



the

Pileated Post

Newsletter of the Flathead Audubon Society

February 2022
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Long-eared
owl



Conservation Educator's Niche

By Denny Olson

It was such a relief, after seemingly endless COVID variants, cancellations, sequesterings and quarantines, to see real people in front of me at the January "hybrid" meeting. I almost felt that I recognized some of the well-spaced upper halves of faces in the audience -- but it's been a while, you know ... Big kudos to Geek (er ... Jake) Bramante for pulling that off. It was a hodge-podge of audio and video microphones, camera, computer, wires and wireless, and it worked! Actually, it worked very well!

I got my first chance in quite a while to do a short "Bird Brain" synonym quiz using the names of Gallinaceous (read: good to eat) birds such as the "Ashen Semi-hogback" or "Gray Part-ridge". Be forewarned: I have somewhere between 150 and 200 fairly reasonable bird song imitations in my repertoire for future Bird Brain fun at our meetings, and there *will* be chocolate in it for you ...

The other thing that happened at the hybrid meeting was a revelation of sorts. At this writing, the acceleration of Omicron variant infections is close to exponential. It may even peak and be on the decline by the time you read this. That unknown, along with the well-seasoned demographics of participants at the meeting, has made me back off on my intention to do a family-oriented, with kids, program at the March 14th FAS public meeting. It's too soon for that kind of choosing-volunteers-from-the-audience interaction. I'll do that later, when we get to whatever settles as the new "normal".

And since I'm addicted to fun, the thought that came to me simultaneously was "why not go all-out with the Bird Brain idea and do a whole program on the irony of calling anyone a "bird-brain" or a "dodo". Birds have nearly always been thought of as tiny-brained dinosaurs that operate purely on instinct and

avoiding traumatic experiences by doing rudimentary learning. Humans, even scientists, on the other hand, have this tendency toward close-mindedness (even bigotry, believe it or not!). "Prove it" is the byword.

And sure enough, those scientists who suspected something deeper about birds' brains have opened a door to such qualities as precise memory of the past, taking perspective, planning, extensive tool use, reconciliation and empathy -- qualities that fall under the umbrella of *cognition*. Thinking! Deep thinking! ("Well, duh!", say all of you long-time birders.)

So, at that March meeting I'm going to make the case for Ravens being as smart as chimps, caching corvids and chickadees having memories that make us look downright stupid, thrashers and wrens having language skills well beyond kindergarteners, magpies doing "meta-thinking and self-awareness -- recognizing selves in a mirror and slight differences in human faces, hummingbirds having neural connections that operate hundreds of times faster than ours, brain-speed adaptations that allow starlings on one side of a murmuration to move instantly in the same direction as those on the other side a quarter-mile away, and evidence for birds having "wakes" and funerals, reconciliations after a fight, and empathy for the disadvantaged. Ptarmigans have fun at sledding parties, ravens and crows have show-off aerial acrobatics contests ("hold my beer, watch this"), scrub jays have developed security systems that thwart burglars, crows make their own tools for food preparation, and some warblers have the technology to get up to 500,000 miles per gallon of fat on their migrations! (Elon Musk, eat your heart out ...) And oh, as if they weren't smart enough already, Chickadees grow the "hippocampus" part of their brains seasonally -- when they need to find food faster ...

So, March 14th, I'll fill in the blanks and have some fun at humans' expense. Until then, if someone calls you a "bird-brain" ... wear it proudly!

FEBRUARY FLATHEAD AUDUBON CALENDAR

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

Monday, February 14, 2022. 7 PM. Flathead Audubon General Meeting, Can be attended in person or by Zoom. See page 3 for how to participate.

Sunday February 27, 10 AM-noon. Winter Birding at Creston Fish Hatchery. See page 9.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Black Swift

by Kat Peterson

I sat and watched a single dark bird emerge from behind a fall of water that trickled down the base of this jagged peak which had formed and since been carved by glaciers. I took a moment to recollect how exactly I had traveled to this remote destination to peer upon this relentless yet breathtaking scene; catching fleeting glances of the little speck of a swift sweeping above this alpine lake. The day began backpacking 6 miles into the Cabinet Wilderness, passing waterfalls and grand views of craggy peaked horizons along the trail. Once I arrived at the pristine, glacial fed waters of Granite Lake, I began blowing up a pack raft I had hauled in to continue to my destination. Just as my raft, backpack and myself kissed the edge of the lake, a black bear cub appeared upon the edge of the treeline, and I felt a sense of relief to be sailing the water. After a mile of paddling against harsh winds at 4,700 feet, the tumbling waterfall came into view, and I knew this was the Black Swift's nest site I had sought.

The Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*) is a wondrously elusive passerine with incredibly unusual nest habits and much mystery still surrounding it. Their graphite bodies have contrasting upper and lower wing coloration. They fly with crescent moon shaped wings and a long squared-tipped tail. Males have a distinct notch in their tail while juveniles' plumage have small bands of white present across much of the underbody. Being the largest swift in North America, Black Swifts trump our other local Vaux's Swifts in overall stature, and tail length. Their wingbeats are shallower with a less erratic flight pattern than other swifts.

