

# Montana's Christmas Bird Counts for 2003-2004

By Daniel Casey  
American Bird Conservancy



Thirty counts were conducted in Montana last year, down from a peak of 33 counts two years earlier. Relatively mild weather characterized most of the count period, and many of the unusual finds among the 142 species (plus one cw and 3 exotics) reported were lingering summer or fall migrant species (e.g. Gray Catbirds on two counts). Most counts had snow cover, with 13 reporting maximum depths of a foot or more, and several (Fort Peck, Glacier, West Yellowstone) with depths of 3 ft. or more. Noxon-Heron had "severe" conditions, with 2 ft of crusted snow and sub-zero wind chills. The snow concentrated game birds in many cases, yielding high counts of Ring-necked Pheasants, Sharp-tailed Grouse (Fort Peck, 398) and Greater Sage-Grouse (Pompey's Pillar, 37). Bigfork had the highest total of countable species (85), followed closely by Stevensville (83). Two new species (Rock and Bewick's Wrens) were added to the cumulative state CBC list (now at 210 spp.) Interestingly, both came from the same count (Ninepipe NWR). The Bewick's was also a state winter first (there is only one other well-documented recent state record).



In a reversal of the usual pattern, Trumpeter Swans (599 on 7 counts) outnumbered Tundra Swans (81 on 4 counts). With the exception of Mallards (25,764) and Common Goldeneyes (4,100), duck numbers were generally low statewide. A Blue-winged Teal was found at Eureka for the second CBC record there in three years. Long-tailed Ducks were found at Bigfork (1), Great Falls (2) and Helena (4); fall and early winter reports of this species have been increasing in recent years.

An Osprey on the Missoula count had been seen 30 November, then again on 3 days during the count period; this species is extremely rare in Mon-

tana after late September.

Three Ferruginous Hawks on the Ninepipe NWR count were not unprecedented there, but fewer than 20 have been seen over the past 15 years on MT CBCs. Three Gyrfalcons were reported, including one on the Pompey's Pillar count, where all five falcon species were counted. The larger species were no doubt taking advantage of the concentrated flocks of game birds.

California Quail continue to be reported from the Bitterroot Valley at Stevensville, where the 67 counted this year were joined by a single (released) Gambel's Quail. One "normal" Montana winter may yet end this (private) experiment, but the former species seems to be surviving and reproducing. Four Sandhill Cranes on three counts nearly doubled the state CBC reports of the species; at least one of these birds (at Ennis) was injured.

*(Christmas Bird Counts continued, next page)*

## DECEMBER FLATHEAD AUDUBON CALENDAR

**Monday, December 13, 2004: Flathead Audubon General Meeting** begins at 7PM at the Summit, conference room #3.

**Tuesday, December 7, 2004: Flathead Audubon Board of Directors meeting**, 6PM at Jane Lopp & Associates Building, 295 3rd Ave. EN, Kalispell.

**Saturday, December 18, 2004: Bigfork Christmas Bird Count & Potluck**

**Sunday, December 19, 2004: Glacier National Park Christmas Bird Count**

**Sunday, January 2, 2005: Kalispell Christmas Bird Count**

(Montana's Christmas Bird Counts, 2003-2004, continued.....)

The spread of Eurasian Collared-Dove across MT is continuing, but slowly. Two on the Bowdoin NWR count were the only ones reported. The more notable trend is the continued increase in wintering Mourning Doves. This year a record 1353 were reported, from 14 counts (586 at Kalispell).

Interestingly, the lone Ruby-crowned Kinglet at Bozeman was new to the state's longest running count, but the well-described Gray Catbird there was their second. Another catbird was photographed on the Stevensville count, where it lingered a week beyond the count day. Stevensville also hosted one of the two Varied Thrushes found this year (Libby); this species is surprisingly rare on MT counts. Combined wax-wing numbers were low again this year (<6000), but as always, Bohemians made up >90% of the total.

Thanks go out to the observers at Kalispell, Missoula and Yellowstone NP, for submitting convincing details on single Lincoln's Sparrows at each location. Three Fox Sparrows were also reported, from Hamilton (2) and Noxon-Heron, with fewer details. Digital photos were submitted for the count-first Swamp Sparrow found in Somers on the Bigfork count.

