



oice of the Meadowlark

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

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Spring 2016

President's Letter

By Destin Harrell



Dear Members,

As many of you know, this will be my last letter to the membership as President. I have enjoyed writing these letters; it allowed me time to reflect on our Society

and the well-being of our organization. There have always been many great reasons to be excited and proud. Thank you to all the Board members who have made our organization run smoothly at every level. Cooperative and productive are two adjectives that come to mind. The highest quality volunteer work and dedication I have ever experienced.

I don't know about everyone else, but I have really enjoyed the speakers we have had this year. Every month is a new topic and new people are coming out of the woodwork to learn more about their particular interest. This diversity our group has is what makes it strong and respected. My hope is that we leave a positive lasting impression for visitors, that art and science forms the strong base for the education of the group, and that a feeling of belonging is experienced by every member of our Society.

I've seen great patience by many of our members when discussing controversial ecological issues. These are debates that can get heated if not for a

healthy respect for the opposing side. Being open to the other person's perspective is healthy and can put your own views to the test. Unlike sports, which deal in fundamental laws of physics where you either do it right or not with immediate feedback, ideas cannot experience challenge unless they can be respectfully shared, debated, and pressed through the fine screen of logic and reason. To be lucky enough to live in a civilized society is a blessing that I'm thankful for every day.

So it is our duty to reach out to people we don't know and share the beauty of birding and the natural world. It can change lives. We will be partnering with the Absaroka Outdoor Fellowship this summer for field trips. A great time to recruit new birders, these hikes will be posted to our website. We would like to have at least one member go on each hike to share the joys of birding while enjoying your favorite outside activity. I plan on going to as many as I can. I just wanted to say thank you again for putting your trust in me over the years and the opportunity to be the President of Meadowlark. It was a fun ride.

See you on the trail or river,
Destin Harrell

Let's Get Connected!

By Melissa Hill

Recently, Meadowlark Audubon began to upgrade our communication ability with our members by creating a Gmail account. This email account allows us to create a contact group that we can connect with at the click of a mouse . . . in theory.

Unfortunately, as we've been attempting to contact the group, we've discovered problems with a large

number of email addresses we have “on file.” Email provider, Bresnan, for example has switched to Charter and all Bresnan emails will be invalid. More than 20 of the emails we have listed for members are Bresnan addresses!!!

We also get several emails returned as undeliverable due to full mailboxes. If you haven't checked your email in a while, you might want to. And don't forget to add our address to your contacts so our emails don't end up in your spam or junk folder.

We want very much to provide our members with up-to-date information about events and birding info, but we can't without the correct address.

Please take a minute to send a quick email to us at meadowlarkaudubonwyo@gmail.com and make sure we have your current and correct email address. It is also a great opportunity to let us know if you prefer to NOT receive email reminders from us, to share birding stories and tips, or to ask questions. We hope to hear from you all soon! Happy Birding!



Wings Across the Big Sky Festival

Montana Audubon's Wings Across the Big Sky Festival, co-hosted by Five Valleys Audubon Society, will be held June 3-5, 2016 in Missoula. There will be over 20 field trips to a variety of habitats, including wetlands, uplands, mountain forests, sagebrush shrub-steppe, and large rivers. Expected species include: Lewis Woodpecker, Black Tern, Long-billed Curlew, Clay-colored Sparrow, Brewer's Sparrow, Rock Wren, Canyon Wren, Bobolink, Gray Flycatcher, Sagebrush Sparrow, Sage Thrasher, Burrowing Owl, Ferruginous Hawk, and Williamson's Sapsucker, among others. A post-festival day long field trip for serious birders is also available.

For non-birding enthusiasts we again are offering our popular Friday night bat walk with local biologists, plus other walks for wildflowers and butterflies. There will be a large art show, history tours, and shopping. Remember Montana does NOT have any sales tax. In appreciation of that, we are providing a fantastic optic and camera sale opportunity. Our Saturday morning markets for local produce and crafts draws hundreds of tourists.

