



the

Pileated Post

Newsletter of the Flathead Audubon Society

Pine Warbler



Photo by Susan Hovde

Peeps from the President By Darcy Thomas

Happy New Year! I hope everyone had a lovely holiday rich with love, peace, and joy. May this coming year give you happiness, health, and wondrous outdoor adventures! May it also be a great year for birds!

I have great news to tell you! After many years of hard work, keeping fingers crossed, and partnering with amazing conservation organizations, namely Flathead Land Trust and Flathead Lakers, Owen Sowerwine Conservation Easement was approved unanimously by the Montana State Land Board. We can celebrate knowing our efforts on behalf of birds, fish, and wildlife have paid off. This was an effort made by many people. Our many members and friends who made donations and who deserve a special thank you.

The Whitefish Community Foundation merits recognition and appreciation for awarding Flathead Audubon a Community Grant of \$50,000 towards the conservation easement.



Photo by Flathead Audubon

For believing in our vision, the Montana Land Board gets a round of applause. Gael Bissel and Pam Willison deserve our sincerest thanks for the hours of work they donated to see this come to fruition. The behind-the-scenes work they accomplished that led to this success is beyond what anyone could expect of unpaid volunteers. The next time you see them please take a moment to thank them personally. I know the birds would clap their wings if they knew what love and dedication these two women have poured into this effort.



Photo by Rob Thomas

We are looking forward to the May 13 general meeting, to celebrate Owen Sowerwine, its beauty, birds, flora and fauna, our hard work in the area, our fun field trips, and our history. I hope you all will join in the celebration.

For further reading, skip to page 7 in this newsletter, and also check out the wonderful article on the approval, written by Micah Drew in the Flathead Beacon. <https://flatheadbeacon.com/2023/12/18/owen-sowerwine-natural-area-granted-permanent-conservation-easement/>.

This year Flathead Audubon is looking forward to many other great things as well. Our conservation education program is expanding to meet student and teacher needs and instill a love of birds and nature into young minds in the Valley. We have a lot of dynamic field trips planned in 2024. Be sure to join a few of them. Once again, we look forward to Warbler Weekend and the Birds of Prey Festival. We are forming a Junior Bird Club and planning a baling twine clean-up event to protect Osprey. We will also have a couple of Birds & Brew nights where we can socialize, meet new friends, and talk about our favorite bird stories.

Our annual election will occur in May so please be thinking about how you can help. If I could wish upon a star and have my dream come true it would be to have someone step forward to be vice president. We are also in need of an Education Committee chairperson. Pam has been double booking herself as our secretary and committee chairperson for the Owen Sowerwine area for a long time. She would love to dedicate her time to Owen Sowerwine, so we need to elect a new secretary to replace her. If you are not quite ready to serve as an officer, we would love to welcome you to sit on our board of directors or co-chair a committee. There will be many more volunteer opportunities available as our year progresses. Our work with Flathead Audubon is vitally important and there are so many ways you can help birds, wildlife, and the places they live by joining us in the daily tasks that make our chapter vibrant. If you are interested, see me after a meeting, call me, or email me at darcy@flatheadaudubon.org.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Canada Jay

By Pam Willison

Perisoreus canadensis was originally named Canada Jay, so it seems appropriate that after being Gray Jay from 1956-2018, the American Ornithological Society changed it back to Canada Jay. They have several popular nicknames: Camp Robber, Venison Hawk, Whiskey Jack, or Lumberjack. Whiskey Jack is said to be a variation of "Wisakedjak", the name given to a benevolent trickster and cultural hero in Cree, Algonquin, and Menominee cultures, and Camp Robber originated with the Tlingit people of NW North America.

Probably anyone who has camped within Canada Jay territory has spotted these bold and skilled "camp robbers". Although often loud and obvious with their chatters, chuckles, whistles, and mimicry, they often glide silently into a campsite and depart with food. Or, beg should their theft be foiled.

Canada Jays are members of the smart and skilled Corvidae family and are a fairly large and stocky songbird. With a wingspan of 18 inches and length of 10-13 inches, they are smaller than most other jays. Their plumage showcases their subtle beauty: gray back, lighter gray underside, mostly white head, black nape, short black beak, dark eyes, black legs, and long gray tail with a lighter tip. They have very thick plumage for insulation, including feather covered nostrils. Their coloration varies somewhat among the nine subspecies.

Canada Jays live year-round on permanent territories in boreal and subalpine forests, preferring black, white, and Engelmann spruce, and jack and lodgepole pine. Range maps confirm that the Canada Jay lives year-round throughout Canada; also, Alaska, very northern parts of the US, and high, timbered areas of the northern Rocky Mountains and Pacific Northwest. Although not a species of concern, they could be impacted by warming climate.