Black swifts fly at an incredible height and speed to forage for winged ants and other insects. You can often spy a Black Swift flying in the clouds with their mouth open hunting insects in rising air masses that sweep large quantities of bugs into the sky. In summer Black Swifts migrate to Montana to nest and come fall they return to South America. Although the exact whereabouts of Montana's Black Swifts wintering habitat remains a mystery, other studies of GPS equipped swifts found they migrate to lowland rainforests in Brazil.

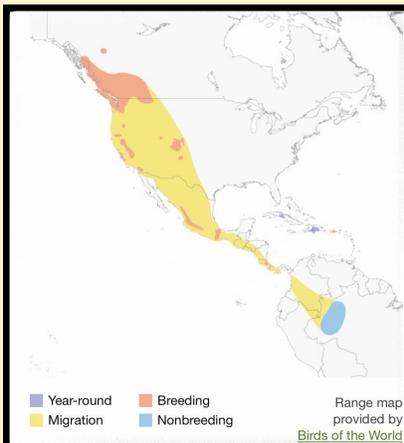
Black Swifts' breeding grounds are spectacularly unique. They greet Northwest Montana to build nests in the most incredible and harsh terrain our mountains have to offer: high elevation waterfalls. The birds require very particular waterfall characteristics suitable to build their nests upon shady, sheltered crevices or overhangs beneath the falls. These waterfall requirements include height and structure, water volume, view over terrain, moss availability, shading

of nest niches, aspect, elevation, and even rock type. Breeding pairs have strong nest fidelity returning to previous years cup nest built of moss and mud. Before 1961, Black Swifts were only documented in Montana by fleeting observations. However, that year wildlife researchers Hunter and Baldwin conducted the first established study where they observed 5 active nest sites in the Mission Mountains. It wasn't until 2004 when Dan Casey, then regional coordinator for Northern Rocky Mountain Bird Conservation, reignited interest in Black Swift ecology by assembling a team to search for active nest sites. Ten years later in 2014, researchers and volunteers began the current Black Swift research project resulting in 7 occupied waterfalls. Since 2014 collaborative survey efforts from Glacier National Park aided by wildlife biologist Lisa Bate, MT Fish, Wildlife, and

Parks, and Montana Audubon have resulted in yearly surveys seeking out new nest sites and monitoring established ones. The 2021 field season reported 51 active nest sites, and 13 annually monitored nests.

Although information on Montana populations is quite limited, North American populations have declined 90% since the 1970s. They are a species of conservation concern in Montana, however because we have limited understandings of their winter locations, and overall ecology, the reasons for their population decline are not certain. The fate of these birds is inevitably linked to water, and climate change makes them vulnerable to extirpation. With the onset of greater droughts and warmer weather conditions, glacial fed waterfalls may experience decreased waterflow.

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February Program

The Challenges of Grassland Bird Conservation

presented by Dan Casey

Grassland-dependent bird species are the most rapidly declining North American birds. Luckily, diverse public/private partnerships have been formed to address the critical issue of declining habitat quality and quantity. Innovative approaches have been developed to define and deliver actions to protect, restore and enhance grassland habitats.



Dan Casey will draw on his experience working on grassland bird habitats across four northern Great Plains states to explain these efforts, and the hope they may provide for such species as the Chestnut-collared Longspur, Sprague's Pipit and Long-billed Curlew.



Provided by Dan Casey

How to Attend the February 14 FAS General Meeting

We all enjoyed being together last month for the in-person portion of our meeting. We managed to pull off the hybrid meeting with only a few glitches (thank you Jake!). We're going to plan on staying with the hybrid format for February. With COVID cases on the rise, however, please check our website, or sign up for our flyby, to make sure we don't need to cancel as the date gets closer.

For those coming to the meeting, we'll meet in Room 26 of the Gateway Mall (United Way building) at 7 PM. This room 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 joining virtually, 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.

Looking forward to seeing everyone!

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.

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

Below is the first installment in a new Post series called

GETTING TO KNOW OWEN SOWERWINE NATURAL AREA

BRIEF HISTORY

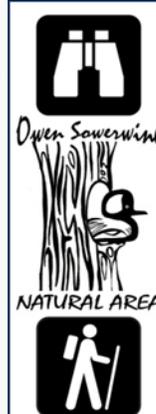
Over the past twenty-five years Flathead Audubon and Montana Audubon have assumed the management roles for the Owen Sowerwine Natural Area (OSNA). Many FAS and community members have volunteered time to assist in this management, and to help keep OSNA available as a valuable community resource for birding, walking, family nature outings, field trips, education, fishing, and hunting. What follows is a brief history of the Area.

In 1976, the newly formed Flathead County Park Board sent to the Montana State Land Board a recommendation that a 442-acre tract of state school trust land in Flathead County be classified as a natural

area. The tract encompasses a large island ("the Big Island") in the braided section of the Flathead River, at the confluence of the Flathead and Stillwater Rivers, and portions of near-by islands and mainland shore pieces. Flathead County committed to paying the state lease fee on the tract, and the County Park Board accepted responsibility for managing it as a natural area. The Land Board accepted the recommendation.

