurate, how many birds die each year? Interviewed earlier this year about the mass bird deaths, Melanie Driscoll, a director of bird conservation for National Audubon Society, stated that 5 billion birds die annually in the United States. That works out to nearly 14 million dead birds per day. Yet other experts offer different estimates. "In the case of songbirds, and depending upon the species," comments one authority, "natural adult mortality rates are estimated to vary between 10 and 50 percent annually" (Christopher Norment, *Return to Warden's Grove: Science, Desire, and the Lives of Sparrows* [2008], pp. 136-137). Using the FWS estimates as a baseline, this suggests that as few as 1 billion birds may die each year in this country. Either way, the number is enormous.

With all these birds perishing, what are the leading causes of bird mortality? Here, too, estimates vary widely. Perhaps the most comprehensive recent study, conducted in 2002 by Cheyenne-based Western EcoSystems Technology, Inc. (WEST) concluded "that from 500 million to possibly over 1 billion birds are killed annually in the United States due to anthropogenic [human-related] causes"

(Wallace P. Erickson, Gregory D. Johnson and David P. Young, Jr., “A Summary and Comparison of Bird Mortality from Anthropogenic Causes with an Emphasis on Collisions.” *USDA Forest Service General Technical Report*, PSW-GTR-191, 2005, p. 1029). Domestic and feral cats, for example, kill millions of birds each year. Just how many, though, is anyone’s guess. As the 2002 study notes, estimates range from as low as 40 million, to 500 million or more. Depending on which estimate you prefer, human hunters harvest as few as 15 million, or as many as 100 million, birds annually in this country. Window strikes, according to Fish and Wildlife Service estimates, kill as few as 97 million birds per year, or as many as 976 million, while collisions with vehicles may kill anywhere from 10.7 to 380 million birds annually. Similar disparities exist within estimates of bird fatalities due to communications towers, wind turbines, pesticides, oil spills or other human-related causes. As the authors of the 2002 study note, estimates of causation should be viewed cautiously: “[C]alculating accurate numbers of bird fatalities associated with any . . . sources is difficult due to limitations in the scope of most mortality studies, as compared to the extensive distribution and extent of these sources” (p. 1029). About all that can be said for sure is that due to human-related causes, vast number of birds die in the US each year.

With regard to the extent of bird fatalities occurring from natural causes, such as disease, weather, food supply shortages, exhaustion during migration, or non-human predation, there is even greater uncertainty. If Driscoll’s estimate of five billion US bird deaths is accurate, and the 2002 study is on the

mark in attributing 500 million to 1 billion bird deaths to human-related causes, then perhaps as many as four billion birds die annually in this country from natural (i.e., non-human-related) causes. Assessing just how many birds die from given natural causes, however, is incredibly difficult to ascertain. Autopsies performed on individual dead birds help establish what caused their death. Yet, generally speaking, relatively few bird carcasses are intact enough to be autopsied, and, while autopsy results can (and often do) provide a basis for extrapolation, they are less helpful in establishing correlations between various causal factors, or in determining how “representative” their results are. For example, autopsies of birds exhibiting signs of starvation—such as low weight or emaciation—can suggest correlations between food supply and bird deaths. Yet, as Ian Newton observed in *Population Limitation in Birds* (1998), because bird carcasses must be found and presented intact in order to be autopsied, they do not provide a representative cross-sample. Moreover, weakened birds may fall victim to predators before they die of starvation, but since predators fully consume their prey and no intact carcass survives, both starvation and predation rates tend to be under-represented.

Many people die of age-related illnesses every year. But what about birds? Surely this happens to them, too. Yet again, it’s all but impossible to quantify how many do. Indeed, our knowledge of the life-span of most species of birds in the wild (as opposed to captive birds in zoos or aviaries) is so limited and imprecise that “aging,” both as a phenomenon and a causal factor, is poorly understood.

Lastly, even though vast numbers of birds die each year, it's paradoxical that we so seldom encounter dead birds. "A dead bird is an incongruity, more startling than an unexpected live bird," biologist Lewis Thomas wrote in *The Lives of a Cell*. He speculated that we see so few because "[b]irds do their dying off somewhere, behind things, under things, never on the wing." Yet is this belief borne out by the facts? Or is this really an urban legend? Do we see so few dead birds because dying birds hide themselves, or because dying birds are more likely to drown or to be consumed by predators?

When it comes to the mortality of birds, one thing is certain: the body of evidence is sorely lacking. And, in the end, such uncertainty about death only heightens the unceasing mystery of life itself.

— John C. Rumm



Nearly 60 feet off the ground, "Osprey Man" John Ross installs an Osprey nesting-platform. John was 80 years old at the time Neil Miller took this photo four years ago.