Survival depends on caching enough food for the long, cold and snowy seasons at the latitudes and elevations they inhabit. As omnivores, they eat a wide variety of food, including arthropods, small mammals and rodents, nestling birds, carrion, insects, fruit and seeds, in addition to robbing traps, begging, and stealing - basically they aren't picky because it's a matter of survival. They



Photo by Patrick Maurice

spend months gathering and caching thousands of pieces of food in various locations (scatterhoarding) within their territory, always weary of thieves like the Stellar's Jay. Canada Jays wrench, twist, and tug food apart, prepare the food for storage by rolling it in their mouths until thoroughly coated with sticky saliva, and storing it above snowline in branch

forks, bark crevices, tufts of lichen, or needle clumps. Cached food is eaten throughout the harsh months, and eventually used to feed nestlings and fledglings. Choice of habitat needs to be adequately cold to successfully store perishable food.

Nesting and raising young are done early to allow time to accumulate the food supply. Pairs mate for life at full maturity (two years) and are monogamous. Then in late February, Mr. Jay selects a nest site on the sunnier side of a tree, near the trunk. He does most of the nest building using twigs, bark, and lichen with insulating layers of tent caterpillar cocoons, and a feather lining. The small nest is about three inches wide and two inches deep to maximize heat retention. A clutch consists of two to five light green-grey spotted eggs. While Mrs. Jay incubates the eggs (18.5-day average) and for several days after hatching, she rarely leaves the nest - it's too cold to expose the eggs or helpless young! Mr. Jay delivers cached food for Mrs. Jay and the hatchlings. After about 10 days of rapid growth, Mrs. Jay can leave them to help carry food.

An amazing survival behavior of the Canada Jay is the retention of a helper - the dominant juvenile stays with the adults through the summer, fall, and winter. Can you remember seeing these groups of three Canada Jays? At 55-65 days of maturity and full size, the siblings battle for dominance, and the dominant juvenile stays with the parent birds. The siblings leave the natal territory and are sometimes being adopted as a helper by unsuccessful nesting pairs! The juveniles work with the adult pairs throughout the food caching season to locate and store food, and stay with the adults until driven away during nesting and fledging. Once the hatchlings leave the nest at about 22-24 days (and are too large for the juvenile to eat!), the juvenile is welcomed back to help with foraging and feeding.



Birds of the World

(continued on page 11)

JANUARY PROGRAM

Avian Predators in Glacier National Park

Co-presented by Jami Belt and Jess Garby



Jess Garby with Golden Eagle

Glacier National Park (GNP) hosts a large diversity of birds, and few are as charismatic as two of our top level predators - the Common Loon and Golden Eagle.

While these birds inhabit very different haunts, both come to GNP as summer breeding residents and exist in very small, tenuous populations. We will share what we have learned about Common Loons since we began monitoring them using citizen science in 2006. We will also share some highlights about Golden Eagle migration monitoring from our Mount Brown Hawk Watch program.

Jami Belt is a biologist at GNP and has led Glacier's Citizen Science Program for the Crown of the Continent Research Learning Center since 2006. Prior to that she worked at the Glacier Institute. She holds a wildlife biology master's degree from the University of Montana.



Jami Belt with Maine Loon

Jess Garby is an emerging voice in avian conservation, focusing her studies on migrating raptors of the West. Jess has worked extensively as a Hawk Counter and a Raptor Trapper in various Montana locations and has assisted in studying the summering population of Turkey Vultures in the Missoula area. She currently works as a Biology Assistant for the Crown of the Continent Research Learning Center in GNP.

JANUARY MEETING FAS

Our meetings are available both in person and virtually. For those attending the meeting in person on January 8, we'll meet in Room 26 of the Gateway Community Center at 7pm. This room is located on the east side of the building along Glenwood Drive. Look for our banner outside.

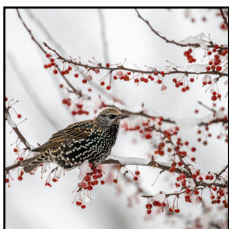
For those joining virtually, when you use the link, you will be let into a "waiting room" where you will then be added to the meeting by the host. Please sign in with your name when you enter the room, so we know to admit you. You will be muted when you first join the meeting. You can use your computer's microphone and speakers (most computers have both). This is the preferred way to join. You can also get an audio connection to the meeting without the Zoom capability by using your phone.

For more information on how to attend by Zoom, or how to get an audio connection by phone, contact jake@flatheadaudubon.org

Videos of previous FAS meeting programs
are available at

<https://flatheadaudubon.org/videos>.

JANUARY FLATHEAD AUDUBON CALENDAR



Starling
Photo by Skyler Ewing

Tuesday, January 2, 5:30pm, FAS Board of Directors Meeting. Public Meeting Room, Fish, Wildlife & Parks building, 490 N. Meridian Rd., Kalispell. You may bring your dinner.