The Chair of the new Park Board, and one of the most energetic

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Remembering June Ash

June Ash passed away peacefully on November 10 with the comfort of family present. She was a central figure in the history of Flathead Audubon, and a friend to many of us.

June was 21 when she first came to Montana in 1952. She came to Libby with her new husband Rod to work the summer as firewatchers at the Big Swede Lookout. June had recently graduated from UC Berkeley in Social Welfare; Rod was finishing his Masters in Anthropology. Driving down the Mission Valley on their way back to California, they spotted a dirt road going east across the mountains to a long valley that looked sparsely populated. "We made a note of that"

June has said. They would come back to Montana 10 years later to explore the Swan Valley.

After Rod graduated they moved to northern California where Rod taught high school social studies and June volunteered for local community programs such as youth baseball, Campfire Girls, and community concerts. In later years she worked as a substitute coordinator for local high schools. At home they raised chickens, pigeons, and 4 kids, Gordon, David, Ellen, and James. She became the Conservation Chair for Cottonwood Garden Club, and was instrumental in developing a town park, receiving several conservation awards. June was "a volunteer extraordinaire" says her daughter Ellen.

In the early 60s June and Rod began bringing the kids to Montana each summer to camp in the Swan. In 1969 they bought 10 acres and a log cabin in the area to use in the summers, began adding on to

it and started a garden. When they retired in 1986 they moved from California to the cabin.

With retirement June had even more time for volunteering. She organized the seniors of the Upper Swan into an AARP chapter that got together monthly. She was active in the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society, Alpine Artisans, and Swan Valley Connections. June and Rod were founding members of the Swan Citizens' ad hoc Committee which developed the Swan Ecosystem Center. And they sought out the nearest Audubon chapter.

June and Rod had been charter members of a new Audubon chapter back in California, and were

involved in that chapter's activities. Shortly after they moved to the Swan they found Flathead Audubon, and volunteered their services. FAS immediately enlisted June and Rod for the Board, put Rod in charge of Conservation, and made June Membership Chair. June served on the Board and concurrently as Membership Chair for 12 years.

In 1993 June and Rod also took on management of the FAS annual Bird Seed Sale, and served in this capacity until shortly before Rod passed away in 2006. Rod would arrange to have several hundred sacks of black oil sunflower seed brought from eastern Montana. June would figure out how many sacks should be dropped on "seed day" at each of the pick-up sites scattered from Eureka to Condon, organize the volunteers who handed out the sacks at the sites, and kept track of it all. At that time, the annual seed

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Photo by Sharon Lamar

THE GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT

You Can Be Part Of The Team—Every Bird Counts

The 25th annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) will take place February 18-21, 2022. The GBBC is a free, fun and easy nationwide event that engages bird appreciators of all ages in counting birds to create a real time snapshot of bird populations around the world just prior to spring migration. Participants are asked to count birds for as little as 15 minutes or spend the day (as long as you wish) on one or more days of the four-day event. Choose the easiest way for you to report your sightings:

- Identify birds with **Merlin Bird ID** app and add sightings to your list;
- Use the **eBird Mobile** app;
- Enter your bird list on [eBird.org](https://www.birdcount.org) for Desktop or laptop)

If you have never participated in the GBBC before, or have not participated since before 2013, you'll need to set up an account. Any of the three ways of reporting, Merlin Bird ID, eBird Mobile, eBird.org, will walk you through the process of setting up your free account. If you already have an account please use the same username and password for submitting your bird list for the GBBC.

Anyone can take part in the GBBC from beginning bird watchers to experts and you can participate from your own backyard or anywhere around the world. Use the following link to learn more about this important citizen science project <https://www.birdcount.org/participate/>.

by Margaret Parodi and Kathy Ross



Thank You To All Flathead Audubon Donors in 2021

This list includes those who donated to Flathead Audubon by becoming a local member of the chapter or who contributed a monetary gift, or both.

Flathead Audubon could not accomplish all the things we do without the generosity of so many wonderful donors. Your donations allowed us to continue such activities as the Jewel Basin Hawk Watch and the very effective Conservation Education Program as well as others.

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Summary Reports of the Northwest Montana Christmas Bird Counts

Bigfork Christmas Bird Count December 18

The 48th annual Bigfork Christmas Bird Count was held Saturday, December 18th, under cloudy skies and snow throughout the day, with mild SSW winds. Snow depths were about 7 inches at the eastern edges of the count circle and 2-3 inches in the valley; temperatures ranged from 15-26 degrees F. Lakes and ponds were mostly frozen and Flathead Lake and River were ice free. Thirty-five volunteer participants counted **15,322** individual birds of **91 species**. Number of birds were up measurably from last year's totals of 14,005, and the number of species increased by 13 birds to 91. There was one new bird

species an **Osprey**, found on this year's bird count. Highlights were a **Wood Duck, Spotted Towhee, and a Brown-headed Cowbird**. There were many count week birds including a Cackling Goose, Gyrfalcon, Mew Gull, Snowy Owl, and a Lesser Goldfinch. Trumpeter Swans and Red-tailed (Harlan's) Hawk were the only species with a high all-time tally's this year.

