



# oice of the Meadowlark

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

Volume 13, Number 1

Autumn 2012

## President's Letter

Dear Members of Meadowlark Audubon,

I hope everyone has had a good summer! I know it was a little hard to see the birds through all the smoke. It was a tough summer for wildlife and nature's resilience was demonstrated by nesting birds relying on residual vegetation from last year's amazing plant growth. We are fortunate that the wet climate last year banked nesting cover for birds during this drought year as there was very little new growth this year. However, nature can only be stretched so far. We will start to see declines in bird populations when drought becomes yet again continuous.

Food for birds has been in short supply as forbs did not have enough moisture for growth. Insects, especially pollinators, are also short on nectar. Hopefully we set out some extra bird seed in our feeders this year. Many birds will adjust by not nesting. It must be a long way to go for a migratory bird to come back to its winter grounds without chicks to show for it.

Think about the Upland Sandpiper. It migrates through the Midwest from Argentina where it winters (some have even been observed in Antarctica) and nests in Wyoming, Canada and Alaska. I have seen this bird twice and it is beautiful. It behaves differently, like other species that nest in the Arctic. It is very tolerant of birding activities, as you may observe with the Rough-legged Hawk.



*Upland Sandpiper (photo courtesy of Destin Harrell)*

I took this picture back in 2003 on the county road heading to the Heart Mountain Trail managed by the Nature Conservancy. On the north side of the road is a post. According to the *Peterson Field Guide to Western Birds*, the Upland Sandpiper is a "pigeon-headed" brown sandpiper, larger than a killdeer. The short bill, small head, shoe-button eye, thin neck, and long tail are helpful points. Often perches on fenceposts and poles; upon alighting, holds wings elevated."

It so happens that I saw this bird on a fencepost! Every time I drive by that fencepost I look for another. I know for sure there was an Upland Sandpiper taking a break on its journey of the Americas.

Time to start the new Meadowlark Audubon Society year of scheduled meetings. The board has been hard at work arranging for educational programs for our members. We are kicking off

this year's season of meetings with a presentation from the folks at the Heart Mountain Nature Conservancy Ranch, who will be talking about what kind of birds they have on their property. If you know of a speaker who you think would be appropriate for our membership, please let me or another board member know and we will try to host him or her.

Thanks again for all your interest and support!

— Destin Harrell

## **Ursula Kepler (1922-2012): *An Appreciation***



Northwest Wyoming's birding community lost a guiding light on July 30, when Ursula Kepler passed away at West Park Spirit Mountain Hospice in Cody. Born in Cheyenne on September 14, 1922, Ursula Manewal attended the University of Wyoming,

graduating in 1944. That same year, she married a childhood friend, Charles "Kep" Kepler, then an officer in the U.S. Army. After the war, the couple lived in Michigan, Oklahoma and Wyoming while Charles completed his law school education, passed the bar, and taught law courses. By 1952, they had settled in Cody, where they spent the rest of their lives together. Their loving marriage endured nearly 70 years, Charles preceding Ursula in death by a month.

Ursula had many interests in her life—gardening, music, swimming, skiing, photography, the Girl Scouts. And birds: she was passionate about birds. She fed them, sheltered them, and even collected them, assembling a collection of mounted specimens of birds commonly seen in this area. Most of all, she loved observing birds, telling the *Cody*

*Enterprise* in 1993 how "Cody is [so] fortunate to have rivers and plains areas . . . and the mountain habitat." She enjoyed sharing her own love of birds with other people, inspiring countless numbers to become birdwatchers.

As early as 1973, Ursula was working with, and calling upon, local birders to report their observations to Wyoming Game and Fish, as well as to *Audubon Field Notes*, the leading national repository of such data. She developed a deep and lasting friendship with Hugh Kingery, who compiled reports for the "Rocky Mountain West" section of the *Field Notes*. Writing to Ursula in 1996 after he retired from his post, Kingery thanked his old friend "for your years of faithful contributions," telling her "I've enjoyed your notes, your observations, and seeing your birding bath in Cody."

