



# oice of the Meadowlark

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

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## Clark's Nutcracker Project

By Melissa Hill



Hello everyone!

One of the great things about being involved in a group like Audubon is the opportunity to do something for birds and nature. We have an exciting "citizen science" opportunity coming up in June and I hope many of you will be able to participate. A graduate student in the Field Naturalist Program at the University of Vermont is studying the relationship between Clark's nutcrackers and whitebark pine trees and she needs your help.

Whitebark pine populations have declined by 50% over the last few decades due to an invasive fungus, white pine blister rust, and the mountain pine beetle, a native species that has climbed higher in elevation with a warming climate. In order to successfully restore the whitebark pine, we need to concentrate our efforts in areas that otherwise provide suitable Clark's nutcracker habitat. This way, the nutcracker can continue to do its job—spreading the seeds of whitebark pine further across the mountains. Your

data can help us figure out what exactly we are looking for when we go to re-plant trees.

In cooperation with The Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Anya Tyson will give a presentation on her work on the project on Monday, June 12<sup>th</sup> (time and location of the program to be determined). The following day she plans to take citizen scientists interested in helping with the project into the field. She will teach them how to identify local trees, good nutcracker habitat, and the birds themselves.

The participants will then be able to go to their "adopted study spot" throughout the summer and do a quick 10-minute survey for nutcrackers. At the end of the summer, the participants will turn in the collected data which Anya will compile and analyze as part of the Clark's Nutcracker Project.

If you are interested in attending the program, being a citizen scientist, or learning more, watch our website for more information.

Enthusiastic folks like Meadowlark Audubon Society members can make significant contributions to science and help protect species like the Clark's nutcracker by simply doing something they already enjoy. I hope you will take a little time this summer and be a part of this great project!

Happy Birding!  
Melissa





## Update from John Rumm

John Rumm has been busy. A year into his new job in Delaware, he is finding ample opportunity to go birding, and he recently published an article in the November/December 2016 issue of *Bird Watcher's Digest*, which is republished here with their kind permission. John writes:

*Dear colleagues,*

*Hello from Delaware! Though I'm far removed from the birds and landscapes of Wyoming, they are never far from my mind here in my still-new capacity as Executive Director of Nemours Estate (formerly Nemours Mansion & Gardens), the historic mansion, formal gardens and grounds of industrialist and philanthropist Alfred I. duPont (1864-1935).*

*As a tourism attraction, we have transitioned from a reserved-only site which did not allow children 12 and under, to one that is open-access and family-friendly, and has seen our attendance rise by forty percent as a result. We are also proactively working to align ourselves more closely with Nemours Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children, which was funded by Mr. duPont's bequest, and with which we share a 300-acre campus, offering our gardens and grounds for nature-based healing and wellness experiences to benefit pediatric patients, their families, caregivers and providers, and the wider community.*

*The estate's woodlands, meadows and waterways are home to 130 species of birds, along with other wildlife, so I'm also enjoying the opportunity to experience nature firsthand myself as often as possible. Folks are very excited about seeing common ravens in these parts—until the past couple years, they'd been virtually unheard of in northern Delaware. Our "big" sighting was a crested caracara,*

*which Lyn and I observed in southern Delaware over the New Year's weekend, along with numerous other birders—only the second record of one in Delaware! It was a very obliging bird and everyone got a good, clear look at it for 20 minutes or so as it sat in a tree next to a softball field. A great way to start off the year!*

*If your travels ever bring you out this way, please make sure to visit Nemours Estate! Lyn joins me in wishing you the very best, and happy birding!*

*John*

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## Landscapes Marred by the Absence of Birds

By John C. Rumm

*"We had blue sky for a few years, before the sun-storm took it away. There was finally enough oxygen in the air," Estelle said. "This sky [of Earth] is so much bluer and full of fluffy clouds, than we ever had on Mars."*

*"Even better than that," said Harry, "it's full of birds."*

— Pat Davis, *Estelle and the Escape from Mars: A Children's Novel* (AuthorHouse, 2009)

The rising sun, barely visible above the horizon, casts long shadows against the distant foothills. Its light bathes the hillsides in shades of orange, red, brown, and black, illuminating peaks and crags,

some covered with a sheen of frost or snow. From time to time, a few thin clouds briefly obscure the sun, their evanescence giving a shimmering quality to the air. All is still. Then, as the sun nears its zenith, a wind begins to blow, gentle at first, then stronger, kicking up plumes of reddish dust that swirl over the dunes and rocky plains and then rise into columns that march across the landscape.