Thank you to all the incredible participants who helped make the Bigfork CBC count a very enjoyable and a fun experience.

Craig Hohenberger

Eureka Christmas Bird Count December 18

The 29th annual Eureka Christmas bird count was held on Saturday December 18 on a snowy day that ranged from 17°F to 27°F. Koozanusa Reservoir was unfrozen as were the streams but smaller lakes and ponds were completely frozen. Sixteen people went to the field and 15 feeders were counted as well. We recorded **55** species and **2699** individuals. Again this year, the count was conducted with appropriate Covid-19 protocols which likely contributed to a reduced number of field going observers.

Canada Goose (769) was the most numerous species observed with the Mallard (367) second most observed. The Canada Goose and Mallard numbers combined made up over 40% of the total individuals seen on count day. A record high count was recorded

for White-breasted Nuthatch (23) and Brewer's Blackbird was sighted for the first time since 2005.

A record high count was recorded for White-breasted Nuthatch (23) but Eurasian Collared-doves (27) were the lowest since first appearing on the count in 2009. Mourning Doves (68) outnumbered Eurasian Collared-doves for the first time since both were on the count.

Several species often found on the count were not reported this year including, Rock Pigeon (first ever miss), any accipiter or falcon, Great-blue Heron, and Pine Grosbeak.

Thanks to everyone that helped make this another successful count!

Ellen Sullivan and Lewis Young

Glacier National Park Christmas Bird Count December 19

Glacier National Park (GNP) held its 60th annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC) on Sunday, December 19, 2021. Twenty-two participants contributed to this event by covering 10 different routes in Glacier. Participants spent the day counting all bird species and individuals detected. The weather was overcast with light winds, and temperatures ranged between 29 and 32. Snow depths varied from 3 to 18 inches, so most observers skied or snowshoed with limited walking. Nearly all water was open (not frozen).

Counts in 2021 were high with 2,319 birds counted comprised of 32 different species. This was the 'year of the goose' for the Glacier count! Leading up to CBC week, GNP had unusually warm weather with little snow. Then days before the CBC, it started to dump snow and get cold causing what appeared to be a mass exodus of geese from the park. In all, observers counted 3,945 Canada Geese, but after looking at recorded times and flight direction, we halved this number knowing that many were duplicates. We

still ended up with a record number of Canada Geese (n = 1,975), more than quadrupling our previous record of 435 in 1999.

Adding to our 'year of the goose' highlights, we added a new species to GNP count: a lone snow goose! One observant birder, while counting yet another flock of Canada Geese passing by, noticed an 'odd' bird in the formation, and it was a snow goose! Luckily, he was able to get a picture. Later, on his walk, he also got a fantastic picture of a male Black-backed Woodpecker.

The next most common birds were Common Goldeneyes, then Bohemian Waxwings, and then Black-capped Chickadees. During count week (3 days before and 3 days after count day), we added one species with one lone Horned Grebe observed on Lake McDonald.

Thanks to all participants for contributing their expertise, time, and energy for this event.

Lisa Bate

Kalispell Christmas Bird Count January 2

The 23rd annual Kalispell Christmas Bird Count was held Sunday, Jan. 2nd, a day with calm winds that started sunny and finished with overcast skies. We had 36 participants in 18 parties, who reported temperatures from -2F in the morning to 23F in the afternoon, and snow depths of 2-23 inches. Our efforts included more than 88 hours and 775 mi. by car, 14 hours and 19 mi. on foot, 1.5 hr and 2 mi. on skis, and 7 hours by feeder watchers. We tallied 15,263 individuals of 77 species (plus 6 forms), and 3

additional species count week. Lesser Goldfinch (2) was a new species for the count, and Peregrine Falcon, Long-eared Owl, and Rusty Blackbird (3) were each found for just the second time. We tied or set new high count totals for Prairie Falcon, Pileated Woodpecker, Townsend's Solitaire, and Rusty Blackbird. Our most notable misses were Wood Duck and American Dipper, each seen on more than half of all previous counts. Thanks to all!

Dan Casey

Libby Christmas Bird Count December 18

The 52nd Libby Christmas bird count took place December 18 with 9 field observers and 6 feeder watchers. The temperature ranged from a low in the morning of 18 degrees to an afternoon high of 25 with little to no wind. The day did feature snowfall from light to quite heavy nearly all day making conditions challenging for birds and birders alike. The Kootenai River was at maximum discharge from Libby Dam which typically reduces our waterfowl count significantly and our river floaters did not float. Our Bald eagle count was the highest ever recorded with 158

birds (90 adults and 68 immature), most of which were in the first 3 miles below the dam. The large number is likely influenced by the high water discharge which makes Kokanee salmon and trout more available as they come through the turbines a bit disoriented to say the least. The feeding frenzy resembled the MacDonald Creek Apgar bridge in the 70's. We recorded 41 species and 1722 birds total which was less than half of last year's total.

