



the

Pileated Post

Newsletter of the Flathead Audubon Society

January 2022
VOLUME 46, NUMBER 5

Steller's Jay



Flathead Audubon Turns 45

In December 1976 the Bigfork Bird Club voted to turn itself into an Audubon Chapter named the Flathead Audubon Society. The first meeting of this new organization was held in Bigfork in January 1977, 45 years ago. Officers were elected, and the group began gathering the 35 new members it needed to be officially chartered as a chapter of National Audubon. By late February 1977, 23 new members had been found, and in March the goal of 35 was reached.

The organization that started FAS had its roots in the first Bigfork Bird Count – held in December, 1974. The enthusiasm generated by that first Count inspired several Count participants to form the Lower Flathead Valley Bird Club, which later became known as the Bigfork Bird Club.

The first newsletter of the young Audubon chapter was called the *Accipiter Express*. That first issue of the *Express* appeared in March 1977. The name *Pileated Post* didn't appear until 2 years later, in March 1979.

Many of the first members of Flathead Audubon are no longer with us; among them such familiar

names as Barb Baxter, Sam Bibler, Jerry DeSanto, Roy Diamond, Loren Kreck, Jean Robocker, David Shaner, Elmer Sprunger, and Jack Whitney. But some are still members of Flathead Audubon today, including Lex Blood, Barb Boorman, Kris Bruninga, Dennis Hester, Elly Jones, Bob Lopp, Jack Potter, and Rick Trembath.

The March 1977 issue of the *Accipiter Express* includes the full list of founding members of FAS as of February 1977, and also offers an interesting window into the activities and concerns of the early Flathead Audubon – including descriptions of the organization's March meeting program, spring field trips, and bird related projects, as well as reports of recent bird sightings. You can view this issue on the FAS website in the Newsletter archive: <https://flatheadaudubon.org/about-us/pileated-post-archive>.

by Linda Winnie



pinterest

Owen Sowerwine Educational Research

In the summer of 2017, Flathead High School International Baccalaureate Students Conrad Hedingger, Molly Adams and Sarah Randolph did increment borer fieldwork aging black cottonwood trees at 16 plot points in a grid pattern at Owen Sowerwine Natural Area (OSNA). The casual observation suspicion that cottonwoods were not regenerating very well was

confirmed by the study. The youngest tree in the study was 24 years old, and most cottonwoods were in the 80 to 140-years old range. The oldest was 162 years. A majority of the sampled trees had broken tops and many held stagnant water in hollowed trunks.

continued on page 5

JANUARY FLATHEAD AUDUBON CALENDAR

Monday January 3, 2022. 5:30-7:30 PM. FAS Board of Directors Meeting. Public Meeting Room, Fish, Wildlife & Parks building, 490 N. Meridian Rd., Kalispell.

Monday, January 10, 2022. 7 PM. Flathead Audubon General Meeting, Can be attended in person or by Zoom. See page 3 for how to participate.

Saturday, January 15, 9 AM–noon. Owen Sowerwine Natural Area, Winter River Bottomland: birds, tracks, hydrology and plant adaptations. See page 6.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Ring-billed Gull

by Darcy Thomas

I know. Gulls have a reputation. People take exception to them for many reasons. One of my favorite stories is told by my own husband. “I got a couple breakfast jacks at Jack in the Box and went to the lake to enjoy a picnic. As I was eating one of the sandwiches, I got up to take a closer look at something that interested me. A gull flew over and landed in front of me eating a sandwich that looked suspiciously like mine. I thought to myself, ‘what schmuck would leave food out for the gulls to get?’ Then, suddenly suspicious, I turned to see that my other sandwich was no longer on the table. I guess I was the schmuck”. We all have stories of gulls aggressively mobbing people to steal food out of their hands, spreading trash around that they take out of bins and just making a lot of noise.

As if this were not bad enough, gulls are just darn difficult to identify. I love how Nicholas Lund, contributor to the Audubon Magazine puts it in his “Birdist Rules of Birding” column. “There’s no way to sugarcoat it: Gulls are the most difficult group of birds to identify. All the different species are just variations on the same basic theme: a gray back on a white body. There’s no, like, Red Gull, where you can look out and say, “Oh yeah, there’s a Red Gull. It’s the one that’s red.” Nope, of the twenty-or-so gull species you may encounter in America, they’ve all more or less got a gray back and a white body.”