I've seen this view many times, gazing from the windows of my house as I look out upon the slopes and benchlands of northern Wyoming. The quality of the light as it colors the landscape is hard to describe—so luminous, so lustrous, as it plays along the walls of the ridges and hillsides. Nearly ever-present, the wind at times is a mere breeze, but more often than not a blustery gale. And the fine, talcum-like dust that it kicks up sometimes forms pillars towering 100 feet or more in the air.

But this view also exists in my mind's eye, thanks to images beamed from Mars. Taken from orbiting spacecraft or from rovers making their way across the Martian surface, these images have stirred my imagination, enabling me to visualize what it would be like to be there, seeing the Red Planet's landscapes firsthand. At times, the scenes from Mars seem eerily familiar, nearly mirror-image twins of vistas all around me here in Wyoming.



*The Sun rises above some craggy foothills—but where? The view here is of a landscape on Mars, seen from Opportunity rover, but it looks for all the world like the foothills of north-central Wyoming.*

I was eight years old in November 1964, when NASA successfully launched Mariner 4, an unmanned spacecraft, on a journey to Mars. Seven months later, in July 1965, I devoured newspaper coverage that reported how the probe had

successfully flown past the Red Planet, taking the first close-up photographs of its surface. The images—twenty-one full ones in all—surprised many scientists: they revealed the crater-strewn landscape of a seemingly dead planet that looked much more like the moon than, as many had expected, a smaller and drier version of Earth.

Two passions dominated my life back then: space and birds. Born in 1956, I was a child of the Space Age, a "space nerd" who could tell you the name of every spacecraft, manned or unmanned. Eagerly following details of every mission, I dreamed of one day going into space myself, and, in my wildest imagination, of one day being the first person to set foot on the surface of Mars.

Closer to home, and more down to Earth, I grew up fascinated with birds. Among my earliest memories is of lying on my back in my crib, gazing up not at Mars, but at an "orbiting" group of birds—a wheel-shaped mobile that, when wound up, rotated so that the plastic birds hanging from its edge appeared to dance and fly. I would reach up and try to catch them: a blue bird, a red one like a cardinal, a green-and-yellow parrot, an orange-and-black oriole. In the backyard of our New Mexico home, trellises wrapped with blue morning-glory vines and baskets of scarlet-red bougainvilleas attracted countless hummingbirds. I would sit behind our glass patio doors and watch them for hours on end, spellbound.

To this day—more than half a century later—both space and birds continue to hold my interest. I avidly pore over the latest images taken by spacecraft on and around Mars and other planets. As a birder, I've accumulated a life list of several hundred species, yet I still enjoy sitting at my front windows, watching the finches, chickadees, and other birds that visit our feeders.

It was the birds, rather than the planets, that were foremost in my mind two Decembers ago. An incursion of frigid Arctic air ushered in a late-autumn cold spell, unusual even for this part of Wyoming at that time of year. Temperatures dipped as low as -28 degrees Fahrenheit and never rose above 0 for an entire week. To help the resident overwintering birds, I filled all our feeders brim full, scattered seeds all over the snowy ground, and put out suet.

A few days later, looking out the front windows, I noted with puzzlement that neither the feeders nor the seeds had been touched. Normally, birds

materialize within minutes of our filling the feeders. But none had appeared. A week went by, and then ten days, and they were still completely full. "Maybe the seed was bad," my wife suggested. We emptied the feeders, cleaned them out, and refilled them with fresh seed. Days later, they were still full.

The Christmas Bird Count brought another oddment. My wife and I have covered the same territory for the past five years; we know the houses that have feeders out and the spots that invariably pan out with reliable sightings. But that year proved frustrating and even eerie. We saw no birds at any of the homes with feeders; the reliable spots proved barren. We spotted a grand total of four house sparrows, compared with hundreds the previous year, and no finches of any kind. In contrast to the scores of crows and ravens we tallied in 2012, we counted only a handful of each. Apart from a single group of 20 or so, we found no Canada geese where as many as a thousand typically occur in winter.

Peculiar though this was, the full force of what was happening did not register with me until a few days later. Walking up the driveway with our dog to get the newspaper midmorning on Christmas Day, I became aware of something startling: The sun was high in the sky, the winds were calm, the temperature was in the upper 30s—all the elements of a fine day—and *yet there were no birds at all to be heard or seen*. No songbirds, no collared-doves, no magpies, no crows, nor any other birds normally encountered at that time of day. At the mailbox, I paused and made a 360-degree sweep of the area, straining to see or hear any signs of birds. Nothing chirped, twittered, or called; nothing flitted, flapped, or flew. The silence was deafening.