Winter finch numbers were unimpressive, although redpolls were found on 21 counts. This year single Hoaries were reported from Bigfork and Kalispell. Only 172 Evening Grosbeaks were found statewide. Small numbers of Purple Finches were found only at Bowdoin NWR (where they are expected), and for the second year in a row at Kalispell (where they are not). After many years of nearly geometric increases, the statewide total count of House Finches declined for the second year in a row, down 15% from the all-time high of two years earlier.

What will this year bring?

Glacier National Park's Christmas Bird Count is scheduled for Sunday, December 19th. Nine routes radiate from the Apgar area. For information and registration, please call 892-7406.



#### **BIRD COUNT!**

As many as 13 male eastern bluebirds have been recorded huddling in one nest box to keep warm.

*Birds & Blooms Magazine*



## **Christmas Counts Coming Up**

This year the Bigfork count (our 31<sup>st</sup>) will be on **Saturday, December 18<sup>th</sup>**. True to our new tradition, the Kalispell count will be two weeks and a day later, on **Sunday, January 2<sup>nd</sup>**. Other counts in our chapter area include Glacier National Park, Ninepipe, Eureka, Libby, and the Upper Swan Valley (Condon). Let's review a few highlights from last year.

Last year a **Swamp Sparrow** in Somers became the 140<sup>th</sup> species on our 30-yr cumulative list for the Bigfork count. Other treats included a female **Long-tailed Duck** in the Swan River at Bigfork, six "**Harlan's**" **Hawks**, and record numbers of both Mourning Doves and American Goldfinches. The Bigfork count has a well-deserved reputation as one of Montana's best, regularly recording more than 80 species, usually the highest count in the state. Centered at Streeter's Corner north of Bigfork, our 15-mile diameter circle includes everything from the sheltered bays of Flathead Lake at Somers to the dense forests of the Jewel Basin Road, and from the Swan River to the open farmlands of the Lower Valley.

We've already seen 91 species over the short (5-yr) history of the Kalispell count, adding a lingering **Lincoln's Sparrow** to the list last year. We also had **Purple Finches** for the second time, six Merlins, and record numbers of doves and Gray Partridge. This count circle is centered at Reserve and 93, and includes lots of riparian areas, West Valley and the Smith Valley, Evergreen and Foy's Canyon.

### **How You can Be Involved (We Want You!)**

Participating in a Christmas Count only requires that you're willing to spend at least part of the day outdoors with one or more other birders, counting all the birds in a designated part of our count circle. Or, if you live in the count circle, you can just count the birds at your feeder that day. We welcome all comers, and take care to pair less experienced folks with more skilled observers. Call the count compiler, Dan Casey, at 857-3143 (home) or 756-2681 (office) if you want to take part in the Bigfork or Kalispell counts, either in the field or as a feeder watcher. For the Bigfork count, all arrangements are made ahead of time, and then we meet at the Bigfork Senior Center at 5:00 pm the day of the count for a potluck compilation dinner. For Kalispell, we finalize the teams over breakfast at Finnegan's restaurant the morning of the count (starting at 7:30). Please come and continue the tradition with us, and start a new tradition of your own!



December 2004 Program  
**Early Winter Birds of the Flathead:**  
**A Christmas Count Primer**  
 (Monday, December 13<sup>th</sup>)



There's no better way to prepare for the upcoming Christmas Bird Counts than to come and enjoy Dan Casey's annual slide show. Much more than merely a discussion of our local counts, this popular presentation will give an overview of the diverse birds we see in our area this time of year, with identification tips, CBC trivia, conservation and natural history tidbits, anecdotes and predictions. You can expect an animated presentation with lots of great pictures of common and rare birds. We will try to finalize the teams for the Bigfork count at the end of the talk. Don't miss it!

**NOVEMBER BIRDING BLAST**

Our Great November Birding Blast, led by the noted birder, Dan Casey, produced 70 species! We did not get several species we thought were sure bets such as turkeys, doves, jays and Tree Sparrows, most woodpeckers except for flickers and a couple of Downies.