Ursula's reporting took on a new impetus in 1983 when, after having closely followed for years the results of Christmas Bird Counts in Jackson, Casper, Cheyenne and other parts of Wyoming, she decided it was high time for Cody to hold its own CBC. With Dave and Cheryl Belitsky, she organized that first Cody count. Keenly competitive, Ursula set a goal: Cody would strive to match or exceed Jackson's record of the previous year, when it tallied 59 species, best in the state. "If we can come close to [that]," she told the *Cody Enterprise*, "that would thrill us to no end." Even though the 26 participants in Cody's inaugural CBC didn't quite make it—they tallied 55 species, including 291 Grey-crowned Rosy Finches, several hundred mallards, and one Pied-billed Grebe—everyone had a great time in the process.

More importantly, Ursula had set the wheels in motion for something that would continue running for decades to come. During the 1984 CBC, Cody's counters—23 people, including four children—battled horrible weather and poor visibility to tally 53 species, including 30 White-winged Crossbills and one hardy (or foolhardy) Western Meadowlark. The following year, Cody's corps of observers topped the state with

51 species, including a Pygmy Owl and a Purple Finch, one of the first recorded in Wyoming. For Ursula, the sighting not only proved a personal triumph, but also revealed the sort of person she was. “I had been told that if we ever saw a Finch it would be a Cassin’s Finch,” she told the *Cody Enterprise* on January 15, 1986,

*so I took pictures and sent a set to Denver [the location of the compiler for the “Rocky Mountain West” section of Audubon Field Notes]. I thought they were ignored, and sent a second set asking if I could have a yes or no. I finally was notified that the pictures had been sent to an ornithologist, and he determined they were Purple Finches!*

Ursula didn’t flinch; the count tallied her finch.

And so it went through the 1980s and 1990s, with Ursula organizing Cody’s CBC, promoting it through the local papers, participating in the count herself in the field and also tallying birds seen in her yard, and hosting the post-count tally dinner at her home. Her enthusiasm was infectious. Thanking her for her services in organizing the 1997 CBC, John Roland wrote Ursula in January 1998 that “the birders you assembled for the count were varied, interesting and informative, as well as being very pleasant.” He particularly enjoyed Ursula describe how she had seen a Loggerhead Shrike, telling her “it was very impressive to hear an experienced and knowledgeable birder express [such] genuine excitement about her sighting.”

Coordinating Cody’s Christmas Bird Count was only one mark of Ursula’s involvement in the local birding community. Working with the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, she sought to increase interest in birds among local school students. In 1991, recognizing the importance of the wetland east of Alkali Lake as a nesting site for grebes, ducks, swans and other waterbirds, Ursula was instrumental in persuading Daphne Grimes and Dodds and G. Sidney Buchanan to set it aside as “Buchanan Nature Sanctuary.” She served for many years as a board member of Ironside Bird Rescue, championing and

supporting Susan Ahalt’s work. And, in 1998, Ursula was overjoyed when the BBHC had hired “an Ornithologist interested in hawks,” Dr. Charles Preston, as the curator of its new natural history museum. She became one of his biggest supporters.

But perhaps the greatest legacy of Ursula’s commitment to the birding community of northwest Wyoming was her effort to form a local Audubon chapter. For many years she had served in a quasi-official capacity as “president” of a “Satellite Chapter” of an Audubon chapter based in Casper. Early in January 1999, she and Charles, along with David Dominick, hosted a dinner that was billed as the “1st meeting towards the organization of a Big Horn Basin Audubon Society.” Among the 33 people in attendance was Vicki L. Spencer, the newly-named Director of Wyoming Audubon. “I was quite impressed,” Spencer wrote Ursula, “by the enthusiasm of the individuals attending the Audubon chapter organizing meeting.” Many wanted officially to elect Ursula as the first president of what would become Meadowlark Audubon Society, but she demurred: it was time for younger people to take the reins.

Later that same year, Ursula told the *Cody Enterprise* that the 1999 CBC would be her “last organization for bird watching and reporting.” Forty-three people took part, the most ever up to that time, tallying 60 species. Nearly half of the 7,115 birds seen were starlings. “I’ve had non-birders report the black waves of a high number” of starlings, the *Cody Enterprise* quoted her on January 12, 2000, “even to a thousand birds dip[ping] and turn[ing] as a black cloud.”