The Saturday night keynote speaker will be Dr. Erick Greene, Division of Biological Sciences, University of Montana. Greene is an engaging speaker who studies threat communication shared between bird species as well as other genera, and contaminant levels in our local Osprey population.

Registration starts in March at <http://mtaudubon.org/birding/montana-bird-festival/>

Annual Election 2016

It's time to cast your vote! Meadowlark Audubon Society's annual election of officers and directors for 2015-2016 will take place at the April 14th meeting. All members in good standing are eligible and invited to vote. Additional nominations are welcomed and will be accepted prior to the vote.

President: Melissa Hill (1st year of 2-year term)

Vice-President: Destin Harrell (1-year term)

Secretary: Jarren Kuipers (1-year term)

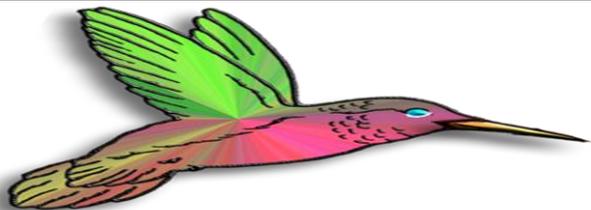
Co-Treasurers: Rex Myers and Susan Richards (1-year term)

Directors: Eric Atkinson, Lisa Marks, Alice Flyr, Donna Haman (1 year term)

Membership Director: Sally Disque

Newsletter Editor: Eric Rossborough

If you are interested in becoming a Board member, please contact Destin Harrell, 307-899-0147 or destin_harrell@hotmail.com.





Olympic Birdfest

By Eric Rossborough

On April 15-17, 2016, The Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society, in partnership with Dungeness River Audubon Sanctuary and the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe, will hold the 13th annual Olympic Birdfest. The North Olympic Peninsula is widely known as a great place for birding, and the ‘Fest is timed for the overlap of wintering birds and spring migration. The guest speaker on Saturday’s banquet will be noted artist and naturalist Tony Angell on “Revealing the Secret Lives of Owls.” Guided birding trips and boat tours will abound, as well as pre and post festival boat cruises: a three-day, two-night birding/sightseeing cruise of the San Juan Islands from April 12-14, and a Neah Bay post-trip on April 17-19, 2016. For more information go to: www.olympicbirdfest.org



When Common Becomes Rare

By Jarren Kuipers

Every Christmas I find myself birding in the fashion of John James Audubon; with a shotgun resting on my shoulder. I travel back to the family farm in

South Dakota to reconnect with kin and test myself against the gaudy introduced gamebird of the plains, the wild Ring-necked Pheasant.

The vast majority of the time I appreciate birds from a distance through binoculars and camera viewfinders. However, there is something about the pheasant that seems to give me license to engage in a predator-prey relationship. It could be their status as an introduced bird. After all, few birders cry over the death of a European Starling. It could also be their short lifespan and amazing reproductive capacity. The first several Ring-necked Pheasants were introduced into Oregon in 1881. In 1892, Oregon hunters harvested 50,000 birds on the first day of the season.

Lastly, the physical and mental capacities of a wild December rooster possess an immense challenge. They are extremely fast by land and air, and by the end of the season they know when to use each to greatest effect. However, often they just crouch down and melt into the sparsest of cover as the hunter walks past within several feet.

All things considered, this license to hunt Pheasants is probably the combination of Pheasant origin, behavior, habitat, reproductive capacity and physical abilities. They can out-breed, out-fly, and out-run us. These characteristics make them one of the few large birds that we as humans struggle to subdue, as they flourish in the wake of native habitat destruction.

However, there is one thing that will damage a Pheasant population, and that is the indiscriminate hunting of hens. Young Pheasant hunters are quickly taught that original sin started with the shooting of a hen, contrary to popular opinion.