Gene Reckin

Troy Christmas Bird Count January 1

Troy MT had their CBC on January 1 2022. Weather was tough with 8-16" of snow and temperatures ranging from -11 to +10 degrees with little or no sun. Saving grace was there was little wind. We had 19 Field observers ranging from 5 years old to just plain old. For those who aren't familiar with the Troy area our count circle resembles more of an amoeba than a circle due to geographic barriers. It was too cold this year to float the river and the river was running very high so little life (waterfowl) were using it. Total species for count day came to 47 with 3 addi-

tional species (GBH, Merlin and Sharp-shinned Hawk). Highlight species wise were a Varied Thrush settling in on a flowering crab with its frozen berries, Killdeer and Snipe. Usual birds missing from this years count were Gray Jay, American Goldfinch, Northern Pygmy Owl and House Sparrow (No loss there). As usual for our count, the town area held most of our species due to the lack of wetlands and agriculture that our circle holds.

Donald M Jones

The Montana Native Plant Society Zoom Presentation

The Montana Native Plant Society invites Flathead Audubon members to a MNPS Presents! Zoom presentation on February 23, 7 PM:

Recovering our Roots: Salish Ethnobotany for Community Wellbeing with Rose Bear Don't Walk, Salish Native Plant Society. Registration will be available in February from the MNPS Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/MTNativePlantSociety>

Earlier MNPS Presents! programs were recorded and are available online here: <https://www.mtnativeplants.org/mnps-presents-online-programs/>, including **Montana's Grasslands: Ecology and Conservation Opportunities** with Kelsey Molloy and Brian Martin, The Nature Conservancy, and **Flora and Fauna of the Canadian Arctic** with Cyndi Smith and Peter Achuff, Parks Canada.

Natural Events To See This Month:

Ruffed Grouse roost buried in the snow.

WINTER/SPRING 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 BIRDING AT CRESTON FISH HATCHERY, Sunday, February 27, 10 AM-noon. Join Margaret Parodi and Kathy Ross for a morning of birding at the fish hatchery. We hope to see waterfowl, hawks, eagles, a myriad of small winter birds including chickadees, nuthatches, and woodpeckers, and if we are lucky, maybe even a belted kingfisher. There may even be some early spring arrivals. Dress warmly, bring binoculars and be sure to check if snowshoes are needed. We may be walking short distances in snow. Contact Kathy at 406-607-9803 or mtkat67@gmail.com to sign up and get directions. Space is limited to 10 birders.

FREEZOUT LAKE AND THE SNOW GEESE MIGRATION, Friday and Saturday March 25–26.

Snow Geese are beginning to move from their wintering grounds to their arctic nesting areas along with thousands of other waterfowl. They stop over at Freezout Lake WMA near Choteau to rest and feed before finishing their journey. We should go visit them! We will meet on Friday morning at 10 AM at the parking lot of the old K-Mart in Evergreen. From there, we will caravan to Choteau, birding along the way, and arrive in time for some afternoon goose watching. After spending the night in Choteau, we'll head back out to Freezout just before daybreak on Saturday to watch the "mass ascension" of geese from the ponds. After the morning's birding, we can return to Kalispell in the early afternoon at our own pace on Saturday. Bob Lee will provide a suggested schedule and route, and will be in the front of the group. With the impacts of the Omicron variant still unknown at this time, we will be taking precautions like limited carpooling, masking and social distancing and no gathering for dinner. Participants may pursue the geese on their own as much or as little as they, the weather and the birds allow. In 2021, there were an extraordinary number of people congregating to watch the geese. There is no indication of how many might be there this year. Please make your own arrangements for lodging. Primitive camping is available at the WMA. If there are lots of people, these sites may be limited. Motel options include the Stage Stop (406-466-5900), Gunther (406-466-5444), and Big Sky (406-466-5318). Make your reservations early as these motels will likely fill up quickly. For more information, contact Bob at RML3@centurytel.net or 406-270-0371.

Natural Events To See This Month:

Maple buds get brighter pigments.

Black Swift continued from page 2

Furthermore, Black Swifts are highly specialized feeders, and declines in arthropods (their main food source) due to environmental changes such as drought directly affect them as well. Perhaps this drastic decline can also be contributed to their brood size: they only lay one egg per clutch each breeding season and will not re-nest if their initial clutch fails. The good news for Montanan Black Swifts is they have been observed collecting mosses from outside their nest waterfalls, which may luckily indicate they have some resilience to the changing moss availability as droughts become more frequent. Also, the 13 regularly monitored nests have shown to be consistently productive.

In the summer months the best place to view these acrobatic birds flying among the clouds is near water sources that create the breathtaking falls they

nest upon. Some popular summer hiking locations include Morrel Falls in the Swans Mountains, Holland Falls and Avalanche Falls in Glacier National Park, and Granite Lake in the Cabinet Wilderness.

Interested in learning more about and catching a glimpse of these avian enigmas? Contact Amy Seaman aseaman@mtaudubon.org to learn more!