Almost at first light at Dan's feeders in Somers, we ticked off great birds - both Waxwings, Golden-crowned Kinglets and Common Redpolls, lots of Crossbills, eagles, swans, ducks and geese, Juncos - on and on. We got 4 species of Gull in the Polson area, including several Thayer's. The Mission Valley produced several morphs of Rough-legged and Red-tailed Hawks. At Ninepipe it got really good - from the same spot, we glassed Long-tailed Duck, Prairie Falcon and Red-breasted Merganser, 3 species of grebe and ducks from Canvasback to Green-winged Teal. Along the ditches we got Ditch Parrots (pheasants), Marsh Wrens, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Merlin and Kestrels on the wires. Shrikes were hunting the shelter belts. We even came up with a couple of shore birds - Killdeer and Long-billed Dowitcher. Thanks for a great demonstration and lesson, Dan!

The Christmas Bird Count will take the place of the December Birding Blast. So come on out and enjoy another opportunity to see great birds.  
 By Bob Lee



**RECYCLING**

**TIPS**

- You can recycle aluminum foil as long as it doesn't have a lot of food sticking to it. Soiled or stained is o.k. Include it with aluminum cans. Foil pie pans are fine, too.
- Only corrugated cardboard and cereal type boxes should be placed in the "Cardboard" section of the blue recycling bins. Just remember, gray or brown on the inside of the boxes.
- Remove packing materials from cardboard boxes before recycling them. Plastic bubble wrap and styrofoam peanuts are accepted for reuse at The Towne Printer in Whitefish and Columbia Falls and the UPS Store in Kalispell.
- The only plastic currently recyclable is #1 and milk jugs.
- Plastic grocery bags can be recycled at most grocery stores. Do not mix them with plastic in the blue recycling bins or take them to the recycling centers.

Linda Winnie

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Our Audubon Recycling experiment got off to a rousing start last month. We expected a bag or two of pop cans and maybe a stack of newspapers, and instead we got - - A MOUNTAIN! By the end of the evening, the trailer was heaped full, with more in the 4Runner! And the next day at the recycling center, Flathead Audubon was credited with 365 pounds of recyclables kept out of the landfill (and cleared out of your basements and cupboards) and \$44.39 put into the FAS treasury. So, every one of you who brought your cans, bottles, bags, and papers, give yourself a pat on the back. And, everybody, start saving! Bring everything you can gather to the next Flathead Audubon meeting and pile it into the old trailer on the edge of the Summit parking lot. You're making a big difference!

Kay Mitchell

PREZ  
SEZ

THANKS!



From President Linda DeKort

## GRATITUDES AND REQUESTS

Thanks to **Tom Ulrich** for donating a slide projector to the FAS Education Committee. This will be a great help in presenting our *Birds of the Flathead* Slide Series to classrooms and organizations. Tom was among the photographers who donated slides to make this presentation possible. Thank you, Tom, for your continued support of Flathead Audubon!

Thanks to **Montana Coffee Traders** for donating Shade Grown, Organic, Fair trade coffee at our general meetings. They are providing both decaffeinated and leaded (for the purists among us).

And now for requests...

We are in need of a member with business background to serve on the Finance and Insurance Committee. We are presently looking into obtaining liability insurance for FAS and are formalizing financial procedures. There will not be too many meetings after we get these things in place. If you would like to share your expertise, please contact Linda de Kort, 755-3794, [dekort@digisys.net](mailto:dekort@digisys.net)

Our raffles have been quite successful, bringing in \$30-35 at each monthly meeting. If you have some nice or delicious things which you think would make a good raffle item, please call Linda de Kort or bring it to the next general meeting. Suggestions: stationery, bird books, homemade baked goods.

## FLATHEAD AUDUBON SEARCHES FOR EDUCATION COORDINATOR

Because of a generous grant from the Sustainability Fund, administered by Lex Blood, FAS is able to provide a stipend (\$1500 annually) for a coordinator of our educational volunteer efforts. Montana Audubon has supplied such a stipend in the past but because of financial constraints is no longer able to fund that position. Flathead Audubon Education Committee is made up of many dedicated and hardworking volunteers who continue to develop teaching materials, put on teacher workshops, help with presentations and field trips. Because the committee is so active, they are in need of someone to help coordinate all of these activities. We are looking for someone who is enthusiastic about working with teachers and promoting conservation education in the valley. The Flathead Audubon Education Coordinator will be expected to fulfill the following duties:

- Promote the use of FAS Education materials by contacting schools, teachers, and interested agencies.
- Maintain the check out procedure for the FAS educational materials.
- Periodically check all FAS educational materials that are being used and alert the education committee if replacements or repairs are necessary.
- Report at Board meetings, General meetings and Education committee meetings, and write an occasional piece for the chapter newsletter.
- Help organize, promote and attend education committee work projects.
- Communicate with other local conservation organizations and agencies to coordinate and advance educational efforts.