Unlike our native Grouse species, Pheasant sexes look completely different. The hen’s dress is drab and cryptically colored while the rooster’s is bedazzled with white, orange, black, brown, blue, and green. As such, the hunter can easily distinguish the sexes on the fly.

Roosters can be hunted to near extinction annually without putting a dent in the Pheasant population. A few smart ones always slip through the cracks, providing more than enough fertilization capacity for an entire landscape of non-hunted hens. Each hen can then incubate up to 15 eggs and even attempt a second clutch if the first nest fails. As a result, hens represent the overall reproductive

potential, while most of the roosters are just dead weight.

It was that knowledge that put me in a bind one day this last December. I was walking the edge of a cattail marsh with my head in the clouds when a bird irrupted near my feet like a hidden jack-in-the-box. It let out a cackle as it rapidly gained speed and elevation. I recovered from the initial shock to quickly calculate distance, direction, and the sex of the bird. The barrel swung through and I brought it down on the frozen lake.

While approaching to retrieve it, the short tan-colored tail of a hen was pointing up into the air to greet me. Waves of doubt and anxiety came over me. *Did it not cackle? Had I not observed the iridescent green head?* After all, it was way too late in the season to run into an immature rooster, which could have some hen characteristics. I bent over to pick it up, prepared to enter Pheasant hunter purgatory. Just then I noticed the unmistakable green head and white neck ring of a rooster.

The Pheasant turned out to an odd mix of male and female characteristics. The head and neck looked like a juvenile rooster, with mottled iridescent green head, weakly developed red facial skin and the characteristic white neck ring. There was also just a little bit of orange on the lower neck. However, from the neck down to the tip of the tail it was 100% hen with perfect coloring, tail length and a complete lack of spurs on the legs.

I quickly showed the bird to my hunting partner, Gerry Steinauer, who happens to be a biologist with the Nebraska Game and Parks. He suggested that it might be a hermaphrodite, which is a genetic condition in vertebrates that causes them to have both male and female organs. Later I found out that physically, hermaphrodites do not necessarily show mixed physical qualities beyond their sexual organs.

Upon further research I came across a few other potential conditions, but the one that fit the best was Spontaneous Sex Reversal. This is a condition occasionally documented in domestic hen chickens. Hens have two ovaries, with the left one being responsible for estrogen production and oocyte (ova) development and the right being dormant. If the left ovary is somehow damaged by disease or injury, estrogen production can be shut off and heightened levels of testosterone occur.

When Spontaneous Sex Reversal starts, the hen stops producing eggs and physically starts to take on male characteristics, including development of a comb and male plumage. Even more amazing, is that in some cases the hen's dormant right ovary develops into a male sexual organ, which can begin to produce sperm. Eventually the hen-turned-rooster may start crowing and attempting to mate with hens.

It is interesting how much consideration we give individuals that physically stand out over others of their kind. As an example, we frequently see pictures of birds with albinism. These rarities in my opinion seem to make the world just a little bit more interesting, which is why in the end I would have rather not harvested such a rare bird. However, it did put me at ease knowing that I did not technically shoot a hen...or did I?



Fourth Annual Spring Into Yellowstone Festival

By Eric Rossborough

Once again this year, and once more as an official sponsor, Meadowlark Audubon Society is partnering with Cody Chamber of Commerce and several other agencies to present the fourth annual "Spring into Yellowstone Birding & Wildlife Festival," Wednesday, May 11 to Sunday, May 15.

Several Meadowlark Audubon directors and members are leading tours or offering programs, including Destin Harrell and Melissa Hill. Space is limited for most programs and tours, so please register soon! For more information, a full schedule and updates, and to register, please visit <http://springintoyellowstone.net/>.