Sources:

<https://www.montanabirdsurveys.com/black-swifts.html>

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black_Swift/overview

NESTING OF THE BLACK SWIFT IN MONTANA, WILLIAM F. HUNTER AND PAUL H. BALDWIN

<https://abcbirds.org/article/165-year-old-mystery-of-disappearing-black-swift-solved/>

Flathead Valley Bird Report

by Dan Casey

Rare and Notables – Dec/Jan

A “Red” Fox Sparrow and a White-throated Sparrow joined long-staying Brown-headed Cowbird and Lesser Goldfinch as notable birds visiting valley feeders. Up to three Snowy Owls were seen in the Lower Valley near Somers throughout the period, and all five species of falcons were found locally during the period. A very late Osprey was new to the Bigfork CBC, and two Lesser Goldfinches added a new species to the Kalispell CBC list.

See <https://ebird.org/region/US-MT-029?yr=all> for more.

12/18 – **Double-crested Cormorant**, Bigfork (Dan C.)

12/18 – **Osprey**, Flathead River in Lower Valley (Lynda S.) (record late date here)

12/19 – **Gyr Falcon**, Egan Slough area (Craig H.); also 01/02 at Flathead WPA (Zack S.)

12/21 – **Snowy Owl** (1), Somers (anon.) 1-3 throughout the period

01/01 – **White-throated Sparrow** (1), Whitefish, throughout the period (bj W.)

01/02 – **Peregrine Falcon**, Flathead Landfill (bj W.)

01/02 – **Rusty Blackbird** (3) McWenneger Slough area (Joshua C.)

01/02 – **Lesser Goldfinch** (2), Kalispell (Patty A.) (one in Somers throughout)

01/07 – **Western Screech-Owl**, Creston (Elliot R.)

01/09 – **Snow Bunting** (4), Lower Valley, Somers (Holly G.)

01/09 – **Western Meadowlark** (2), Lower Valley, Somers (Bridger D.)

01/10 – **Purple Finch**, Kalispell (Jenni L.)

01/12 – **“Red” Fox Sparrow**, Columbia Falls (Joshua C.)

What to Expect – February 2022

Late January through mid-February: the depths of winter! Yet a variety of hawks and falcons will be found throughout the valley, and flocks of waxwings (with occasional American Robins) will be hunting for the remaining mountain ash berries. Feeders should remain active with a variety of finches, juncos and more. And by mid-February, the first inklings of spring, with flocks of Starlings arriving, Red-winged Blackbirds starting to stake out territories in the cattails on sunny days, chickadees whistling their “fee-beee” and increasing waterfowl flocks seeking open water and sprouted wheat fields.

June Ash continued from page 4

sale was Flathead Audubon’s primary source of income. Not until the early 2000s, after roughly a decade of rapid growth and expansion of the education program, did the chapter need to develop new sources of income. It was June’s organizational efforts that funded FAS through that decade of growth.

June and Rod received many awards for their work on conservation, including Volunteer of the Year from the Swan Ecosystem Center, the Flathead National Forest Danny On Award, and Montana Audubon’s Lifetime Achievement Award. After Rod passed, his friend Art Ortenberg funded for 5 years an annual “Raptor Day in Honor of Rod Ash” at Lone Pine, organized by Flathead Audubon. It included a half-day of talks on raptors and raptor conservation, which June opened with stories about Rod and his conservation work, and with a passionate talk on the importance of conservation. FAS continued to hold “Raptor Day” even after the 5 years. It eventually morphed into our annual “Birds of Prey Festival”.

In 2019 June turned 90. Three FAS “old timers” visited her in her nursing home to bring birthday congratulations from the chapter. For over an hour she entertained us with funny stories and tales from her time in the Swan, talked about birds, and about politics (she was up on all the latest developments), and about life in general. Near the end of our visit she

told us: “I’m doing fine here. Remember that life is as good as you make it.”

June Ash made a good life for herself and for all those around her. Through her volunteer efforts she helped build organizations that continue to make many lives better. Flathead Audubon was fortunate to have her on our team, and many in FAS have been fortunate to know her as a friend. In June’s own words, she enjoyed a very good life, she not only gave but also received as well. She felt blessed.

A celebration of June’s life will take place Sunday at 1 PM June 26th in the Swan Valley Community Hall. June’s family suggests that gifts in June’s memory can be made to Flathead Audubon.

by Linda Winnie and Ellen Sullivan

You can hear June and Rod tell their own stories in four interviews housed in the Mansfield Library at U of M: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/upper Swan valley_oralhistory/67/ on life and conservation in the Swan; https://scholarworks.umt.edu/upper Swan valley_oralhistory/38/ on gardening in the Swan; https://scholarworks.umt.edu/upper Swan valley_oralhistory/44/ on life and community in the Swan; <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/nwmt-fla/3/> on their summer at Big Swede Lookout. The links give you both a recording of the interview and a written transcript.

BAD ROCK CANYON CONSERVATION PROJECT COMPLETED - WITH BEDROCK OF HARD WORK AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT!

