



# oice of the Meadowlark

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

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**Winter 2015**

## President's Letter

By Destin Harrell



Dear Members,

I would like to say thank you to everyone who has recently stepped up to offer and present programs this year. We have a good slate of presentations for this winter and I'm excited to attend them. We

have recently been meeting at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody. The administration there has allowed us to use their facilities, meeting areas, lab, and auditorium. Thank you to Melissa Hill and Dr. Charles Preston for proposing this change of venue and getting the proper permissions. The meetings have an interactive feel when you're able to be hosted by an educational facility like the Draper Museum of Natural History. I hope you can attend one of the fantastic programs this winter.

During the September meeting I announced that after eight years, I would be stepping down from the president's position following the May meeting. I feel like it is time to have new leadership, with new ideas to give it a go. I would like to stay involved with the board and I hope to be of use to the membership in the future.

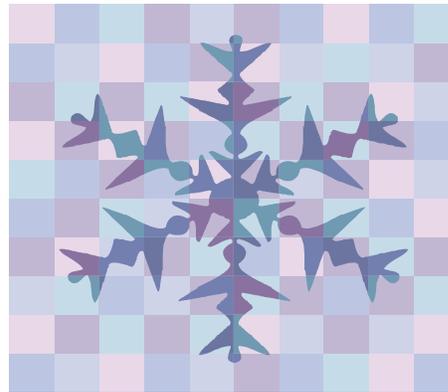
I do love being a part of this group. I have great memories attending my first meeting in 2001 and getting to know the local birders. I have learned so much from the field trips and the programs over the years. What I like is the wide variety of topics. It keeps us educated on broad ecological issues which we can apply to our

passion for birds and birding. My life in the Bighorn Basin surely isn't as complete without the Meadowlark Audubon Society's influence.

Thank you all for the opportunity to lead Meadowlark Audubon Society and all that you have taught and shared with me. I am sure my successor will be a very inspired and dedicated person, considering the quality of people we have in the membership.

Hope you can participate in the upcoming Christmas Bird Counts and the Mid-winter Eagle Survey.

Take care,  
Destin Harrell



## Big Horn Basin Christmas Bird Counts

### Kane [Lovell area] Christmas Bird Count

The Kane CBC will be held on Sat. Dec. 19, 2015.

The Kane CBC will be part of the 116th Christmas Bird Count, which is held throughout North and South America and the Pacific Islands and sponsored by the National Audubon Society. Observations made during

the CBCs help identify species at risk, focus public policy, initiate conservation strategies, influence public commitment, and locate birds on the move due to climate change. The Kane Count Circle, created by Terry Peters in 1990, is centered around the old town of Kane, extending from Moncur Springs on the west to Sand Draw near Lovell, incorporating a good portion of the Yellowtail Habitat, as well as private land.

Meet at the Big Horn Canyon National Recreation Area Visitor's Center in Lovell at 7 a.m. At this time we will check in, enjoy a hot drink & muffin, and select a route. Each team will be given a packet containing a bird list, map, and other pertinent information. At sunrise the teams will cover their routes and regroup at 4 p.m. for a chili dinner and compilation.

Please drive a 4-wheel drive vehicle if possible. If not, we will try to pair you with a team that's in a 4-wheel. At check-in we'll ask for your vehicle license number and description, and if you have a cell phone, its number.

Bring binoculars, bird books, spotting scope, CAMERA, lunch, side dish for dinner, warm clothing and footwear, hat and gloves, and plenty of water and/or warm drinks. A clip board is handy to record your findings. Since the pheasant season will be open, wearing hunter orange is a good idea for your own safety. Everyone welcome: no expertise required, so bring a friend! We thank the National Park Service for being our host. Contact Neil and Jennifer Miller by phone at 307-568-9346 or by email at <njmillier@tctwest.net> for more info.

We are looking forward to a fun and successful count day while helping out our feathered friends! See you on count day! Until then, good birding! Neil and Jennifer.