My Adventures with the Kane Bird Count, 2015

By Eric Rossborough

I have never been good at getting up in the morning. As I rocketed in the dark towards Powell I decided there were entirely too many lights on the landscape. I remember when I took birding up a friend saying to me, “Those people like to get up early in the morning.” Well. I parked in the lot of the Big Horn Canyon Visitor Center amongst all the other cars. We walked slowly towards the lit door. In the lobby was a teepee, its flap turned up to expose the inside. Maybe it wanted to catch the summertime breeze. We followed a lit hallway downstairs, where there were donuts and various treats. Neil and Jennifer Miller greeted me. I hadn’t met them before. We stood around. Then they placed me. My two companions, Leslie Schreiber, a wildlife biologist with Fish and Game, and Sarah Davis, an AmeriCorps VISTA member working with the Crow at Fort Smith, Montana. “Where is that?” I said. I had never heard of Fort Smith.

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re a biologist,” I said to Leslie. Hah. It turned out none of us knew anything about birds, or so we said. The three of us looked furtively around the room. Sarah’s background, she said, consisted of being hijacked by her father to go look at birds near their home in upstate New York. She had been in the West for – a month and a half. I had her beat by ten months. After eating more doughnuts, we decided that since we had two binoculars and two bird books, we could figure it out. We were off.

We walked in on a two track off Route 32, just past the Shoshone River. The district we got was kind of big, but most of it was sagebrush. Any action we found, would mostly be down here. Look look, a

Hawk! We saw it sitting in a big cottonwood tree, way off. What was it? It’s hard to tell when it’s sitting still. At length Mr. Hawk got up and flew, swooping and landing in another tree by some utility buildings to the north. We saw red. The rufous on the topside of the tail! A Red-tailed Hawk.

How did we know for sure? I said. We had the book. We decided that in the name of science, we had to make a decision of some sort or other, unless we really couldn’t tell, and I said no one was gonna question us on a Red-tailed Hawk anyway. Leslie looked at me. She’s a scientist, helps plan hunting seasons for the State, and it was clear I wasn’t above playing fast and loose with the facts. But it certainly was a Red-tailed Hawk. It flew again.

One thing I like about being in the outdoors is not following the trail. You’re safer on the trail, but it’s just not a very creative activity. We were on a bottomland, filled with dikes, two tracks, clumps of bushes, tall grass, and canals, some of them dried up and abandoned. We climbed down a dirt pile and startled a bunch of passerine birds sitting in some bushes. What are they? It turned out my two companions were pretty good birders. Song Sparrows! Leslie spotted a female Ring-necked Pheasant over the edge of a berm, just a few feet away, bopping along. We drove up on the tableland above the river and saw nothing.

The high land up there is mostly devoid of sagebrush. You see all this land with grooves in it. Leslie said these were old bentonite mines and they reclaimed the place by putting topsoil back on after. It went and went. We saw a lot of country. One thing is I have a tendency to end up in non-pristine land that has been kind of messed with, and after a lifetime of it I am kind of used to it. We walked out towards a bluff over the Shoshone. “Look, Mallards!” Sarah said. She could tell, by the way they flew. They swooped down and landed by the water. I wanted to go down and hike around in the river bottom woods there, but we couldn’t find a way. It was just straight sheer dirt. Looking across the river, I saw a small mammal make its way out onto the ice shelf under a leaning Cottonwood. “Hey! Is that a Mink?” I said. “It’s a Squirrel!”

“Fox Squirrel,” Leslie told me. She explained to me that with the advent of dams on the Missouri, North Platte, and other rivers, Fox Squirrels have made their way west since the nineteen sixties, following the regenerating river bottom woods that don’t get wiped away now that there are dams all over the

place. My introduction to hunting was with Fox Squirrels, several years ago in Wisconsin. I spent all summer practicing shooting a .22 on this guy's dairy farm in Mineral Point, then when the season started I had my first Squirrel in about twenty minutes, one happy foggy morning. I ran to the barn to show Karl, who was milking his cows. "Look!" I thought I had shot a moose or something. It turned out Fox Squirrels were not very wary. I enjoyed eating them in the lunchroom at work with barbecue sauce, sitting there smirking around at the other people with their Danish and wrappings.