However, gulls are fascinating and worth the challenge to learn about. Here I will give you a piece of advice taken from ornithologist Alvaro Jaramillo. When talking about learning to identify sparrows which are difficult as they are seemingly similar “little brown jobs” he advises to take a close look at the song sparrow and learn it in well. If you study the details of this common sparrow, you’ll be prepared to recognize another sparrow that is less common. The same can be said of gulls. The good news for wannabe gull identifiers, is that we don’t have a wide variety of gulls in Montana and Ring-bills are the gulls you are most likely to see away from the coast. This makes them a great beginner gull. Learn to identify it well. Then, when you see a gull that is not a Ring-billed gull, you will know immediately you have something different.

So, let’s get down to basics. Ring-billed Gulls are not shy of hu-

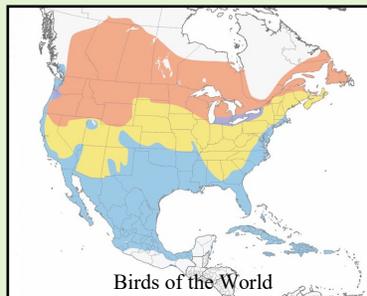
mans and are often found hunting food on the wing or while afloat or on foot in places where people like to congregate. Around the Flathead Valley you are likely to see them in parking lots, sports fields, golf courses, at the city dump as well as in agricultural fields, along the rivers and on the lakes. They are opportunistic feeders, and their diet consists of a wide variety of foods such as fish, insects, worms, rodents, grain, and garbage. They will also eat human foods that are discarded or, as my husband could tell you, left unattended. Ring-billed Gulls are medium-sized with a somewhat short, thin bill. The wingtips extend past the tail and are tipped in black and spotted in white. In flight, they are

acrobatic and their wings appear very slender. It takes three years for Ring-billed Gulls to reach maturity. This is a little tricky so take your time when learning.

Juvenile Ring-bills are a mottled brown and white with pink legs and a pink bill with a dark tip. Their eyes are dark. First winter birds begin to get gray feathers on their back but still have a lot of brown on their wings and some brown throughout the rest of their body. Second winter birds show more gray color in their wings, but they continue to have varying amounts of brown streaking on their heads, neck and chest. The bill and legs are beginning to turn yellow. Breeding adults have clean white heads with pale eyes, yellow legs, and a yellow bill with a black band. Non-breeding adults, which we see in the winter months have brown-streaked heads.

Look closely when looking at a colony of Ring-billed Gulls. Try to pick out the first and second winter birds and look for any juveniles. Also, look to see if there is a gull that looks very different. It may be smaller or larger, have a darker gray back. It may have pink or green legs. It may have a red spot on the bill. It may lack black in the wingtips. These are indicators of a different gull species. So, now you know you have something different than the Ring-billed Gull, which you now know very well. Get out your field guide and narrow down the possibilities of what this new gull is. And keep studying. The more you watch gulls and study them the better you will get. But remember the most important rule of all. Do not leave your sandwiches unattended!

References available upon request from darcy@flatheadaudubon.org.



January Program

Sharp-tailed Grouse Restoration in Western Montana

presented by Ben Deeble

After their absence of over 20 years, this fall the reintroduction of sharp-tailed grouse to western Montana was launched. The effort culminates years of habitat analysis, planning, and partnership by private landowners, non-governmental organizations, and public agencies. The goal is to restore a sustainable population of sharptails for at least the next 50 years, reestablishing the full complement of Montana's historically breeding bird species.

Ben Deeble has been studying and working to conserve western birds for nearly 30 years. He earned a Master's degree from the Universi-



Provided by Ben Deeble

ty of Montana in 1995 studying a remnant population of sharp-tailed grouse in the Blackfoot Valley, and continued gaining experience working for Idaho Fish and Game and the Bureau of Land Management on sharptails and sage-grouse. He went on to work for over a decade with the National Wildlife Federation from Missoula leading their sage-grouse conservation program west wide, eventually moving the project to Montana Audubon. Presently he is president of the Big Sky Upland Bird Association, and is working in a public-private partnership to restore sharp-tailed grouse to western Montana.