### **Cody Christmas Bird Count**

The Cody CBC will be held Saturday, December 26, 2015. Backup date in case of blizzard: the following Saturday.

The Cody routes are assigned prior to the count and participants receive route maps, bird checklists, and other information about the count in the mail. It is then the responsibility of those covering each route to contact each other to make plans for covering their route.

At 6:00 p.m. on the evening of the count, we gather to tally the results of the count and enjoy a pot-luck supper. Soup and beverages are provided, and participants are asked to bring a side dish of their choice to share. The tally and supper will be at 6:00 p.m. at the Christ

Episcopal Church, 825 Simpson Ave, in Cody. Chuck Neal will lead the tally. All levels of birders are welcome and we try to pair experienced birders with those who have less experience. There is a limited window open to conduct the counts each year, and this year we find that our only Saturday choice is the day after Christmas, leaving the following Saturday open in case we need to postpone due to bad weather. But after all, it is called the "Christmas Bird Count."

If you would like to join the Cody CBC, call Joyce Cicco at 307-527-5030, or email <jcicco00@tritnet.net> for more info.



## **Birding the Mindo Cloud Forest of Ecuador**

**By Eric Rossborough**

Ecuador is one of the best places in the world to look for birds. There are approximately 1600 species in the South American country, almost twice as many as in the United States. Neighboring countries like Columbia boast more species, but Ecuador has a greater diversity of birdlife than any other small nation on Earth. Ecuador is located in Tropics, is crossed by the Equator, and has the Andes Mountains, plus sea level terrain within its borders. Ecuador covers almost all the climate steps, and so is extremely biologically diverse. Birders of all stripes have flocked to the country to see what they can see, which is plenty. In July, Rex Myers and Susan Richards of Meadowlark Audubon spent two weeks in Ecuador, and reported their findings to Meadowlark Audubon at the September meeting.

On July 20, 2015, Rex and Susan joined Dave McDonald, Professor of Zoology and Physiology at the University of Wyoming, and a group of his students. They flew into Quito, which sits on the edge of an active volcano. "It looks like you put a city of two million into

Wind River Canyon,” Rex said. Another big draw to the country is mountaineering, but Rex and Susan spent most of their time in rainforest. This wet country also offers a large number and diversity of butterflies, as well as snakes. One young woman turned out to be a big snake buff. “She was always finding snakes and taking pictures of them with her phone,” Susan said, “but no one else was interested.”

Travel was by dirt roads, which Rex described as “Viciously rough. If you have never driven in Ecuador, it’s something you do not want to do.” They spent their time at the The Mindo Cloud Forest Reserve, and within that, a 153 acre tract known as the Milpe Bird Sanctuary. There is a lot to see here. The Mindo Valley Christmas Bird Count yielded 500 species. However, the focus of McDonald and his students was on the Golden-winged Manakin.

A passerine bird containing sixty species, Manakins are hard to spot in the dense rainforest. They range in size from two to six inches, and feed on small fruit in the forest understory. They are small and compact, have a short, wide bill, and short wings. Rex and Susan wanted to see a White-bearded Manakin, staying in one place for an hour after their companions had left. Finally they were rewarded with a fleeting glimpse. In the wet undergrowth it is difficult to spot a bird five feet away. Birding in the Ecuador rainforest, as a result, is largely done by ear. Rex and Susan hadn’t much experience at birding by ear, and Dave McDonald was essential in helping them through this part of it. Humidity is 100%, and it rains every day. The vegetation drips constantly. With the thick undergrowth, bushwhacking is not really an option. “Get off the trail,” Susan said, “and it’s incredibly hard to hike.”

One result of this daily rain is the ground turning to mud. Slipping is constant hazard. Rex and Susan thought they would be the only ones to slip, but this was not the case. The college students in the group slipped frequently as well, something they called having a “yard sale: everything goes.” Another thing Rex and Susan noted was the size of the leaves. Huge. “Because they are so large,” Susan said, “they make quite a noise when they fall. It’s an auditory experience unlike anything in our Western mountains.”