## Osprey Man: In Appreciation of John Ross

April brings with it the return of one of this region's most recognizable raptors—the Osprey (*Pandion*

*haliaetus*). In *Soaring with Fidel* (2007), an engaging account of his fascination with Ospreys that led him on an odyssey from Cape Cod to Cuba as he tracked them to see where their migrating flights took them, David Gessner recounted meeting a host of colorful characters. Among the most memorable was "Osprey Man," who claimed he could communicate with them telepathically, and proudly described himself as "a Conduit for the Great Osprey."

Here in the Big Horn Basin, we have our own "Osprey Man." As colorful as any of the characters Gessner encountered, our "Osprey Man"—John Ross—may not claim to be in telepathic communication with ospreys, but he sure does know his way around conduits, not to mention electrical poles.

Ten years ago this April, John (or "Johnny," as many of us know him) was elected to Meadowlark's Board of Directors as its first "Conservation Chair." He served in that capacity for five years, but even after retiring from the board, he has continued to serve the chapter, putting in untold hours on various projects and championing conservation efforts. This past October, John hauled materials, lent tools, and provided labor over two weekends for our springhead enclosure project on Sheep Mountain. And, because of John's having brought it to the board's attention last summer, Meadowlark donated \$300 to the Green River Greenbelt Killdeer Wetland Project; John and his wife KaCey made a lead donation to this effort.

Yet it is with Ospreys—specifically, erecting nesting platforms for them—that John Ross has made a real difference, and a lasting mark, in this region.

In the 1970s and 1980s, when Osprey populations nationwide began rebounding thanks to the banning of DDT, citizens and power companies joined forces to begin erecting artificial nesting platforms in areas that Osprey frequented. They installed hundreds of manmade platforms—so many so that, by the 1990s, in states like Massachusetts, more than 90 percent of Osprey pairs used them. “In the crowded East the ospreys could never have come back to anywhere close to their old numbers without the efforts of a fairly heroic band of platform builders,” Gessner observed in *Return of the Osprey* (2001), “The banning of DDT let these birds live, but the platform builders gave them homes to live on” (p. 43).

West of the Mississippi, interest in artificial nesting platforms took hold slowly. An important impetus for them, especially in Wyoming, was the expansion of dams and reservoirs, irrigation systems and water-treatment facilities along rural waterways. As wetlands conservation efforts began to take hold in the West, citizens and power companies began working together to help boost Osprey populations, much as they had been doing in the East.

Enter John Ross.

A lineman by training, John spent his entire career—more than four decades—working for Western power companies. “Linework,” he says, in his characteristically understated way, “was about all I ever did.” In 2001, about the same time John was elected a director of Meadowlark Audubon, a friend told him how a pair of Osprey had tried unsuccessfully to build a nest along the Clarks’ Fork River, on the Beartooth Ranch along the Clarks’

Fork River. “He asked me if I would do something about that,” John recalled in a recent interview. John did. He contacted his former employer, Pacific Power and, using equipment and materials they provided, designed and built a nesting platform and erected it atop a 65-foot pole. It took a few years before Osprey started using the platform, but they finally did, and in 2005, three chicks were born—the first hatchlings reported there in anyone’s memory.

During 2005 and 2006, John, assisted by other Meadowlark members and friends, constructed and installed additional Osprey nesting platforms around the Big Horn region. At the request of Basin Rural Electric, one was put up at Harrington Reservoir, along the Greybull River south of Otto, to replace a power pole, formerly used by nesting Osprey, which the company had had to remove for safety reasons. John installed a third nesting platform just east of Cody, on property owned by Jim and Dee Oudin. In addition to erecting the nesting platforms, John periodically has gone back out to them to inspect them, remove old nesting material, and perform any needed repairs. In the fall of 2007, for example, after a storm partially destroyed the Osprey nest atop the Harrington platform, John, assisted by Harold Perry and Neil Miller, scaled the pole to remove the old nest and replace it with crabapple branches.

“I saw an Osprey flying alone across a myriad of autumn sky,” Chinese philosopher Li Fu once wrote. In ancient China, Osprey symbolized abundance, foresight and risk-taking. Most of all, the Osprey represented a person of great talent. We, along with the fish-eating hawks he has worked to help, are

fortunate to have such a talented person in our midst—John Ross, the Osprey Man.