The close of 2021 can be marked by the completion of one of the most important Flathead River To Lake Initiative's*¹ conservation projects, the Bad Rock Canyon Project. In December 2021, Montana's Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) closed on the purchase of 772 contiguous acres of Columbia Falls Aluminum Company's (CFAC) riparian/wetlands and valley forest along the south bank of the Flathead River, just east of Columbia Falls. This land, acquired decades ago by CFAC to buffer the aluminum plant, is one of the largest remaining intact parcels along the Flathead River and includes backwater sloughs, a spring creek, and acres of relatively undisturbed riparian and conifer forest. The company's lands had been closed to public use for years until about a decade ago and after the plant closure, CFAC agreed to enroll this parcel (plus other CFAC lands) into Montana's Block Management Program allowing for youth hunting. This has been a boon for young hunters and a great way for the company to share this incredible property with the public. This significant gesture led to a cascade of events over the last 10 years that finally culminated in the state's recent acquisition. But none of this would have happened without the persistence and expertise of many individuals and ultimately, the overwhelming outpouring of public support.

The idea for working for a conservation solution for this parcel started more than a decade ago when the CFAC was closed for some time and the community was anxious to find out Glencore's (CFAC parent company) plans for its future. During a public hearing in Columbia Falls with Glencore, a citizen, Jami Belt, suggested that along with the company's plans to permanently close the smelter, perhaps this land could be set aside for the community as a park, trail area, and open space to provide long-term recreation and other benefits to the heavily impacted community. At many subsequent public meetings, nearby landowners and Flathead Land Trust's Land Protection Specialist, Laura Katzman, continued to voice support the idea for long-term conservation of this parcel. In fact, this land was identified as crucial conservation area in the 1980s as part of efforts to find projects to mitigate for habitats impacted by Kerr and Hungry Horse dams. In 2003, collaborators working with the Flathead Lakers identified this as an extremely high conservation priority in their Critical Lands Project.

For next few years, the initial focus was on developing the Gateway to Glacier Trail through the property to allow folks to enjoy the land. The Gateway to Glacier, City of Columbia Falls, and hundreds of community members supported this effort and the par-

ties agreed to a license for the trail, signed in 2018. However, the groups found it would be challenging for Gateway to Glacier to obtain certain grants for building and maintaining the trail as well as to obtain access through other state or private lands with only a temporary licensed use.

Pivotal support for the public's idea of conserving the land stemmed from CFAC's representative, Steve Wright who with his years of experience with CFAC and the community and his keen understanding of timing, presented the idea forward to Glencore representatives in 2019 when Glencore began considering a land sale. Glencore saw the merits of the idea and agreed to pursue it further. Steve then reached out to Flathead Land Trust to see if they and their partners could purchase and conserve this outstanding parcel of riparian habitat while also providing a trail and public access at market value. With strong relationships among key players already forged in the community, discussions between Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Glencore/CFAC representatives moved quickly leading to Flathead Land Trust holding

an option agreement, and MFWP applying for large grants.

The state soon learned that this project ranked very high nationally for a significant grant from the Forest Legacy Program and another from the Habitat Montana Program. The stumbling block would be the \$590,000 of private funds still needed for the project. Flathead Land Trust stepped up to fill that significant private funding need; and, with

the help of many partners including the Flathead Lakers, local businesses, and other community members, they met that challenge. To raise this amount of funding locally, the Flathead Land Trust and partners sponsored dozens of tours of the property and an on-line auction fundraising event. Within a year, major grants from the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust (\$175,000) and Heart of the Rockies Initiative & Keneda Fund (\$100,000) and other funds from the Cross Charitable Foundation, Headwaters Montana, Cinnabar Foundation, AGL Foundation, Whitefish Community Foundation, Montana Trout Unlimited, Flathead Valley Trout Unlimited, Flathead Wildlife, Vital Ground Foundation, and 250 individuals from the community, they more than met the goal.

MFWP went through its MEPA scoping and draft EA process and received over 336 supportive public comments from 220 individuals including support from Flathead County Commissioners with no one opposing this project. Such overwhelming support is rare and likely would not have happened without the long-term working relationships among the partners,

continued on page 12



Bad Rock Project continued from page 11
local governments, community members, and the company representatives.

We thank all of the people who helped make this project a reality as well as the many members of Flathead Audubon who have helped document bird and other wildlife species on this property and all who contributed directly to the purchase!

Our board unanimously voted to give \$7,500 to the project but by the time we completed our process, Flathead Land Trust had met their fundraising

goal. Those funds will go to the next important River to Lake conservation effort.

This incredible project secured permanent public access to the property, including a limited opportunity for hunting and a 3-mile community trail constructed by Gateway to Glacier Trail for use by hikers, bikers, and birdwatchers. It will ensure protection of key habitats for birds, elk, bears, wolverine as well as migratory habitat for bull trout.