With Ursula Kepler’s passing, a black cloud of another sort temporarily blocks our view. Yet it cannot conceal the light of her accomplishments and her lasting presence. Ursula enriched so many lives, both human and avian. For that, and for the many memories she gave us, we will remain forever grateful.

— John C. Rumm

*Editor's note: Much information in the above article came from Ursula Kepler's "Birding News" scrapbook of newspaper articles and correspondence, which is housed in the Park County Archives in Cody. We are grateful to Lyn Stallings, curator of the archives, for her assistance in making it available to us.*

## **Tributes to Ursula Kepler**

I will never forget my first meeting with Ursula Kepler. Her sparkling blue eyes were full of excitement as she described the Red-breasted Nuthatch that had just visited her backyard. I had heard that Ursula was the core of the birding community in Cody, so when she invited me to her home I readily accepted. I had only arrived in Cody a few days earlier to begin envisioning and designing the Draper Museum of Natural History. Ursula wanted to donate a portion of her extensive science and natural history library to the Museum to get us off on the right start. She was very gracious and generous with her gift and her extensive knowledge of birds in the Cody area. We talked for more than two hours that first day—about birds, people in Cody, birds, wind in Cody, birds . . . and more birds!

Ursula's passion was inspiring, whether she was talking about birds, wildflowers, swimming, Girl Scouts, or any of her other varied interests. My wife, Penny, and I soon came to consider Ursula and her husband, "Kep," among our best friends in Cody. We visited with Ursula in her room at West Park Spirit Mountain Hospice only a few days before her death. She was tired and not feeling well. But that sparkle returned to her eyes for just a moment when she told us of the beautiful bird that had visited her that morning. The birds, Cody, and Penny and I lost a great friend and source of joy when Ursula left us. Her memory will continue to inspire.

— Charles R. Preston

I met Ursula her in the late 1980s when she was running the Audubon Christmas Bird Count. We met at her house after the count to do a tally

and have some wonderful food. She even joined me on my Cottonwood Creek route one year when she was in her 70s. It seems nothing dampened her spirit or zest for life and she was a joy to talk to as you never knew what she would say. Ironside Bird Rescue became a 501-C-3 nonprofit back in 1990, with Ursula a founding board member. She continued in that role until her death. She and Kep also donated to the birds every year and her yard was the release site for a few songbirds.

I was at their 50th wedding anniversary but missed the 60th. Kep was a very nice gentleman and always said hello and asked about how things were going with the birds. I will miss them both.

— Susan Ahalt

## **2012 Spring Bird Count**

Once again this past spring, as has been the practice for eight years, a group of observers met for nine weeks on Monday mornings to count the birds on the Beck Lake complex. This complex includes Beck and Alkali lakes (which Audubon has designated as an "Important Bird Area" because they are used heavily by migrating and nesting waterbirds), along with the Buchanan Wildlife Sanctuary, the New Cody Reservoir, and Markham Reservoir. Thanks to global warming, the weather was quite pleasant for most of the days we counted birds. Of course, the fellowship of other birders and the knowledge that we would be going somewhere for a hot breakfast afterwards helped to make any chilly weather bearable.

The accompanying table shows the bird numbers we have seen since we started the bird counts on the Beck Lake Complex. The numbers indicate the average number of birds or species counted each day of the season.

There are certainly fewer birds being seen in later years, but I won't pretend to have any idea

<b>Bird Counts at Beck Lake Complex</b>				
<b>Year</b>	<b>Spring Count</b>		<b>Fall Count</b>	
	<b># Birds</b>	<b># Species</b>	<b># Birds</b>	<b># Species</b>
<b>2005</b>			<b>2026</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2006</b>	<b>339</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>2369</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>2007</b>	<b>549</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>1073</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>2008</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>1036</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>2009</b>	<b>241</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>805</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>2010</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>910</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2011</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>462</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2012</b>	<b>320</b>	<b>26</b>		

why. I think it is important that we keep these records for anyone who may want to look into the trend.

We will start this year's fall count at 7:58 A.M. on September 17th, weather permitting. We plan to meet at McDonald's at about 6:30 to have breakfast, and will carpool from there to the west side of Taco John's parking lot near the west end of Beck Lake.

We would like to invite anyone who is interested to join us to learn about bird identification in the company of other birders. If you cannot come for the entire count, please free to join us for as much time as you have available. We start the count one hour after sunrise, so the time changes each week.