Monday, January 8, 7pm, Flathead Audubon General Meeting. Gateway Community Center, US Hwy. 2 West, Kalispell. East side of Gateway Mall along Glenwood Dr. All are welcome. To join remotely, see instructions above.

Sunday, January 14, 10am-3pm. Flathead Valley Raptor Prowl. See page 4.

Saturday, January 27, 9am-1pm. Winter River Bottomland: Birds, Tracks, Hydrology and Plant Adaptations. See page 4.

SAVE THE DATE!

Friday, May 17-Sunday, May 19.
Warbler Weekend at Tally Lake.

Highlights from the December 4, 2023 Board of Directors Meeting

By Pam Willison, Secretary

- ↓ Dee Baginski, Operations Coordinator, is working with Jason Garver, Jake Bramante, and others to research and price some options for FAS merchandise.
- ↓ The Board approved the new Mission Statement which was rewritten to be one sentence (look for it on page 5 of the newsletter!).
- ↓ Bob Lee gave a report from the Montana Audubon Board, noting that the dates for the state festival, Wings Across The Big Sky, will be May 31-June 2, 2024.
- ↓ Cindy Roberts reported that some of the Learning Kits are being used in classrooms, with the Snowy Owl being the most popular.
- ↓ There was discussion about the need for a comprehensive plan for the removal of invasive buckthorn, including follow up solutions for small buckthorn and sprouts, and possible restoration of affected areas. It was noted that this may require some professional assistance.
- ↓ The new application process and information for Group Use in Owen Sowerwine were reviewed. These will be posted to the FAS website once they are finalized.

JANUARY FIELD TRIPS FOR YOU

FLATHEAD VALLEY RAPTOR PROWL: Sunday, January 14, 10am-3pm.

Dan Casey will lead us on a tour of the open country favored by winter raptors in the West Valley, Creston and/or Lower Valley area near Somers. Our route will be finalized based on local raptor surveys, and we will focus on the roadside identification of the varied forms and plumages of Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks. Prairie Falcon and Snowy Owl are also possibilities. We will meet at 10am in the United Way parking lot at Gateway West Mall, and will return there by 3pm. Limited to 10 participants; we will carpool to the degree of comfort of participants. Sign up is required. Please call or text Dan at (406) 270-5941 or e-mail dan@flatheadaudubon.org.



WINTER RIVER BOTTOMLAND: BIRDS, TRACKS, HYDROLOGY AND PLANT ADAPTATIONS Saturday, January 27, 9am- 1pm (weather permitting).

Owen Sowerwine Area. Meet at Kalispell Montessori Elementary School parking lot. 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, Bald Eagles, many kinds of chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, Bohemian and Cedar waxwings in flocks of thousands, Pine Grosbeaks, Townsend's Solitaires, often a Merlin -- and there is always an unexpected bird! It won't be just bird ID, but lots of natural history lore, which is Denny's trademark. Dress warmly, bring binoculars, a snack and snow boots, and check with us on the need for snowshoes, if the snow is deep. Text Denny at 406-249-3987 or e-mail educator@flatheadaudubon.org to sign up and get directions. Space is limited.

LOST AND FOUND



One, well-loved water bottle that appears to have accompanied an adventurous soul along many of life's marvelous experiences. Said adventurer left this at the October general meeting when Denver Holt was our guest speaker. This water bottle needs to find its master, as I am sure it will continue to quench his or her thirst on many capers to come. To claim your thirst-quenching companion, email Darcy at darcy@flatheadaudubon.org.



Photos by Darcy Thomas

Flathead Valley Bird Report

By Dan Casey

Rare and Notables – November/December 2023

Winter was slow to arrive, and our avifauna did not change much from the previous month. Scoters continued at Foy's Lake; all three of our largest falcon species made appearances. **Steller's Jays**, **Pine Grosbeaks** and **Common Redpolls** were widespread, but **Bohemian Waxwing** numbers did not build to their usual numbers. The gull roost in the Flathead Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) hosted at least six species by the end of the period, although **Glaucous Gulls** were notably absent. See also: <https://ebird.org/region/US-MT-029?yr=all>.

- 11/16 – Greater Yellowlegs (1) Lake Blaine (late) (Jake B.)
- 11/17 – Snow Goose (2) West Valley (bj W.)
- 11/20 – Pacific Loon (1) Lake McDonald (Grant P.)
- 11/22 – Black Scoter (1,f) Foy's Lake (Grant P.); still present 12/9 (Leslie K.)
- 11/27 – Ferruginous Hawk (1) Manning Rd, Somers (Dan C.)
- 12/09 – White-winged Scoter (3) Foy's Lake (end of long stay?) (bj W.)
- 12/13 – Short-billed Gull (1) Flathead Lake WPA (Shawn R.)