— John C. Rumm

## **2011 Meadowlark Audubon Scholarship**

Applications are now being accepted for the 2001 Deborah Woodbridge Memorial Meadowlark Audubon Scholarship. The scholarship is named for the individual who, before she passed away in 2008, championed the effort to award a scholarship to a deserving high school graduate from the four-county region the Meadowlark Audubon Society serves (Park, Big Horn, Hot Springs, and Washakie) whose career plans will further Audubon’s mission “to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth’s biological diversity.” The 2011 scholarship is funded in part through donations made in memory of Mr. Ernest Fuller, a bird lover from Cody, who passed away in 2010. One scholarship (between \$750 and \$1,000) will be awarded to the recipient as a tuition payment to the college to which he/she has been accepted. A PDF copy of the application form, and deadline information, are available on the MAS website.

— Lisa Marks

## **Meadowlark’s Website Gets a Makeover**

First launched in 2002, Meadowlark’s website has served our members well, but its basic structure had become outdated and did not conform to accepted standards. It has now been revamped and you can check out the changes at [www.meadowlarkwyo.org](http://www.meadowlarkwyo.org).

You will find the site easier to navigate since the main menu on the left-hand side now remains stationary and in view rather than scrolling with the page. The heading has also been redesigned, with images of eggs in a Western Meadowlark nest and an image of a Meadowlark on a post, taken by Pete Arnold of Cheyenne and used with his permission. Pete also photographed the Meadowlark whose head graces the top of the main menu.

If you haven’t visited the website lately, our Officers page lists the names of Meadowlark officers and board members along with their email addresses, while the Bylaws page has a copy of the Chapter’s Constitution and Bylaws. Our Birding Spots page contains helpful information about good birding habitats within our four-county region, including directions and notes on bird species found there, contributed by fellow birders and chapter members. If you know of a favorite birding site that isn’t listed, get us the information and we’ll add it to the page. On the Contacts page, you’ll find listings of federal and state agencies involved with birds, wildlife, and the environment, along with contact information for state and federal legislators. From our Web Links page, you can access a host of bird- and birding-related sites. Lastly, test your birding knowledge on our new “Mystery Bird” page!

Make it a point to visit the website and bookmark it for future reference. It’s a helpful and informative place for our members, and your suggestions and contributions are always welcome and appreciated!

—Joyce Cicco at [jcicco00@tritnet.net](mailto:jcicco00@tritnet.net)

## Calendar of Upcoming Events

*Unless otherwise noted, all events take place in the basement community room of Big Horn Federal Savings, 1701 Stampede Avenue, in Cody. Please make sure to check our website (<http://www.meadowlarkwyo.org>) for program details, announcements and updates!*

**Thursday, March 10, 2011: Board meeting, 6-6:45 pm; General meeting, 7-8 pm. Program: Dr. Charles Preston (Senior Curator, Draper Museum of Natural History, Buffalo Bill Historical Center), "Golden Eagle Nest Monitoring Results." Location: Northwest College in Powell, Wyoming, Fagerberg Building, Room FAB70.**

**Tuesday, March 21, 2011: *Beck Lake Spring Bird Count* begins (see article inside for more information).**

**Thursday, April 14, 2011: Board meeting, 6-6:45 pm; General meeting and Annual Election, 7-8 pm. Program: Grace Nutting, "*Touring and Birding the Islands of the South Atlantic.*"**

**Saturday, April 30, 2011: *Lek Watch*: MAS president Destin Harrell will lead a trip to view a local Sage Grouse lek. We will watch male Sage Grouse stage their elaborate mating dance, discuss their conservation and life history, and enjoy a morning of birding. We will leave from the Cody K Mart parking lot at 5:00 am, so please arrive by 4:50 am.**

**Friday, May 6, 2011: *2nd Annual Warbler Walk*: MAS vice-president John Rumm will lead an hour-long walk along the Shoshone River Trail to look for warblers and other spring migrants. We will meet in the parking lot below the 12th Street (Belfry) Bridge at 7:30 am.**

**Saturday, May 7, 2011: *Barbed-wire Removal Project*: MAS members will partner with Friends Of A Legacy (FOAL) on a project to remove barbed-wire from fences that impede the migration of pronghorn and the movement of wild horses, and that also pose a collision risk to Greater Sage Grouse. Please bring gloves, long sleeves, eye protection and any other protective equipment for working with barbed wire, a lunch, sunscreen and binoculars! We will meet at the Cody K Mart parking lot at 8:00 am.**

**Thursday, May 12, 2011: Board meeting, 6-6:45 pm; General meeting, 7-8 pm. Program: *Wyoming Wilderness Association: Who We Are and What We Do.***

**Saturday, May 14, 2011: *Silverberry and Buffalo Berry Sapling-planting*: We need volunteers to help plant 1,000 silverberry and buffalo berry saplings in areas where stands of Russian olive and Salt Cedar have been eradicated. Planting the saplings will help encourage native berry-producing shrubs to provide for avian forage. We will meet at the Cody K Mart parking lot at 8 am. (In case of bad weather, the rainout date is May 21.)**



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