Because of the extreme variation in altitude, many birds stay in very narrow ranges in Ecuador. You can go up or down 500 feet and a bird species will be gone. Due to its proximity to the Equator, there is only one season: summer. Another thing the Ecuadorian rainforest is rich in is hummingbirds. There are 138 different species. Rex and Susan managed to see thirty five: birds with

wonderful and sonorous names: the Amethyst Woodstar, the Green Violetear, the Tawny-bellied Hermit, the Sword-billed Hummingbird. The Sword-billed Hummingbird has a bill five inches long: the bill is larger than the body. Rex mentioned he has no idea how this works aerodynamically. Another bird they saw a great deal of were Tanagers. There are 149 species in Ecuador. Rex and Susan only saw eight, but the ones they did see were nearly iridescent.

Birding is big business in Ecuador. All the reserves have plenty of feeders, and paid staff keep these full all the time. It is not only nature-oriented tourists that follow birds: many of the natives have bird feeders in their yards as well. One common type of feeder is the banana feeder. Split a banana down the middle and put it on a stick skin side down. The birding orientation in Ecuador extends to the facilities. Restrooms and urinals have low walls, so people can be birding constantly.

Birds of the Ecuadorian rainforest travel in multi-species flocks. “The rainforest will be dead quiet, and all of a sudden there will be flocks of birds overhead,” said Rex. The reason they do this is to stir up insects to eat. For birders, this means the action can come fast and furious: there will be a flurry of identification, and then the birds are gone, and it’s quiet again. Seen in these flocks were birds like Parrots and Toucans. The Parrots fly around overhead, making a tremendous noise, and are gone. One bird Rex and Susan particularly wanted to see was the Andean Cock-of-the-rock. Getting up before dawn, they hauled up a slippery slope and crept into the rainforest to find a lek. “It was an absolute din,” Rex said. They didn’t see any. “When it’s dawn,” he said, “they’re gone.”

Dave McDonald will be leading his next birding trip to Ecuador in January 2016. For more information contact Dave at [dbmcd@uwyo.edu](mailto:dbmcd@uwyo.edu).





## **Furthering My Education with the Help of the Meadowlark Society**

**By Richard Walker**

By furthering my education I will gain the necessary knowledge to become the game warden I aspire to be. In my community I hear of a lot of issues various wildlife species, from deer to coyote to bighorn sheep, are faced with. My senior class capstone project faced the issue of overgrazing of rangelands and its effects on the ecosystem. Many people are uneducated on the environment and the wildlife around us, and I want it to be my mission to instill this knowledge into other people as I move forward into my career.

I want to become a game warden to insure the health of wildlife species, whether it be wild game animals or migratory birds. I understand the effects of trophic cascades and how one species can affect another: like a domino effect that ripples through the ecosystem. A very controversial issue in the Western states, and some Eastern states, is that of wolves. I have learned a lot about top-down and bottom-up forces in the ecosystem by studying this issue. I believe that it is important to see many different views of things in order to get an accurate opinion on a topic. In Wyoming we do not generally recognize what benefits a keystone species like the gray wolf has on our ecosystems. Wolves, although known to be destructive, were able to bring a lot of diversity back to Yellowstone, like beavers, muskrats, and even amphibian species. With the new growth of aspen and willow trees, more songbirds returned to the area, along with many scavenging birds. The incredible adaptability of not only animals but the environment in general is amazing. As a game warden, I will continue to work to understand the wildlife around us and to see the benefits and disadvantages that each species brings to the table. At this point, I believe that every species

brings something to the table that in some way benefits the ecosystem.

Currently I am enrolled for the fall of 2015 at Northwest College, where I am working to earn an associate's degree in Range Management. From there I plan to transfer to Bozeman, Montana to finish out a bachelor's degree in Wildlife Management and Ecology. Then I plan to work on becoming a game warden, in order to assist my community, The United States Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management in sustaining healthy and long-lasting ecosystems not only in the Big Horn Basin, but in the state of Wyoming as a whole.