Thanks for your support!

by Gael Bissell

OSNA continued from page 3

proponents of this project, had been Owen Sowerwine. Sowerwine had previously been a member of the State Land Board. He was well known in the Flathead as an avid outdoorsman, a dedicated conservationist, and a civic leader, who had been instrumental in founding the Flathead Valley Community College. The Land Board recommended that the new natural area be named after Sowerwine, who had died in January 1975. A public hearing on the proposed designation was held in May 1976 in the Community Room of the Conrad National Bank in Kalispell. The public was enthusiastic and the designation process moved forward. In 1978 the State Land Board designated the parcel as class 4 land (for "natural area use"), and the Owen Sowerwine Natural Area was established.

The official dedication ceremony took place September 9, 1978. An article in The Daily Inter Lake the following day begins: "It became official Saturday. A wild thicket enfolded in the coils of the Flathead and Stillwater Rivers is now protected under the name of Owen Sowerwine, the longtime Flathead Valley resident and conservationist who initiated the fight to preserve the area."

Participants in the ceremony gathered that Saturday morning at the Outlaw Inn, and were taken in a bus donated by the Inn to a boat launch site on the Stillwater River. Volunteers from the Flathead County Search and Rescue ferried the participants to the Big Island in boats provided by Montana Fish and Game. The dedication ceremony was attended by members of Sowerwine's family, then-Lieutenant Governor Ted Schwinden, members of the Flathead County Park, and a number of other county and state officials.

The site was managed as a Natural Area by the Flathead County Park Board through 1995. In 1994 the yearly state lease fee had risen from the original \$200 to \$550, and Flathead County decided it could no longer afford to retain the lease. In 1996 Flathead Audubon stepped forward to assume the lease and manage the Area in order to maintain its status as a Natural Area.

When a new assessment in 1999 threatened an astronomical rise in the lease fee, Flathead Audubon joined with Montana Audubon to negotiate a long-term license for OSNA with a reasonable fee. Agreement was finally reached in the spring of 2001. Montana Audubon became the official license holder, and Flathead Audubon was designated local manager.

When this license expired at the end of February 2010 a new 10-year license was signed. Montana Audubon was again the official license holder, while Flathead Audubon remained the on-site manager. In fall 2019, the license was reassigned to make Flathead Audubon and Montana Audubon the joint license holders of OSNA, with Flathead Audubon continuing its management role, with the two Audubons sharing the yearly license fee and management costs. In 2020 the parties to the license (DNRC, FAS, MA) began an effort to develop a more permanent arrangement for management of OSNA, and during this process DNRC has issued an annual Special Recreational Use Permit, instead of a 10-year license.

by Pam Willison and Linda Winnie

Much of this history appears in the OSNA section of the Flathead Audubon website: <https://flatheadaudubon.org/protect/owen-sowerwine-natural-area/>



FLATHEAD AUDUBON MISSION STATEMENT

THE FLATHEAD AUDUBON SOCIETY IS A LOCAL CHAPTER
OF THE NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY.



- ⇒ OUR MISSION IS TO CONSERVE BIRDS, WILDLIFE HABITAT, AND ECOSYSTEM DIVERSITY.
- ⇒ WE PROMOTE AWARENESS AND APPRECIATION OF THE NATURAL WORLD THROUGH EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES AND ADVOCACY PROGRAMS.
- ⇒ WE WORK WITH DIVERSE GROUPS AND AGENCIES TO ACHIEVE SOUND DECISIONS ON NATURAL RESOURCE ISSUES.
- ⇒ WHILE FOCUSING OUR EFFORTS IN NORTHWEST MONTANA, WE BELIEVE IN THE PROTECTION OF THE EARTH AND ALL OF ITS INHABITANTS.

CHIRPS & SQUAWKS

Highlights from the January 3, 2022 Board of Directors Meeting

- ◆ Plans were initiated for holding a raffle of larger donated items, in addition to continuing the silent auction held during the annual meeting.
- ◆ Rod Walette, Treasurer, confirmed that the insurance policies have been renewed, and per guidance from our investment manager, will provide information for the February meeting about changing the mixture of the investment components.
- ◆ Margaret Parodi reported on the upcoming field trips, and is seeking suggestions for more/new people to lead field trips. Bob Lee noted that plans are being made for the field trip to Freezout Lake.
- ◆ Denny Olson is working with the STEAM alliance committee (school curriculum), is continuing work on the Natives Rule video (starring Kathy Ross), and is working with Linda de Kort (West Valley Naturalists) to consider some co-sponsored activities. Cindy and Tom Roberts explained the barriers to contacting local teachers about our education resources. Cindy and Denny will make some contacts with school administrators to try to get classroom activities started again.



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

I want my gift to recognize another:

In memory of _____

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Please make checks payable to:

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Your gift is tax deductible.

Flathead Audubon Society is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization. Our federal tax ID number is 81-0447830.

FLATHEAD AUDUBON SOCIETY DIRECTORY

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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.

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

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
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FLATHEAD AUDUBON SOCIETY

Membership Individual or Family

- Basic Membership ————— \$25
Pays for newsletter and operating costs
- Supporting Membership ————— \$40
Extra \$15 funds local projects such as
Conservation Education and
Owen Sowerwine Natural Area
- Additional Donation of \$ _____
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New member? Renewal?

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