— Donna Haman

## **Meadowlark Audubon Society Scholarship Essay**

*Editor's note: As is our custom, here is the winning essay in Meadowlark Audubon's Deb Woodbridge Memorial Scholarship Competition. The \$1,000 scholarship is awarded to a high school graduate from our four-county region whose career goals support the mission of the National Audubon Society—focusing on birds, other wildlife and their habitats, and conserving and restoring natural ecosystems for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity. This year's recipient, Kristopher Mull of Worland, Wyoming, will be attending Northwest College. We are delighted to print Kristopher's essay, and wish him the very best in his future endeavors!*

I think that it's real important that we humans restore our ecosystems of birds, wildlife, and their habitat. I'm glad that organizations and advocates work hard, every day, to solve the nation's environmental problems. But no single person or organization can change the world on their own. I plan on helping with their cause to help our ecosystems!

I plan on entering the field of wildlife biology to better our ecosystems and make the habitats for the animals and birds a more eco-friendly and a more comfortable place. Being the outdoor activist that I am, I think that it's really crucial that we protect what our birds and animals eat as well. Plants and animals are important components of the environment. Plants help to provide the oxygen needed for respiration by performing photosynthesis. They also serve as a food source for animals. Certain animals, like the herbivores, also depend on plants for food. Humans use plants and animals for numerous purposes; however, with such atrocities as environmental pollution, the killing of animals, and the destruction of their natural habitat, the plant and animal populations have merely struggled. To conserve plants and animals, you need to reduce environmental pollution and habitat destruction, and encourage others to abide by your efforts. For example, when my father and I go out hunting, we have a contest who can pick up the most trash and the loser has to usually buy lunch for the next day. Little things like that help out the habitats and ecosystems. I believe it's a step forward!

We cannot interfere with the natural habitats of the ecosystem. Both large and small elements of a natural habitat are easily harmed; the destruction of a bird's nest or the removal of trees represents such an occurrence. I think that it's important to not introduce unfamiliar species of plants or animals to a given area. Plants and animals adapt to the ecology of an area, evolving to protect themselves from enemies that also inhabit the region. If you introduce a species that is alien to the habitat, it will either perish or threaten the region's native

plants and animals. For example, up in Buffalo Bill Reservoir, I remember when I was younger someone dumped walleye in the lake and it tore up the trout and other native species to the lake.

I also think that it's important to get the word out to others. You can spread your ideas to others, explaining the importance of conservation and how they can help. Posters and pamphlets are effective strategies for this task. On the posters, write general concepts about why people should conserve plants and animals, and list simple measures that can be taken to ameliorate the present conditions. Within the pamphlets, define conservation, list reasons why plants and animals need to be conserved, and explain how people can contribute to the conservation effort. You must lead by example!

I think that I would be a great wildlife biologist to help protect the animal's habitat and conserve their way of life. Through spreading the word through pamphlets and actually doing the hands-on work it would be better for the animals and for the ecosystems. Also something to think about when addressing this subject is that we want to conserve the land for the animals and birds and also for our granddaughters and grandsons. We want them to experience the same things we did when we were young. We must conserve the land!

— Kristopher Mull

## **Editor's Notebook: *Old Friends***

There's a quickening of the spirit, a feeling of comfort, which comes from knowing each other so well. You finish each other's thoughts; you round each other off. It's a feeling that comes from going back years together—so long, in fact, you may have lost count of how many. Years may pass before you see each other again, but when you do, it's as if no interval had elapsed since the last time you did. You simply pick up where you left off.

That's how it often is when old friends meet again. It's a time for re-igniting old memories, and creating new ones.

As it is with people, so it is with birds, at least in my experience. There's nothing quite like the feelings of comfort and recognition that come from re-encountering once-familiar birds that you haven't seen for a long, long time.

This past summer, my family and I vacationed for two weeks in Ohio. Except for a few quick trips, all business-related, it was our first foray back east in nearly five years. We looked forward eagerly to spending a week in Lakeside, a Chautauqua community at the tip of the Marblehead Peninsula on Lake Erie's Ohio shoreline, where we had not been since 2006. We planned to visit parents—my 85-year-old father and my wife's 86-year-old mother, both ailing. And we hoped to see old friends whom we hadn't seen for years—including those of the avian variety.