I am greatly obliged to have this opportunity to share my goals with the Meadowlark Audubon Society and the community.



## **The American Kestrel**

**By Melissa Hill**

The American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) is often referred to as a "pint-sized predator." About as big as an American Robin, their small size and big personalities make them a favorite among many birders. Kestrels are not recluses. They hunt along roadsides and nest in cavities in close proximity to humans. Their bright colors (well, bright for raptors) make them stand out while resting on fence lines, hovering over fields and pastures, or copulating on fence posts in front of the entire world. Throw in an incredibly distinct and loud "killy killy killy" cry and you have one noticeable bird.

Found in open habitats from East Coast to West Coast and from Alaska through South America, this tiny falcon has long been one of the most spotted raptors on Christmas Bird Counts across the country. But that's changed in recent years. Across its range, American Kestrel populations are dropping noticeably. In fact, some areas of the country have seen an 88% decline in Kestrel populations since 1966. Here in the Northern

Rockies Region, our American Kestrel population has declined by 55% in that same time. Why? One group is working hard to find the answer to this question.

The American Kestrel Partnership (AKP), a project of The Peregrine Fund, is a research and conservation project designed to produce nesting habitat, data, models, and conservation plans for the American Kestrel across North America. The American Kestrel Partnership consists of more than 600 partners, recording data from more than 1,400 kestrel nests from Alaska to Argentina. Using citizen scientists, the AKP is hoping to collect data that will help determine the cause of the Kestrel's decline. Once a cause or causes are found, a conservation plan can be developed to help the species recover.

Reasons for the American Kestrel's population decline may include land use, climate change, competition with European Starlings for nesting cavities, depredation by other birds of prey, and contaminants such as heavy metals, brominated flame retardants (used in electronics and textiles), and rodenticides.

The AKP is asking for your help in both research and conservation efforts! You can contribute to Kestrel conservation by building and hanging nest boxes and you can contribute to conservation by monitoring those nest boxes and logging your data through the AKP. You can also help American Kestrels by supporting, sponsoring, or promoting the AKP or learning more about and spreading your enthusiasm for the world's second smallest falcon species.

Meadowlark Audubon's February 2016 meeting is scheduled to have Erin Katzner, Director of Community Engagement for The Peregrine Fund, to talk about the decline of the American kestrel and the work of the American Kestrel Partnership.

To register as a citizen scientist, find plans for American Kestrel nest boxes, or to learn more about the American Kestrel Partnership visit their website at [www.kestrel.peregrinefund.org](http://www.kestrel.peregrinefund.org).



## **A Tribute to the Late John Ross**

**April 27, 1927 - November 20, 2015**

**by Neil Miller**

John was an avid and competent birder. He was actively involved with Meadowlark Audubon from the very beginning. He participated in virtually all our field trips. He assisted us in the very first bird surveys of the Beck Lake IBA. He participated in both the Cody and Kane Christmas Bird Counts for a number of years. KaCey and he have done the Greybull to Shell Winter Eagle Count for the BLM numerous times. He arranged and orchestrated the setting up of several Osprey nest platforms, and the installation of the Great Blue Heron nesting platform in Wardell Reservoir. He worked tirelessly in our attempt to establish the Beartooth Ranch as a Meadowlark Audubon site. He spent hours and hours as a volunteer observer in Chuck Preston's Golden Eagle Study over a couple of years.

In short he has been a serious contributor to Meadowlark Audubon for many years and a dear friend to Jennifer and me and many, many others. He will be greatly missed.