If you or somebody you know are interested in applying for this stipended position, please call or email Linda de Kort, 755-3704, [dekort@digisys.net](mailto:dekort@digisys.net)

## RECYCLING CENTERS HONORED AT NOVEMBER MEETING

Flathead Audubon's program of recognizing individuals and organizations in the Flathead for their Outstanding Conservation Achievements is now in its fourth year. Three times each year, we honor and thank persons or groups who have made significant contributions to conservation in the Flathead. The program reminds us of the wide variety of people engaged in important and often indispensable conservation efforts, and the broad range of activities that contribute to preserving the natural values of our Valley.

In its first presentation for 2004-5, Flathead Audubon recognized the three recycling centers of the Flathead Valley for their essential contributions to the reduction of waste in the Valley. The presentation was made at our November meeting.

**Reduce, Reuse and Recycle** -- "the three R's" -- are the key to minimizing waste. The first 'R' is the foundation: *Reduce* the amount of packaging material you bring into your home or business, as well as other material that you will use only once or for only a short time. Then, try to *Reuse* anything you do bring in, or find someone else who can reuse it. And finally, when you find yourself with things that have to be disposed of, *Recycle* all that you can. The landfill is only your very last resort.

In the last 15 to 20 years, the recycling ethic has gained a foothold in the Flathead. Now we have a variety of "specialty" recyclers who will take such things as oil, batteries, packing materials, cell phones, and electronics. But the mainstay of all our recycling efforts is our trio of recycling centers.

They are in the business of taking most of the common items we need to dispose of -- aluminum and steel cans, other metal objects such as appliances, paper and paper products of various kinds, plastic containers, etc., and then selling them to someone who will turn them back into useful commodities. The materials from our discarded items are reused to produce new ones. In addition, the manufacturing process involved in working with recycled materials generally requires less energy and auxiliary resources such as water, than does the manufacturing process that starts with basic raw materials.

North Valley Recycling in Whitefish, Pacific Steel & Recycling in Kalispell, and Valley Recycling in Kalispell, have for a number of years provided this essential service to our community. Running a recycling center is not a "get rich quick" proposition. There have been times when the profit margin on recycling was pretty meager. We are grateful that all three of our recycling centers have stuck with it during those times, and are still actively supporting our efforts to reduce waste here in the Valley.

**North Valley Recycling** has served the Flathead since 1981. Its founders, Ben and Connie Cohen, introduced curbside pick-up of recyclables in Whitefish and nearby areas. The business was acquired in 2001 by Montana Waste Systems, based in Great Falls. The company was not able to send a representative to our November meeting.

**Pacific Steel & Recycling** was founded almost 100 years ago in Spokane, and now has a number of recycling centers throughout the Pacific northwest. The one is Kalispell opened about 1950. Randy Augusta, Supervisor of this facility, attended our November meeting, and told us that originally, Pacific Steel and Recycling was in the business of recycling hides and horns. Now, however, they process more than 15 million pounds of metal, paper, cardboard and plastic. They currently offer corrugated cardboard pick-up to local businesses, and accept a wide variety of metal items, such as scrap iron and stainless steel, appliances (excluding refrigerators), radiators and car bodies.

**Valley Recycling** opened about 13 years ago. It is locally owned and operated. Claude Hargrove, Plant Manager, attended our November meeting, and told us that Valley Recycling processes over 7 million pounds of material each year. He estimates that about 5% of this is plastics, 17% is aluminum, 12% is other nonferrous metals, 30% is cardboard, and the remaining 35% is newspapers, magazines and other waste paper. About half of this comes from local businesses, the other half is household recyclables. Valley Recycling processes the material deposited by the public in the blue recycling bins located around Kalispell and at the county trash pick-up sites.