They were there aplenty to greet us, or at least several of them were. Late one afternoon, while driving along a coastal road a few miles south of Lakeside, my wife and I chanced upon Meadowbrook Marsh, a nature preserve owned by Danbury Township. The 113-acre tract offers diverse habitats, including wetland marshes, forests, meadows and grasslands. Danbury Township had acquired the property in the early 2000s, but it was not until 2008 that trails and observation areas had been developed. What immediately drew us to the preserve was the sight of numerous Great Egrets standing gracefully erect in the marshes, their whiteness glinting in the shadows of the setting sun. There must have been nearly a score of them, more than we had ever seen at one time.

As I watched the egrets, my mind returned to the first time I saw one of these marvelous birds. It was the summer of 1967, and I, then 11 years old, was traveling with my family from our home in Toledo, Ohio, to Ocean City, Maryland. In the days and weeks leading up to our trip, I

pored over my treasured copy of Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds* (1947), visually imagining what it would be like to observe birds I'd never seen before. Great Egrets captured my attention. Not yet part of my world, they seemed foreign and exotic, even though (or perhaps because) Peterson's plate depicting them and other "long-legged waders" showed them detached from any context, two-dimensional and on a greyish background. No amount of imagining, however, could prepare me for the sight of that dazzling white bird, standing tall in the reeds with its long, S-shaped neck and spear-like yellow bill clearly visible, that I glimpsed from the car as we crossed over a causeway.

Ever since then, I've observed egrets scores, if not hundreds, of times. I doubt I will ever grow weary of seeing them. But they occur only rarely in Wyoming, so the opportunity our summer vacation afforded me to see them again, and in such numbers, provided a special thrill. Along with them, in the marshes and ponds of Meadowbrook Marsh, were almost as many Great Blue Herons—equally majestic birds which I have encountered in Wyoming, though never more than one or two at a time. In contrast to the egrets, which were mostly quiet, the Great Blues put on quite a vocal performance, their grunts, squawks and croaks reverberating across the marshland.

Other old feathered friends re-encountered in Ohio provided welcome sights and new memories. A female Wood Duck swam lazily among some cattails in one of Meadowbrook's ponds, its telltale "backward spectacles" clearly visible. We looked expectantly, but in vain, for its mate. A pair of Mourning Doves perched overhead one evening on a telephone line outside our rented cottage in Lakeside. They cooed softly back and forth with their mournful call, making a sound once so commonplace and comforting to me, but now almost never heard in Wyoming. Sitting with my elderly father in the living room of his assisted-living apartment, I saw a brief flash of red out of the corner of my

eye, and turned my head just in time to spot a Ruby-throated Hummingbird visiting the feeder outside his window. It rekindled memories of summer afternoons when hummingbirds frequented the trumpet vines that wrapped around the railings of our porch in the Toledo home where I spent much of my boyhood, their shimmering red throats and rapidly beating wings captivating me.

Two other old friends, both once commonly encountered, proved elusive this past summer. One was the Northern Cardinal—a bird of special significance for me, it being both the State Bird of Ohio, and the mascot of my high school. When I lived in the East, it seemed as if cardinals were ubiquitous. The male's vibrant red color, crested head, and black face mask made him nearly impossible to miss, even in heavily wooded areas; the female, though drabber in her red-accented greyish-brown plumage, also stood out, especially with her bright red beak. Ringing out loudly, the telltale calls of the cardinals—*purdy purdy purdy* or *chew chew chew*—were familiar, and comforting, ambient sounds.

But the cardinals were, strangely, scarce as hen's teeth in Ohio during our time there. Walking around Lakeside, I only rarely heard brief snippets of their songs, and then looked in vain to find them. No flashes of vivid scarlet; no crested birds. Finally, on the last evening of our week in Lakeside, after hearing a cardinal's call, I stepped outside and glimpsed one perched high atop a distant tree. I saw it there for only a few seconds before it flew away. Ironically, much the same thing happened a few days later when we visited my sister's home in suburban Dayton. The back of her house looks out upon a stream whose banks are lined with tall oaks and other hardwood trees—perfect habitat for cardinals and other songbirds. As was the case in Lakeside, however, they seemed barren of birds during our two-day stay. Yet as we were pulling out of my sister's driveway late in the afternoon to start our long drive back to Wyoming, a bright-red bird flew right past the front of the

car and lighted in a tree. Its call reverberated as we drove up the street, leaving me feeling heartened, yet wistful.