After our own lunch, we decided that the best plan of action would be to walk around in our river bottom woods some more. It was right next to a Bentonite plant. You could hear it hum all afternoon. We leaned against a log facing the river. Sarah saw something, look look, but we studied it: turned out to be just another Fox Squirrel, she said disgustedly. However, sitting turned out to be a pretty good strategy. And when we walked into the woods we saw more songbirds. Leslie's big score was a Brown Creeper. We watched this for some time, looking in the book. At first we thought it was a White-breasted Nuthatch. Leslie didn't think so. While it was on the underside of the branch, it wasn't going downhill, and the breast was mottled and brownish. I spotted a Downy Woodpecker, my big success of the day, which I could tell because it was small, and so was the beak. They turned out to be the only Downy Woodpeckers and Brown Creepers seen on the Kane Bird Count that day.

Towards the end of the afternoon, we decided to go back up on the bluff for one more look. More waterfowl on their way upstream, this time to bed for the night. Sarah studied them through her binoculars. Common Mergansers, she said: green heads and red bills. We watched them, black dots high against the sky, strung out and evenly spaced, up above the bentonite plant and the sandy bluff of the river. The sun was going down and it was getting cold. We watched them up high, go down, under the edge of the cliff, and out of sight.

Birds seen: Mallard, Common Merganser, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, Bald Eagle, Ring-necked Pheasant, Rock Dove, Downy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Northern Shrike, Black Magpie, Common Raven, Black-capped Chickadee, European Starling, Song Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco.



Why Are Kestrels in Decline?

By Eric Rossborough

When Eric Katzner was twelve years old, her mother snuck her into the Columbus (Ohio) Zoo and aquarium. Obsessed with birds, Erin got her mother to tell the directors at the teenage volunteer program that she was thirteen, thus getting Erin into the program a year early. That day she held a Kestrel in her hand. This event changed the course of her life. Katzner went on to become a member of the zoo's education team, training animals for educational shows. While her experience with animals is broad, birds hold a special place in her heart. "The thing I love about working with birds," she said, "is that you can get them much closer to the public than say, lions and tigers." At February's Meadowlark Audubon meeting, Erin discussed her work with the Peregrine Fund's American Kestrel Partnership. "Any opportunity to talk about birds with fellow bird nerds," she said, "is a win in my book."

Since 1966, the American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), or Sparrow Hawk, has experienced a 47% decline in the continental United States. Why? This is a widespread bird, its range covering most of North and South America. Scientists haven't been able to find out why. Theories abound. "The environmental problems du jour: pesticides, fracking, global warming, habitat loss, GMOs, are assigned," Katzner said, "but these theories don't hold up when you figure that Kestrels have been in decline since the late sixties." Adding to the confusion is the fact that Kestrel populations have declined in some parts of the United States and not others. For example, in the northeast, Kestrel populations have declined by 88%. At the same time, the Cooper's

Hawk population has exploded. Many think predation by Cooper's Hawks the cause of Kestrel decline here. Kestrel parents will support their young until migration time, and then kick them out of the family group. It appears that when Cooper's Hawks predate on Kestrels, they are taking the young and inexperienced. If this predation was the cause of Kestrel decline, Katzner says, the population drop, high as it is, would be much more precipitous.

North America's smallest and most colorful falcon, the American Kestrel is a bird of unique habits. Because they visible, often seen hovering over the ground and lining up on fence posts, people are often surprised to hear their numbers are in decline. They are secondary cavity nesters, assuming abandoned Woodpecker cavities, rock ledges, or boxes provided by humans. Although they prefer cavities, Kestrels lack the ability to make their own. Arthur Cleveland Bent, in his *Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey*, describes a pair of mated Kestrels waiting until a pair of Magpies had finished their nest, and then driving them off. Another account has Kestrels taking over a Crow's nest, and then eating the eggs. "Kestrels are one of my favorite birds to work with," Katzner said. "They have great big attitudes for such little tiny birds." Their diet consists of insects, as well as small rodents and birds. Audacious and adaptable they may be, but their decline has been steady over the last four decades.