## **Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge**

**By Rex Myers**

Growing up in Denver, the Rocky Mountain Arsenal was off-limits because of the secret, toxic stuff the government did there. In the last twenty years, however, the 17,000 acre area in Commerce City, northeast of Denver, has become a National Wildlife Refuge. It is worth the trip if you visit Denver. Grassland, wetland, and woodland habitats have been preserved with trails. There are about a dozen miles of paths through these habitats and a nine mile driving tour. The refuge has a small Bison herd and will be re-introducing Black-footed Ferrets in the fall of 2015. There is a nice visitor center as well, with exhibits on Rocky Mountain Arsenal history, and local habitat exhibits. Susan Richards and I went there over Labor Day, drove roads, and walked a couple miles of trails. Birds seen included: Double-crested Cormorants, Rough-leg, Barn, and Bank Swallows, Eastern Kingbirds, Mourning Doves, Red-wing and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Robins, Meadowlarks, a Yellow Warbler, American Kestrel, Northern Harrier, Starlings, and Magpies.

Happy Birding!

Rex



## The Sagebrush Sea

By Eric Rossborough

October's meeting of the Meadowlark Audubon Society, at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, featured a screening of *The Sagebrush Sea*. Produced by a team of biologists and filmmakers from Cornell University's Lab of Ornithology, *The Sagebrush Sea* arrives at an opportune time, coming as it does with the September decision not to list the Greater Sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act. October's Meadowlark Audubon Meeting featured a screening of film, along with a discussion.

As Jarren Kuipers, biologist and Meadowlark Audubon Treasurer, pointed out, the sagebrush sea is where all of us in the Bighorn Basin live, whether we realize it or not. The town of Cody itself is carved out of the sagebrush steppe. Like the tallgrass prairie to the east, the sagebrush steppe has been subject to an extermination campaign in the name of agriculture and animal husbandry that has been less successful than the one waged on the tallgrass prairie merely because of a lack of water. It's not from a lack of intent on the part of our forbearers that as much of it is left as there is. Even now, sagebrush is the dominant floral feature of the Bighorn region. And the apparent lack of diversity is misleading. As Destin Harrell, Meadowlark Audubon President and Wildlife Biologist for the Bureau of Land Management, pointed out, "It wasn't until I got to college and someone took me out there and pointed out the marvelous diversity of grasses under the sagebrush that I found out how diverse it really was. I just fell in love."

As the movie shows, the Greater Sage-grouse, a creature of extremes, has adapted itself to this harsh environment. The film takes us through the year in the life of a Greater Sage-grouse, as they primp and fight, as they roll the eggs in their clutch every few hours to keep them warm, as they shelter their hatchlings under sagebrush to protect them from predators. The sagebrush is called a nurse plant, since it provides shade and protection, not only for the Sage-grouse and chicks, but for other forms of grass.

After the film, Destin moderated a discussion. The Greater Sage-grouse, for the time being, has escaped listing under the Endangered Species Act due to a concerted effort on the part of various agencies to improve its habitat and population. Asked about whether he thought the recent measures taken to protect the Sage-grouse were enough, Destin said, "No one knows if it will work for sure, but it's a good step forward. There are a lot of groups that care about the Grouse, but the threat of endangered species listing definitely brought in some groups that might not otherwise be interested. If there was not the threat of a law, I don't think we would have got as far as we did." The Greater Sage-grouse is an umbrella species: if it can thrive, so in turn will a lot of other plants and animals that rely on the sagebrush expanses for survival.

Our local experts offered conclusions, based on personal experience, which differed somewhat from those expressed in the movie. Melissa Hill, Assistant Curator, Draper Museum Raptor Experience, said that based on their nest studies of Golden Eagles in the Bighorn Basin, Jackrabbits and Cottontails are primary prey species of these raptors, not the Greater Sage-grouse. The movie asserted that Wyoming sagebrush is fire resistant, but Destin noted that in his experience this was not the case. It could be that the proliferation of lighter fuels like cheat grass make it easier for sagebrush to burn up. In any event, sagebrush does not grow back quickly. Silver sagebrush, seen at higher elevations, grows back in about thirty years, but Wyoming sagebrush, seen at lower levels in the Bighorn basin, will not grow back for a hundred years or more if burned.