The other elusive bird also bore a crest—the Blue Jay. Much like the cardinals, they were familiar figures in the birdscape of my memories. They were one of the very first birds I learned to recognize; their beautiful plumage, with its shades of blue, grey and white, left an indelible impression. So, too, did their distinctive, often raucous, calls and whistles, especially their haunting song, liquid and gurgling, impossible to describe, a sound like no other bird makes. I considered it a virtual certainty that I would see and hear Blue Jays while back in Ohio, but except for one brief snippet of a far-off call, my expectation failed to pan out.

A day before leaving Lakeside, however, as my wife and I were walking in town, she paused, bent down to pick up something, and silently handed it to me. It was a perfectly intact Blue Jay's feather, delicate and fragile, with complex hues of blue and grey running through it. Preserved on my desk, it serves as a touchstone, a wellspring of memories.

Friends may come and go, but old friends stay with us for a lifetime. Returning from my vacation in Ohio, I was cheered, once again, by the sights and sounds of birds that were once foreign to me, but which have now become part of my life. The American White Pelicans that float lazily in the Buffalo Bill Reservoir. The Sandhill Cranes whose primeval calls punctuate the dawn and twilight. The Mountain Bluebirds and Lazuli Buntings whose blue coloration never fails to arrest me. And others, also—the various grebes, ducks, raptors, sandpipers, thrushes, warblers and finches that I have come to know so well here in Wyoming.

And, of course, the Meadowlarks—both human and avian—who have become valued friends. May they remain so, for many years to come.

— John C. Rumm

## The Land of the Sage

*Editor's note: September 2012 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Silent Spring, the bestselling book by Rachel Carson whose publication helped launch the environmental movement. Carson wrote it to focus public attention to the harmful effects and unforeseen long-term consequences of chemical pesticides and herbicides. Her book caused widespread outcry, triggered Congressional and scientific investigations, and led to the banning of DDT. Sadly, Carson herself did not live to see this outcome; she died of cancer in 1964. Today, the eloquence of her writing remains as vivid and as potent as it did half a century ago. In this excerpt, Carson describes how the fragility of the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem, a "natural system in perfect balance," was being imperiled by concerted efforts to eradicate sagebrush stands.*



The earth's vegetation is part of a web of life in which there are intimate and essential relations between plants and the earth, between plants and other plants, between plants and animals. Sometimes we have no choice but to disturb these relationships, but we should do so thoughtfully, with full awareness that what we do may have consequences remote in time and place. . . .

One of the most tragic examples of our unthinking bludgeoning of the landscape is to be seen in the sagebrush lands of the West, where a vast campaign is on to destroy the sage and to substitute grasslands. If ever an enterprise needed to be illuminated with a sense of the



history and meaning of the landscape, it is this. For here the natural landscape is eloquent of the interplay of forces that have created it. It is spread before us like the pages of an open book in which we can read why the land is what it is, and why we should preserve its integrity. But the pages lie unread.

The land of the sage is the land of the high western plains and the lower slopes of the mountains that rise above them, a land born of the great uplift of the Rocky Mountain system many millions of years ago. It is a place of harsh extremes of climate: of long winters when blizzards drive down from the mountains and snow lies deep on the plains, of summers whose heat is relieved by only scanty rains, with drought biting deep into the soil, and drying winds stealing moisture from leaf and stem.

As the landscape evolved, there must have been a long period of trial and error in which plants attempted the colonization of this high and windswept land. One after another must have failed. At last one group of plants evolved which combined all the qualities needed to survive. The sage—low-growing and shrubby—could hold its place on the mountain slopes and on the plains, and within its small gray leaves it could hold moisture enough to defy the thieving winds. It was no accident, but rather the result of long ages of experimentation by nature, that the great plains of the West became the land of the sage.