The American Kestrel Partnership, with the help Hawkwatch International, UCLA, Boise State, and other organizations, has undertaken to figure out the source of this decline. One thing they are looking at is whether migration is a factor. By taking DNA from feathers in southern locations, scientists can figure out where Kestrels are going, and what might be happening when they get there. While they're not seeing any diseases affecting kestrels in North America, who knows what's happening elsewhere? To compound the confusion, some Kestrels migrate, and others do not. "If you're confused," Katzner said, "it's for a good reason." Another theory is that Common Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) are competing with Kestrels for nest space. Kestrels are nothing if not feisty, however; the Peregrine Fund YouTube channel features a video of a Kestrel entering a nest box, beating up an occupying Starling, driving it out of the box, and then going outside after it!

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B696MI3yhko>).

For those who want to get involved, there is plenty to do. The American Kestrel Partnership is running a nest box program across the U.S., run by citizen scientists and Audubon clubs. Nest boxes are encouraged, but it may take a couple years for a Kestrel pair to find it. Many highway departments are putting Kestrel boxes on the back of their signs. Grassy highway embankments prove to be an excellent place for Kestrels to look for insects.

While the jury is out on the future of the Kestrel, one day Katzner and her husband watched a Squirrel try to access a Kestrel box in their yard. "I was going to run out," she said, "but I didn't need to. Mother Kestrel showed up and beat the bejesus out of that Squirrel. It was actually rather impressive."

To learn more, volunteer, or watch cam video footage of kestrel boxes, visit <https://kestrel.peregrinefund.org/>.

Absaroka Outdoor Fellowship

By Jarren Kuipers

This year, the Absaroka Outdoor Fellowship, in coordination with Sunlight Sports and Meadowlark Audubon, will be holding monthly hikes from May through October which will explore a variety of geographic areas and habitats in our area. Hikes are chosen for a variety of interests and abilities. Participants typically break off into smaller groups: Some prefer to test their physical abilities, while others like a shorter trail and slower pace. This year Meadowlark Audubon will be sending along members on each hike to facilitate naturalist activities such as birding and botanizing. Hikes are typically the third Saturday of the month. Meet in front of Sunlight Sports, 1131 Sheridan Avenue, at 8 AM sharp.

More detailed information can be found by contacting Jarren Kuipers at 307-250-3150, by email at jarren@landstewardservices.com or at www.facebook.com/HikeAbsaroka. Let's go explore!



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 at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, 720 Sheridan Avenue Cody, Wyoming 82414. Information is subject to change, so please visit our website (<http://www.meadowlarkwyo.org>) for updates! If you would like to be added to our email blast list to receive notices and reminders about meetings and upcoming events, please contact Melissa Hill, eyriehill@gmail.com.

Thursday, April 14, 2016. Outdoor Recreation Programs and Activities Designed to Interest and Engage Young People, with Zach Hutchinson, Community Naturalist for Audubon Rockies. 7:00 to 8:30 p.m..

Thursday, May 12, 2016. Two Months 'Off the Grid' in Australia, with John McGough, of Shell, Wyoming. 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.

Wednesday, May 11-Sunday, May 15, 2016: Fourth annual Spring Into Yellowstone Birding & Wildlife Festival. See article in this issue for more information or visit <http://springintoyellowstone.net/>.

Thursday, June 9, 2016. Meadowlark Audubon Society Annual Picnic. Beck Lake Park, Cody WY. 6:00 PM. Meadowlark Audubon will provide a grill. Please bring your own grilling items, plates, utensils, cups, chairs, and a salad, dessert or other dish to share. See you there!