*The Sagebrush Sea* can be viewed on PBS, and on the PBS website at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/sagebrush-sea-full-episode/12341/>



## Introduction to Birding

By Eric Rossborough

Members of Meadowlark Audubon and the community at large were treated, on November 12th's meeting, to a presentation by Dr. Charles (Chuck) Preston and Melissa Hill of the Draper Natural History Museum entitled: "Introduction to Birding." Melissa, Manager of the Draper Museum Raptor Experience, provided the intro to the intro. "Even though my career is working with birds, I am a beginning birder," she said. "When I've gone out with real birders, I have no idea what you're talking about." The evening turned out to be a chance for beginning birders to, if not get their feet wet, at least have a grounding in what and how to see when out birding. Not only that, there was plenty of information for more experienced birders to hone their skills on.

"The cool thing about birding is you don't need a lot," said Chuck. With that, he allowed as how in the post John James Audubon era, when ornithologists no longer shoot their specimens in order to study them, a pair of binoculars might be a good idea. Prices range from \$100 to over \$1000, he said, and you get what you pay for. Chuck does not recommend very expensive binoculars for beginners. A mid-range pair of binoculars is sufficient. After that, improvement in optics is incremental. 7x32 and 8x42 binoculars are recommended. Chuck said he personally likes rubber covered binoculars, finding them more durable. Destin Harrel noted that when it comes to optics, you can't judge a book by its cover. "I have found beat up binoculars that had outstanding optics," he said.

After optics, the first thing to know when birding is what birds live in your area. This can be done with the assistance of a good field guide. Recent years have seen a proliferation of these on the market. I myself, until

recently, stuck to the venerable *Golden Field Guide: Birds of North America*. Why? It fits in my pocket. Chuck told a story of about a Frigate Bird that was found far from the ocean in Colorado when he was a curator at the Denver Museum of Natural History. No one believed it, but it turned out to be so. "Keep an open mind," he said, "but remember that people frequently misidentify birds."

After you know whether a bird can be found in your area, look at what kind of habitat it likes. This can narrow things down quite a bit. Then, look at the size. People are always misjudging the size of birds and other animals. Someone showed Chuck a picture of what was thought to be a black Panther. He was taken aback, but the angle of light had inflated the apparent size of what turned out to be a very large house Cat.

The silhouette of a bird can tell much about a bird. Look at the shape of its tail, the shape of its beak. Another thing to watch for are patterns of flight. How high or low does it fly? What about the demeanor of the bird? According to Chuck, you can tell a Red-tailed Hawk from a Golden Eagle by its attitude and general demeanor. I will have to watch for this next time I am in the field.

Roger Tory Peterson ushered in a new era in a birding in 1934, when he published *Guide to the Birds*. It was the first modern field guide and the first one to use what he called "field marks:" distinguishing characteristics that enable you to tell one bird easily from another. For example, a Cliff Swallow has a solid tail and a brown neck. People who have done something a long time often come to know things without being able to explain why. As Chuck said, "'I don't know' is never a satisfactory answer. Elucidating what field marks distinguish a bird can be very instructive."

If you're crushed that you missed this solid introduction to the art of birding; despair not. Part two will be coming up in the spring, so watch your calendars.





**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](mailto:eyriehill@gmail.com).*

**No Meeting in December.**

**Thursday, January 14, 2016. Birds of Kenya, with Dennis Davis, retired Northwest College journalism professor. 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.**

**Thursday, February 11, 2016. American Kestrels, Erin Katzner, Director of Community Engagement, The Peregrine Fund. 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.**

**Please note: program is tentatively scheduled, depending on Erin Katzner's travel schedule.**

**Thursday, March 10, 2016. Bears in Your Neighborhood! What Now? With Andy Pils, Shoshone National Forest Service Wildlife Biologist, North Zone. 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.**