Along with the plants, animal life, too, was evolving in harmony with the searching requirements of the land. In time there were two as perfectly adjusted to their habitat as the sage. One was a mammal, the fleet and graceful pronghorn antelope. The other was a bird, the sage grouse—the “cock of the plains” of Lewis and Clark.

The sage and the grouse seem made for each other. The original range of the bird coincided with the range of the sage, and as the sagelands have been reduced, so the populations of grouse

have dwindled. The sage is all things to these birds of the plains. The low sage of the foothill ranges shelters their nests and their young; the denser growths are loafing and roosting areas; at all times the sage provides the staple food of the grouse. Yet it is a two-way relationship. The spectacular courtship displays of the cocks help loosen the soil beneath and around the sage, aiding invasion by grasses which grow in the shelter of sagebrush.

The antelope, too, have adjusted their lives to the sage. They are primarily animals of the plains, and in winter when the first snows come those that have summered in the mountains move down to the lower elevations. There the sage provides the food that tides them over the winter. Where all other plants have shed their leaves, the sage remains evergreen, the gray-green leaves—bitter, aromatic, rich in proteins, fats, and needed minerals—clinging to the stems of the dense and shrubby plants. Though the snows pile up, the tops of the sage remain exposed, or can be reached by the sharp, pawing hoofs of the antelope. Then grouse feed on them too, finding them on bare and windswept ledges or following the antelope to feed where they have scratched away the snow.

And other life looks to the sage. Mule deer often feed on it. Sage may mean survival for winter-grazing livestock. Sheep graze many winter ranges where the big sagebrush forms almost pure stands. For half the year it is their principal forage, a plant of higher energy value than even alfalfa hay.

The bitter upland plains, the purple wastes of sage, the wild, swift antelope, and the grouse are then a natural system in perfect balance. Are? The verb must be changed—at least in those already vast and growing areas where man is attempting to improve on nature’s way. . . . [I]n a land which nature found suited to grass growing mixed with and under the shelter of sage, it is now proposed to eliminate the sage and create unbroken grassland. . . . Now millions of acres of sagebrush land are sprayed each year.



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

---

**(The Land of the Sage continued)**

What are the results? The eventual effects of eliminating sage and seeding with grass are largely conjectural. Men of long experience with the ways of the land say that in this country there is better growth of grass between and under the sage than can possibly be had in pure stands, once the moisture-holding sage is gone.

But even if the program succeeds in its immediate objective, it is clear that the whole closely knit fabric of life has been ripped apart. The antelope and the grouse will disappear along with the sage. The deer will suffer, too, and the

land will be poorer for the destruction of the wild things that belong to it.

— Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962)

## **Membership Renewal Reminder**

Please note that Meadowlark **Chapter-only** annual memberships expire August 31st. If you have not sent in your renewal, we would appreciate it if you would take a moment to do it now. Chapter-Only dues are still only \$12 per year. Please send your dues to Donna Haman, Membership Chair, at P.O. Box 593, Cody, WY 82414. Thank you!

---

### **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, September 13, 2012: Board Meeting, 6-6:45; General meeting, 7-8:30. Program: Carrie and Brian Peters, “The Nature Conservancy’s Heart Mountain Ranch.” Please note that the meetings and program will take place at the EOC Meeting Room in the basement of the Park County Courthouse, 1002 Sheridan Avenue in Cody.**

**Saturday, September 15, 2012: Volunteer Workday Event for BLM National Public Lands Day. Please see Meadowlark’s website for more information.**

**Late September 2012 (date TBD): The Nature Conservancy Volunteer Project on the E & B Landmark Ranch near Heart Mountain. Please see Meadowlark’s website for more information and/or contact Katherine Thompson at 307-250-5345 or [Katherine\\_thompson@tnc.org](mailto:Katherine_thompson@tnc.org).**

**Thursday, October 11, 2012: Board Meeting, 6-6:45; General meeting, 7-8:30. Program: John C. Rumm (Curator of Western History, Buffalo Bill Historical Center), “A Sense of Wonder: The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson.”**

**Thursday, November 8, 2012: Board Meeting, 6-6:45; General meeting, 7-8:30. Program: Vince Slabe (wildlife biologist affiliated with the Raptor View Research Institute, Bozeman, Montana), “Golden Eagle Research, with Special Reference to Non-Lead Ammunition Impact Studies.”**