How to Attend the January 10 FAS General Meeting

Ever since we decided to put a pause on in-person meetings, we've been longing for them to come back like a spring migration. After much deliberation, we've decided to have not just an in-person meeting, but a hybrid meeting! What this means is that we'll meet together at the United Way building (old Gateway Mall), but we'll also be broadcasting in Zoom!

For those coming to the meeting, we'll meet in Room 26 (different than in past) at 7 PM which is on the east side of the building along Glenwood Rd in Kalispell. Look for our banner hanging outside. Please **practice social distancing for seating** in the large meeting room and **we strongly encourage mask wearing**.

For those deciding to attend virtually, we'll be testing out not only broadcasting the presentation, but also trying to integrate you as well, so that you can report bird sightings and ask questions at the end of the presentation. This is a first effort so there are bound to be a few kinks to work out, but stay with us as we try and be not only safe, but inclusive for all those that want to attend!

Use the link below to join the meeting. You

should eventually be let into a "waiting room" where you will then be added to the meeting by the host. Please sign in with your name when they enter the room so we know to admit you. You will be muted when you first join the meeting. You can use your computer's microphone and speakers (most computers have both, whether you see them or not), and this is the preferred way to join. Feel free to log in at 6:30 PM for some chatting about birds and saying hello before the meeting starts.

To attend by Zoom, or to get an audio connection to the meeting without the Zoom visual capability, contact cory@flatheadaudubon.org. You can also get by using the phone number and passcode.

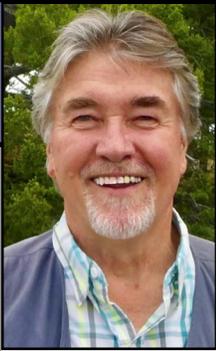
Looking forward to seeing everyone!

Videos of earlier FAS meeting presentations are available at <https://flatheadaudubon.org/videos>.

2021 Donor List

The full list of donors to Flathead Audubon in 2021 is planned to appear in the February issue of the Pileated Post. At press time for this issue, there were

about 2 weeks left in December in which additional donations may occur.



Conservation Educator's Niche

By Denny Olson

It has been an unforgettable year. The uncertainty of COVID and all of its variants has us all wishing for personal contact, more mobility and that calming feeling of being safe from invisible and unpredictable forces. It doesn't help that, just when we are seeing a glimmer of light on the horizon, the virus reminds us that it doesn't care, and it morphs yet again.

My job as Flathead Audubon Conservation Educator has been about extolling the virtues and value of birds, and in the past, that has been heavy on person-to-person presentations, coordinating our fourteen learning trunks, shepherding a small group of volunteer ambassadors, and constantly looking for better ways to communicate all of the above. So, I have had to suspend most of those efforts, and as I've said before, make lemonade from the pandemic lemons.



So here are the jugs of "lemonade":

Laura Katzman from the Flathead Land Trust and I -- with some help from Chris Hammond of MT FWP until he changed his role there through a promotion - have been working to keep alive our 7th-grade Bird Education sequence. We picked seventh grade because what we envision fits perfectly with the Montana Life Science Standards expected of our public schools. We are mostly piloting it through Vic Dalla Betta's classes at Evergreen Middle School, and despite COVID wrenches being systematically tossed into the gears, it is still going after a fashion.

The sequence we envision consists of activities leading to four field trips by teachers, students and FAS volunteers. The focus is on (1) West Valley Ponds and the spectacular Sandhill Crane stopover there in October, (2) the winter invasion of raptors from the north, both in West and Lower Valleys, (3) the massive waterfowl migrations in early spring on the Lower Flathead River system, and (4) the raucous songbird and Osprey breeding season in our river-bottom corridors right next to us.

In our ultimate vision, they start with an in-person program by one of us, along with fun in-classroom activities like the "Jeep-birdy" contest

Laura invented. Then we hope to have a learning trunk that is specific to prep for each of the four field trips. We have a Sandhill Crane trunk now, along with a narrated PowerPoint program available on our YouTube site. I have PowerPoint programs that I can do in-person on Winter Birds of Prey and Waterfowl of the Flathead Valley. I would like to turn those into narrated videos so there is flexibility to do them in-class at any time. I also have a narrated video workshop on Learning Bird Songs on our YouTube site, which can help students and teachers do a simple river-bottom breeding bird survey on our Owen Sowerwine Natural Area (OSNA) Education Trail.