It felt as if class *Aves* had ceased to exist, or had never existed at all.

I shivered at this thought. A line of poetry by John Keats, which Rachel Carson used as an epigraph in her classic book, *Silent Spring*, flashed through my mind:

*The sedge is wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing.*

The world seemed strangely post-apocalyptic. It felt ... it felt like being on Mars.



*Martian sunset over Gale Crater*

On Mars! The recollection of my childhood dreams hit me like a thunderclap. *I'm the first person on Mars, and there are no birds here. There are only empty, silent landscapes all around me.*

There are no birds on Mars and never have been. Only in the minds of science-fiction writers have birds, like Stanley Weinbaum's orange-feathered "tweel" or the elegant and elusive "flamebirds" of Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*, ever existed there. In real life, the dusty, rock-strewn plains and hills of the Red Planet are landscapes marred by the absence of birds.

And, for nearly a month that winter, so was the landscape around my house. Finally, the Sunday afternoon of the first weekend of January brought a sudden spasm of pinyon jays that descended en masse upon the feeders and made quick work of their contents. A few days later, a pair of purple finches lighted on the perches of one feeder, and a small flock of house sparrows appeared. Within a week, we were seeing, once again, Eurasian collared-doves, magpies, and crows.

What had happened to the birds in the interim? No doubt the brutal cold spell of early December had killed some of them; others, presumably, had been pushed far to the south and west ahead of the advancing cold front, and only now, a month later, were beginning to straggle back to their accustomed territories. The overall numbers remained down for the rest of the winter, and some birds, such as chickadees, took many months to return. But at least the birds are back.

Perhaps coincidentally, or at the very least ironically, the day the first birds returned, the Sunday newspaper carried a story headlined "Blast Off." It profiled a 23-year-old Wyoming woman who has made the initial cut to appear in a reality TV show about the first effort to colonize Mars. Scheduled to blast off in 2024, the Mars One mission plans to send a team of four astronauts on a one-way trip to the Red Planet, with additional teams to follow every two years. "The Mars One astronauts will forsake their lives on Earth for a chance to live on a different planet, leaving their friends and families behind forever," said the article.

*And the birds. They'll be leaving the birds behind forever, I thought as I read the article. The prospect chilled me.*

If I'm still around when they leave, I will wish the brave crew of Mars One Godspeed as they embark on their odyssey. They will carry the dreams of countless earthlings with them as they go. But for me, the dream of going to Mars will have long since vanished. It left when the birds left, and it did not return with them. The marred landscapes of the Red Planet have become, for me, a barren reminder of a time when no birds stirred.

*John C. Rumm recently moved from Wyoming to Wilmington, Delaware. He is writing a biography of Olaus and Adolph Murie, prominent naturalists whose work helped shape the American environmental movement.*



## Water Features and Basin Birds

By Paul DuBow

During an early scene in *The Polar Express* the young boy, doubting the existence of Santa, looks up the

North Pole in the encyclopedia and reads, "...stark...barren...devoid of life." Sounds like the Bighorn Basin in winter, doesn't it? My wife gets tired of hearing me mutter that as we trek along during Christmas Bird Counts. Even in summer while walking through endless shrub-steppe habitat many people may think it is stark, barren and devoid of water. Yet there are many water features throughout the basin that attract birds. And birders.

Before settlement in the early 1900s the only water sites in the Bighorn Basin were large rivers: The Bighorn, Shoshone, Greybull, and Nowood; spring-fed streams: Crooked Creek, Shell Creek, etc., and ephemeral seeps where geologic faults brought water-bearing strata to the surface; there are several seeps in Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, for example. The rivers and larger creeks were bracketed by cottonwood gallery forests with willows on the sandbars—imagine a world with no Russian olive or salt cedar—and the seeps were sedge meadows. Water availability and habitat were limited for birds and other fauna. Away from those corridors was an endless tapestry of sagebrush, rabbitbrush, and junipers good for some species like golden eagle, sage thrasher, and sagebrush sparrow.