For several years now, Valley Recycling has had a special working relationship with Flathead Audubon. Our members can take their recyclables to Valley Recycling and ask that any payment for these be donated to Flathead Audubon. Claude and his workers keep track of these small amounts, which do, over time, add up nicely! Every six months or so, we receive roughly \$60 from this program. Flathead Audubon sends a special "Thank You" to Valley Recycling for helping us in this way.

In recognition of their past and continuing contributions to the reduction of waste in the Flathead Valley, and as a token of our appreciation for their efforts, Flathead Audubon presented these three recycling centers with a certificate of recognition and a one-year membership in the Flathead Audubon Society.

Written by Linda Winnie

## First Wild Condor Chick Takes Off

The first wild-born condor chick to fly in California in 22 years officially fledged Nov. 4 when it took a 150-foot flight. It first left its nest in early September, perching 20-50 feet below the nest cave where it hatched April 9 near the Hopper Mountain NWR, CA. The last wild condor chick fledged in 1982.

Both parents are captive-released birds. The 10-year-old father is the dominant male of the southern California flock. He was released by Hopper Mountain Refuge in 1995. The seven-year-old female was released at Big Sur by the Ventana Wilderness Society in 1998. The parents will care for the chick until it is approximately 18 months old.

The 2,417-acre Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge in Ventura County, CA, was established in 1974 to protect the California condor. Two other wildlife refuges – Blue Ridge in 1982 and Bitter Creek in 1985 – joined Hopper Mountain to create a refuge complex for the same purpose. Today, Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex is the base of operations for condor reintroduction to southern California. Hopper Mountain Refuge provides foraging and roosting habitat. Its condor rearing facility has six simulated nest caves and a flight pen. Condor chicks are transferred to the flight pen when they are 8-10 months old to undergo power-pole aversion conditioning. They stay until they are old enough to be released into the wild.

The largest bird in North America, the condor was listed as an endangered species in 1967 under a law that pre-dated the Endangered Species Act. They have soared over mountainous areas of California since prehistoric times. But their numbers plummeted in the 20th century, reaching their lowest level in 1982 when just 22 birds existed. Their decline is partially due to loss of habitat and food and from shooting, lead poisoning and toxic substances used to poison predators.

One hundred eleven condors live in the wild in California, Arizona and Baja, Mexico; 135 live in captivity at the Los Angeles Zoo, San Diego Wild Animal Park, the Oregon Zoo and the Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, ID. The Condor Recovery Program began releasing California condors back into the wild in 1992.

Information from USFWS webpage: <http://www.fws.gov>



California Condor Photo by USFWS

## Columbia Basin Bulletin: USFWS REVIEW SAYS NORTHERN SPOTTED OWL STILL THREATENED

After completing a formal 5-year status review of the Northern Spotted Owl, following a lawsuit filed by the Western Council of Industrial Workers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has concluded that the species continues to warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act as a threatened species.

Officials say the review uncovered both good news and bad news related to the species. On the positive side, the risks faced by the species when it was first listed, such as habitat loss on federal lands, have been reduced due to the success of the Northwest Forest Plan and other management actions. On the negative side, the species' overall population in Washington, Oregon and California continues to decline and new potential threats have emerged that need to be studied further, including fire, competition from barred owls, and West Nile Disease.

The 5-year review considered all information that has become available since the original listing of the Northern Spotted



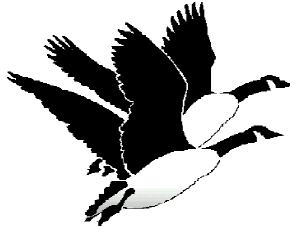
Owl, such as population and demographic trend data; genetics; species competition; habitat condition; adequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; and management and conservation planning information. Key findings of the review include (a) habitat loss on federal lands has been substantially reduced but continues on private lands and wildfires appear to be removing habitat at an increasing rate; (b) demographic data document declining population trends across the species' range, with the most pronounced declines in British Columbia, Washington, and northern Oregon; (c) populations are still relatively numerous in the southern portion of its range and are present in most of the species' historic range, suggesting the threat of extinction is not imminent; (d) threats contributing to declines have not yet been responsive to habitat management; and (e) the nature, magnitude, and extent of Barred Owl effects remain uncertain. Likewise, the new threats of West Nile virus and Sudden Oak Death were perceived as both potentially severe and imminent, but substantial uncertainty about their effects mediated against placing too much weight on these factors.