Still in progress, or just in theory for now, are learning trunks for winter birds of prey (not started), an early spring waterfowl trunk (which we may be able to borrow from other organizations) and an Osprey Trunk that I will have ready for the Ospreys returning this spring to OSNA.

As part of my necessary pandemic adaptations to going "virtual", I produced videos on the value of birds ("Birds Rock!"), the present concerns about bird populations and their future prospects (Bird Trouble", which also addresses the sad condition of our cultural illiteracy on science and good evidence), and an empowering video on what we all can do to remedy bird trouble called "Bird Help".



The next video in editing production, with final shooting to do in the spring, will be "Natives Rule!" -- about the intricate relationships between native plants, native insects and native birds. After that, BJ Worth (whose Birds in Motion videos are spectacular!) and I are planning to combine efforts on a promotional and educational video on our 15-year-so-far Jewel Basin Hawk Watch program.

That's a summary of the "lemonade" brewed so far. But elsewhere in this Post, check out our plans for educational research projects in OSNA! (And, I miss you all, and can't wait to entertain you at *real* meetings with some Bird-brain fun!)

Natural Events To See This Month:

Special "pectinations" (studded tires!) on grouse feet allow them to walk on icy branches.

OSNA *continued from page 1*

A few saplings were observed while traveling between plots in the low, seasonally flooded areas of fossil river channels and along the Stillwater River. The 8 - 10-foot higher "bench" areas of the area had virtually none, and in fact were undergoing a succession pattern toward shade-tolerant spruce and fir.

Since cottonwoods are dependent on the scouring effects of flooding for seed germination, and also dependent on a gradually falling water table post-germination, it was fairly easy to conclude that flooding rarely happened on the higher plateau areas (with the historical records showing that probably the last flooding that high had happened in 1964, and possibly 1975. It could very well be that the damming of the South Fork of the Flathead River in 1959 had moderated flooding to the extent that it allowed a nearly constant downcutting of the river -- within the confines of its banks. It left behind a higher plateau of land higher and drier, relative to the river, no longer suitable for cottonwood regeneration through flooding.

The other potential issues in the seasonally-flooded areas were sunlight competition by invasive species, specifically a non-native highbush cranberry shrub/tree. A removal program by FAS volunteers did increase the numbers of cottonwood seedlings and saplings in those areas newly sunlit.

Most of the saplings and seedlings in those

areas are short and clumped, probably reflecting heavy browsing by a generous population of white-tailed deer in the area. We want to get some data on how much effect deer-browsing has on the new cottonwood survival, so this fall we constructed a temporary eight-foot-tall deer enclosure, 25 feet by 25 feet, in an area that is seasonally flooded and has a good supply of the cottonwood seedlings. We staked a "control" area of the same size right next to it, with roughly the same number of seedlings. We will be training high school and junior high students to not only count cottonwoods and measure growth in those areas year-by-year, but other plants as well.

We are also going to be training some students to do yearly spring breeding bird surveys (with an accompanying FAS birder chaperone) at GPS plot points started by biologists at MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks in past years.

A third student project will examine the natural restoration rates of native plant species of areas where we removed invasive buckthorn (2000 trees removed so far, and only about half done!). So, we are answering our own questions about OSNA, educating students in scientific process, and restoring a river corridor that is a superhighway of bird migration spring and fall. And having fun doing it!

by Denny Olson



Pam Willison



Pam Willison

Controlling Non-native Vegetation in Owen Sowerwine Natural Area

During 2021, volunteers spent nearly 300 hours in Owen Sowerwine, doing work to remove or control plant species that are not native. The efforts were primarily directed toward cutting Common Buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*) and February Daphne (*Daphne mezereum*) bushes, and removing seed heads from noxious weeds, particularly houndstongue, Canada thistle, and oxeye daisy. By reducing the seed production and dispersal of these species, it slows their spread, and gives native vegetation a chance to compete and survive.