Since settlement, additional water areas have been developed across the Bighorn Basin. All are human constructed for water supply and irrigation, but also have the additional benefit of attracting birds and becoming birding hotspots. The large rivers now have dams and reservoirs such as Bighorn, Boysen, and Buffalo Bill, for water supply, flood control, and recreation. Except for the southern end of Bighorn these reservoirs are not actually in the basin; dam location is a consequence of engineering and constricted canyons. Reservoirs can provide waterbird habitat, especially when the pools are drawn down to increase capacity in expectation of spring snowmelt. Shallow water and mudflats are good places to spot shorebirds, waders, and other species. Drive the US-14A causeway across Bighorn Reservoir in winter, and one can count up to twenty or more bald eagles sitting along the channels. When the water is high, hundreds of geese and ducks, gulls, cormorants, grebes and coots utilize the habitat. These reservoirs together with smaller reservoirs along the rivers, e.g., Willwood, Sunshine, Lower Sunshine, provide the water for the extensive irrigation projects in the basin first started by Mormon pioneers and later expanded by the Shoshone Project of the Bureau of Reclamation. In a satellite view of the basin it is easy to detect the green swaths of agricultural land along each river.

The irrigation projects have additional reservoirs constructed to regulate the flows of water or to capture return drain water, e.g., Lovell Lakes, Deaver Reservoir, Ralston Reservoir, and Beck and Alkali Lakes in Cody: see Sally Disque's article on spring and fall migration counts at Beck and Alkali Lakes in *Voice of the Meadowlark* 15(3), Spring 2015. Because of alkali leaching from the soil these areas often have a ring of white crust around them. On the Great Plains and out in California many of these sites are characterized by hard-stem bulrush and branchiopods such as tadpole shrimp and draw alkaline-loving birds including white pelicans (if fish or tiger salamander larvae are present), western and eared grebes, California gulls, gadwall, ruddy ducks, and yellow-headed blackbirds. Some people may find the alkali deposits unattractive, but biogeochemistry is an important factor for some waterbird species. Likewise, the green patches of irrigated pasture and hayland are attractive to many bird species; two that have responded favorably to this new agrohabitat are Canada geese and sandhill cranes that use fallow fields and alfalfa for foraging on vegetation or invertebrates.

The Bighorn Basin is not only an important area for agricultural crops but also for livestock. Stock ponds or dugouts provide water for cattle and sheep, as well as for many bird species, not just waterbirds. A good example is the Common Corrals in Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area. A series of concrete ponds provides water for cattle as they are moved from the Basin to high country in the spring, and back down again in fall. These ponds also serve as a magnet for many upland bird species, such as chukars, Townsend's solitaires, mountain bluebirds and yellow warblers. Many state and federal agencies construct wildlife "guzzlers" to provide water to wildlife in arid habitats; stock ponds provide many of the same benefits to game as well as nongame species.

Some irrigation water is purposed specifically for wildlife habitat creation. A prime example is the Yellowtail Wildlife Habitat Management Area east of Lovell. Much of the area is managed for upland habitat and species such as ring-necked pheasant and wild turkey, but there are also several important water areas, including Ponds 3, 4, and 5. Pond 5, Horseshoe Reservoir, is a deepwater area along Big Fork Canal and is frequented by cormorants, coots, mergansers and other ducks, and kingfishers. It helps that the area is stocked with fish. Ponds 1-4, as well as Classroom Pond, are all located in the

Shoshone River floodplain and were created by constructing berms and water control structures to hold and manage water in each cell for waterfowl, but other bird species benefit as well; Ponds 3 and 4 are especially significant birding sites. The first sandhill crane of 2015 arrived in Pond 3 on Valentine's Day, considerably earlier than the rest of Big Horn County. Four hard to find species are frequently seen or heard in Ponds 3 or 4: Virginia rail, sora, black-crowned night-heron and American bittern. Two Virginia rails were counted on the Kane CBC in December 2015, and remained until early January 2016; two more were present until early December 2016 in what has come to be known as the Rail Hole — a small open water area east of the outlet of Pond 4 that stays ice free longer than the other ponds. Additionally, a brood of Virginia rail chicks was observed in Pond 4 during summer 2016. We also have watched thousands of starlings and blackbirds come in to roost in Pond 4 at dusk in early winter.