# KILLER GEESE?

The recent history of Canada Goose management has been a mixed blessing. It is a shining example of wildlife conservation, yet so successful that in many areas, goose populations are out of control. Especially in urban and suburban areas, Canada Geese are embroiled in a number of human-goose conflicts ranging from landscape damage to unsightly fecal matter to serious concern about disease transmission. This has resulted in a myriad of lethal and non-lethal control techniques aimed at reducing goose populations.

Among common pathogens found in waterfowl are bacteria that can cause acute diarrhea, fever, muscle aches, chills, headache, kidney damage and possibly death. Parasites may contaminate drinking water, but most are not human pathogens. Certain viruses, such as influenza and retroviruses, range in effect from gastroenteritis to serious and occasional fatal disease. It should be noted that the presence of a pathogen in goose feces does not necessarily indicate that the birds were sick or that the pathogen will be transmitted to other organisms.

Based on some recent studies in the north-eastern and mid-Atlantic states, there was a low probability of risk to humans through contact with goose feces. However, a study in Colorado suggests



that there is a potential for disease transmission. Although the authors did not state the likelihood, it was thought to be fairly low.

In some areas, geese killed for management reasons are donated to local food banks. There is a potential for exposure to environmental toxins, such as organochlorine and organophosphate pesticides and residues of PCBs. The most thorough study, conducted in suburban Chicago, found that pesticide concentrations varied with locality. Although there were detectable levels in some geese, removing the skin and fat and baking the meat reduced the residue concentrations. These same precautions can apply to hunter harvested geese as well as nuisance birds.

Overall, there is a lack of conclusive data on the health risks associated with Canada Geese. Although there is a potential for disease transmission, the few data available tend to indicate that the potential is fairly low.

This article was synopsised from *The Public Health Debate Surrounding Canada Geese* by Sarah K. Ball and published in the summer 2004 issue of *Wildlife Tracks*, a publication of the Humane Society of the United States.

By Bob Lee

## LET'S FEED THE BIRDS! WHERE SHOULD I PUT MY FEEDER?

**Location, Location, Location!** There are a few key points to consider when deciding where to put your feeder. It's not as simple as hanging it from the nearest tree. You want to think about things like avoiding competition and accommodating various feeding styles and preferences. You also want to think of possible hazards to the birds, such as window collisions, prowling cats, and thieving squirrels. Follow these tips to provide an ideal environment in your backyard.

**Locate feeders at different levels.** Sparrows, juncos, and towhees usually feed on the ground, while finches and cardinals feed in shrubs, and chickadees, titmice, and woodpeckers feed in trees. To avoid crowding and attract the greatest variety of species, provide table-like feeders for ground feeding birds, hopper or tube feeders for shrub and treetop feeders, and suet feeders well off the ground for woodpeckers, nuthatches, and chickadees.

**Protect birds from window collisions.** In the United States, approximately 1 billion birds die from flying into windows each year. Protect birds from collisions by placing feeders within three feet of windows, if possible. Mobiles and opaque decorations hanging outside windows help to prevent bird strikes, or attach fruit tree netting outside windows to deflect birds from the glass.

**Keep cats indoors.** The location of your feline friends is important, too. Cats kill hundreds of millions of birds annually in the United States, often pouncing on ground-feeding birds and those dazed by window collisions. Responsible and caring cat owners keep their cats indoors, where they are also safer from traffic, disease, and fights with other animals. Bells on cat collars are usually ineffective for deterring predation.

*In this special season, we are reminded that we are caretakers of the Earth and all that it holds.*

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DECEMBER, 2004



The Flathead Audubon Society is affiliated with the National Audubon Society and meets on the second Monday of each month from September through May. The regular meeting starts at 7:00 p.m. and includes a featured guest who presents a conservation or nature program. The Board of Directors meets the Tuesday preceding the general meeting, at 6PM at 295 3rd Ave. EN, in Kalispell. Both meetings are open to all those interested.

**THE PILEATED POST** is published September through May and is sent to members of the Flathead Audubon Society as a membership benefit. For membership information or address change, please call Mike Fanning at 862-8070.

**Deadline for newsletter copy is the 20th of each month. Contact newsletter editor at 257-0363; email submissions to pileatedpost@hotmail.com**

## FLATHEAD AUDUBON SOCIETY DIRECTORY

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