The leading causes of native biodiversity degradation or loss are invasive plants and habitat loss. Invasive plant species have many methods of outcompeting native plants, including producing large quantities of seeds, having aggressive root systems that choke the roots of native plants, and producing toxic chemicals in their fruit, leaves and/or roots. The non-native vegetation can then use more of the available moisture, nutrients, light, and space, which causes native plants to struggle, and often die. The result is a reduction of the quality and quantity of wildlife habitat and food sources.

Our program to control non-native vegetation

emphasizes using muscle-power instead of chemicals. As an example, 64 hours were spent cutting and digging invasive weeds, compared to 14 hours spent by a licensed contractor to spot-spray noxious weeds. Thanks to the organizing efforts of Denny Olson, 5 group work days were held in early spring to cut and stack Buckthorn. The stumps are immediately brushed with a 25% glyphosate solution to kill the root and prevent regeneration by sprouting. A whopping 180 worker-hours were volunteered during these 5 work days – THANK YOU!!

The OSNA "Invasive Warrior" honor would have to go to FAS Board member Will Beyer who spent just shy of 100 hours doing everything from running a chain saw or brush cutter, crawling through the brush to identify and mark Buckthorn and dragging a garbage bag through dense vegetation to locate and remove seed heads. It's hot and back-breaking work, and I offer sincere gratitude to Will for his contributions toward making OSNA a better place for our many birds and critters.

by Pam Willison, Co-Chair OSNA



Flathead Valley Bird Report

by Dan Casey

Rare and Notables – Nov/Dec

An out-of-season Brown-headed Cowbird and a regionally rare Lesser Goldfinch continued to sporadically visit feeders in Creston and Somers, respectively, throughout the period. Foy's Lake and the West Valley Crane Viewing Area each supported a variety of waterfowl as warmer temperatures kept these sites primary ice-free. A lingering American White Pelican was also seen at Ninepipes NWR repeatedly through early December. See <https://ebird.org/region/US-MT-029?yr=all> for more.

- 11/23 – **Harris's Sparrow** (1), Creston (Craig H.)
- 11/26 – **Yellow-headed Blackbird** (1), Creston (Craig H.)
- 11/27 – **Anna's Hummingbird** (1), Somers (Al J.)
- 11/28 – **White-throated Sparrow** (1), Whitefish (Linda S.)
- 11/29 – **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** (1, late), Columbia Falls (Bridger D.)
- 12/1 – **Cackling Goose** (29), West Valley (Mani. G) (small numbers elsewhere)
- 12/1 – **Iceland (Thayer's) Gull** (1 or more), Flathead

landfill (Dan C.)

- 12/14 – **Brown-headed Cowbird** (1), Creston, sporadically all fall (Craig H.)
- 12/14 – **White-winged Scoter** (1), Foy's Lake (Dan C.)
- 12/14 – **Surf Scoter** (1), Foy's Lake (several sightings during the period) (Dan C.)
- 12/15 – **Lesser Goldfinch** (1), Somers, present since 10/31 (Dan C.)

What to Expect – January 2022

As winter hits its stride, the last lingering half-hardy migrants will likely be gone. The few remaining American Robins, Killdeers, Wilson's Snipes and any dabbling ducks other than Mallards (e.g. American Wigeon) will seek out those spring creeks that offer open water. Perhaps a Snowy Owl or two will join the many Rough-legged Hawks hunting in our farmlands. Well-stocked feeders should see a diversity of finches (Pine Siskins, Common Redpolls, and perhaps Evening Grosbeaks) in addition to the usual chickadees, juncos and nuthatches.

JUST AMAZING BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY!

Here are two ways to shake off these gray short days of winter! First, head to this year's top 100 bird photos from National Audubon's 2021 photography contest by going to <https://www.audubon.org/news/the-2021-audubon-photography-awards-top-100> where your jaw will drop as you peruse the zoomed Green Heron (taken by a youth photographer), a gorgeous close-up shot of a Golden-fronted Woodpecker getting a drink, or the one of the flying Black Skimmers!



Then, take the Virtual Gallery Tour of the 2020 Audubon Photography Awards Winners and top 100 by going to <https://www.audubon.org/news/take-virtual-gallery-tour-2020-audubon-photography-awards-winners>. Look for the one of a cormorant swimming underwater in a school of fish that knocked my socks off. These photos are incredibly inspirational and help draw us all together to help save these incredible species and their habitats. Enjoy!
by Gael Bissell

WINTER FIELD TRIPS FOR YOU!