There are also important municipal water sites. Parks and golf courses often have ponds—"water hazards" in golf parlance—incorporated into the layout of the area; in many locations geese have prospered so well as to cause a nuisance in these sites. Most cities and towns in the basin have sewage treatment ponds somewhere removed from the town proper; see Rex and Susan Myers' article on the Powell treatment ponds in *Voice of the Meadowlark* 17(1), Fall 2016. Sewage is a nutrient soup that promotes phytoplankton growth which in turn supports high populations of zooplankton, e.g., *Daphnia*, and macroinvertebrates. Additionally, as the effluent is relatively warm and often aerated, the ponds can remain ice-free longer in winter than many nearby areas. Like alkaline lakes similar species respond to these habitats as well. At some treatment ponds northern shovelers, a species of which I am particularly fond as my M.S. and Ph.D. research was on them, can be found in large numbers, and American avocets, black-necked stilts and Wilson's phalaropes may often be seen at those same areas. Many other waterbird species can also be observed. I remember the first cinnamon teal, a species absent from my early birding days back east, that I ever saw almost 40 years ago was on a treatment pond at a rest area along I-25 in Colorado. It may not have been "pristine" wildlife habitat, but it was a life bird. Don't discount these important birding areas.

Many people decry the global changes brought about by human manipulation and alteration, but

we need to take the good with the bad. The Bighorn Basin has been modified by people for the past 100+ years, but these changes have benefitted many bird species to the enjoyment of birders. Just like attracting birds to your feeder these sites attract birds, often where observations are easy to make.



## Let's Go Birding in Cuba!

By Eric Rossborough

American profiteers, from scouts of major league baseball talent to purveyors of fine goods, have been waiting with baited breath for the demise of President Fidel Castro, so they can swoop down on Cuba like a flock of seagulls and have at it. Last November, they got their wish, when the long-time oligarch died at the age of ninety. Everyone has seen the photos of Cuban automobiles, all of which predate the Cuban Revolution. Somehow they have kept them running. In terms of access to material goods and linear progress, Cuba has been locked off from the modern world since the overthrow of dictator Fulgencio Batista. A probably unintended side benefit of Cuba's exclusion from the capitalist world is that its physical environment has been locked in time. Things there look much as they did in 1960, which is 50 plus years of de facto protection of the natural environment. As David Brower said, the environmental movement has only slowed the rate at which things get worse. If only we could turn back the clock! In Cuba you can, at least for the moment, and for avid naturalists, the time to see this paradise is now.

Cuba is home to over 350 bird species, 27 of which are endemic and about 30 of which are considered globally threatened. A sighting of the blue-headed

quail-dove, while rare, is not out of the realm of possibility. Birders in Cuba can expect to see flamingos, parakeets, woodpeckers, herons, and spoonbills. Cuba is the natural habitat for three species of hummingbirds, including the bee hummingbird, or zunzuncito, the smallest hummingbird in the world, weighing less than a penny. The Cuban solitaire, olive-capped warbler, Fernandina's flicker, and giant kingbird are other birds you can expect to see in what sailors in the 1700s called the "Pearl of the Antilles."

Charles Puff, proprietor of Cuban Outdoor Adventures, is planning on offering birding tours of Pinar del Rio, one of the best birding areas in Cuba. Tourists will get to tour Havana while staying at a five-star hotel. The tour will also include a visit to Parque Nacional La Güira: 54,000 acres of wilderness preserve, teeming with Cuba's birds.

"Make sure you bring your passport!" Puff says. "Your passport will have to be valid for at least six months after your return from Cuba." The weather? Tropical. "Bring a big hat, and plenty of sunscreen," Puff said. He adds, "In addition, a waterproof windbreaker may be useful in the field during a refreshing afternoon rain shower."

For more information go to [www.cubaoutdooradventures.com](http://www.cubaoutdooradventures.com) or call Cuba Outdoor Adventures (USA): 1-314-894-3776.





Meadowlark Audubon Society of the  
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## 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](mailto:eyriehill@gmail.com).*

*Note that meeting dates have been changed to the third Wednesday of the month unless otherwise indicated.*

**Sunday, April 30, 2017. 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. Iceland - a Land of Contrast, with Catherine Symchych, Photographer/Adventurer.**

**Wednesday, May 17, 2017. 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.**

**Wednesday, June 21, 2017. 6:00 p.m. Meadowlark Audubon Society Annual Picnic. Beck Lake Park, Cody WY. Join us as we celebrate the end of our “meetings season” and kick off another great summer! We’ll have some bird related games and there are nature trails to explore and do a little birding. Meadowlark Audubon will provide burgers and hot dogs for our annual picnic dinner. Please bring a side or dessert to share with others as well as your own beverage. See you there!**

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