All Flathead Audubon field trips are free and open to the public and are geared for all ages and levels of field experience. They are led by area biologists, retired professionals, and some of the best birders in the region. Please read our field trip guidelines at <https://flatheadaudubon.org>. For all Field Trips, dress for the weather, bring binoculars or spotting scope if you have them, wear sturdy footwear, and drive and pull off the road safely. All drivers must have their own vehicle insurance. For more information, contact the individual field trip leader listed below. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic we are taking precautions to ensure safety for all participants. Masks and respect for others' personal space are highly recommended, and we ask you to not share binoculars or spotting scopes. The number of participants allowed on trips will be limited as will carpooling.



WINTER RIVER BOTTOMLAND: BIRDS, TRACKS, HYDROLOGY AND PLANT ADAPTATIONS. Saturday, January 15, 9 AM- NOON (weather permitting). Owen Sowerwine Natural Area. Join FAS Conservation Educator and long-time teaching naturalist Denny Olson on a winter hike. Winter birds, bird songs, tracking, botanizing, and seat-of-the-pants interpretation will be the unstructured itinerary. This is one of the best spots in the area to see Pileated and other woodpeckers, many kinds of chickadees, Bohemian and Cedar waxwings in flocks of thousands, Pine Grosbeaks, Townsend's Solitaires--and there is always an unexpected bird! Not just ID, but lots of natural history lore, which is Denny's trademark. Dress warm, bring binoculars and snow boots, and check with us on the need for snowshoes if the snow is deep. Call Denny at 249-3987 or e-mail denny@flatheadaudubon.org to sign up and get directions. Space is limited.

CHIRPS & SQUAWKS

Highlights from the December 6, 2021 Board of Directors Meeting

- ◇ Rod Walette, Treasurer, reported that WCF has discontinued the Day of Giving fundraiser, he is seeking bids to renew the FAS insurance policies, and the Montana Audubon Wildlife Grant application will be submitted. Rod also initiated continuing discussion about investments/endowments at WCF, and it was agreed that a final decision should be made at the March meeting.
- ◇ Jake Bramante explained the equipment and set-up being used to hold the hybrid (live and Zoom) meeting as a test run for the January public meeting. He also reviewed the status of equipment purchases and gave a report on the progress of switching to a new data base management program.
- ◇ The Birds and Cats brochure was reviewed and the Board approved going forward, so it will be reviewed by a Humane Society representative, then the final wording formatted by a graphic designer.
- ◇ Denny Olson reported that the script and work on the Native Plants video is moving forward and filming will be completed in the spring; the deer enclosure structure in OSNA was completed and he can now look for a teacher/class to complete baseline information and monitor growth; and, he is working on creating the new education trunk on Osprey.



SPECIAL GIFTS

I wish to help make Flathead Audubon's vision a reality. Here is my contribution to the continued success of our chapter.



- Eagle Donation, \$1000+
- Osprey Donation, \$500+
- Snowy Owl Donation, \$250+
- Merlin Donation, \$100+
- Kestrel Donation, \$50+
- My Own Vision, amount my choice

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Pileated Post

Newsletter of the Flathead Audubon Society

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The Flathead Audubon Society is affiliated with the National Audubon Society and Montana Audubon <https://MTAudubon.org>. We meet on the second Monday of each month September through May. Meetings start at 7 PM and include a featured guest who presents a conservation or nature program. The Board of Directors meets the Monday preceding the general meeting, at 6 PM. See page 1 for locations. Both meetings are open to all.

THE PILEATED POST is published September through May and is sent to members of Flathead Audubon Society as a membership benefit. To become a member or to renew your membership, go to the FAS website or use the membership form below. **Deadline for newsletter copy is the 18th of each month. Contact newsletter editor at 755-1406; or linda@flatheadaudubon.org.**

Check our website <https://FlatheadAudubon.org> for
Late breaking FAS news & announcements
Online FAS membership sign up or renewal
Newly scheduled field trips & events



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FLATHEAD AUDUBON SOCIETY

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- Basic Membership —————\$25
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- Supporting Membership —————\$40
Extra \$15 funds local projects such as
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Owen Sowerwine Natural Area
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