12/13 – Lesser Black-backed Gull (1) Flathead Lake WPA (Craig H.) still present 12/16 (Dan C.)

12/14 – Prairie Falcon (1) Farm Rd, Somers (Dan C.)

12/15 – Brewer's Blackbird (150) Egan Slough Rd, Creston (Craig H.)

12/16 – Snow Goose (7) Lower Valley (Denny O.)

12/16 – Peregrine Falcon (1) Flathead WPA (Dan C.)

12/16 – Gyrfalcon (1) South of Creston (Michele T.)

What to Expect – January 2024

As long as the Flathead River and Lake stay open, watch for a diversity of waterfowl, grebes or loons that have chosen to spend the winter (seven **Common Loons** were seen on the Bigfork CBC 12/16). Watch crab apple and box elder trees for foraging flocks of **Pine Grosbeaks** and **Bohemian Waxwings**, and check birch trees for **Common** and **Hoary Redpolls**. The inevitable (?) snows should bring in more birds to feeders as access to natural seeds decreases; watch for **White-throated** or **Harris's Sparrows** to join your junco flocks.

THANK YOU TO SLITERS LUMBER & BUILDING SUPPLY!

By Pam Willison, Owen Sowerwine Chairperson

Photo by Pam Willison



Denny Olson using EZ-Ject Lance
Easy-peasy!!

A big THANK YOU to Sliters Lumber & Building Supply for awarding Flathead Audubon a grant to fund the purchase of an EZ-Ject Lance system, for use on the invasive buckthorn in Owen Sowerwine.

The EZ-Ject Lance herbicide system is used to inject a capsule of glyphosate powder into the cambium layer of the trunk of the invasive, so the herbicide is translocated systemically and kills the tree. The advantages of this system are faster and less physically taxing work, the work can be done by teams of just two people, there is less disturbance to birds and wildlife than running chainsaws, and it is safer than handling glyphosate liquid.

After careful evaluation of the method, we were fortunate to hear about the one-of-a-kind grant opportunity offered by Sliters, and to have our application approved. Again, thank you Sliters!!

This year Sliters celebrated their 90th anniversary by offering grants to 90 nonprofits and groups in the Flathead Valley, and we are grateful to be one of those recipients.

A small test area of buckthorn has been treated, and we will follow-up in the spring to evaluate the effectiveness of our technique, and the overall appearance of the treated area.

FLATHEAD AUDUBON MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Flathead Audubon Society is to conserve birds, wildlife habitat, and ecosystem diversity in Northwest Montana through education and conservation programs.

How to catch that bird... in your binoculars

By Ben Long

When I was a kid, grandpa told me I could catch a bird by sprinkling salt on its tail. Since then, I've traded in my salt shaker for a good pair of binoculars.

The trouble is, putting yourself in the vicinity of a bird while you have the binoculars in hand is only half the challenge. The second half is finding the bird in the binoculars. The challenge can be particularly maddening when trying to glimpse a tiny warbler flitting through the leafy tree canopy or a flying duck cutting across a distant marsh.



Photo by BC Outdoors Magazine

I'm no expert, but here are a couple things to consider if you have trouble finding birds on the wing or in the bush.

One, pick the right glass. The optical concept to understand is field of view.

Field of view is the size of the sight window when you look through the binoculars. It's generally expressed in feet at 1,000 yards, say 350 or 450 feet at 1,000 yards.

Binoculars are described based on two numbers. The first number is magnification. The second is the diameter of the objective (big) lens as measured in millimeters. So, the popular 8x40 binocular has magnification of 8x and an objective lens of 40 millimeters.

This is relevant because field of view depends on both those variables. When you are shopping for binocs, check the specs. Sometimes it's abbreviated as "FOV."

The thing to know is, the more your binoculars magnify, or the smaller the objective lens, the smaller the field of view. An 8x42 binocular would have a FOV around 377 feet, while a 10x42 would likely have a FOV of about 340 feet. A 7x35 binocular, however, would have a FOV of 480 feet.

That makes a difference for "target acquisition." So, if you are frequently frustrated finding birds, consider binoculars

that have (a) less magnification or (b) bigger objective lenses, or both.

Binocular marketing follows trends and 8x40 is the popular choice these days. When I was a kid, everyone carried 7x35s. I also have 10x50s which are OK if you don't have to lug them around your neck; I use mine in my office or in my truck. Compact binoculars, say 8x20s, are delightful to carry but significantly sacrifice FOV.

Target acquisition is a skill that requires practice. The good news is the practice is fun! Birders who put in plenty of hours scanning the treetops for flighty passerines will get better at it over time. You can practice around your neighborhood, but don't violate anyone's privacy.

One trick is to keep your eyes focused on the bird, then move your binoculars to your eyes. That is, don't break eye contact with the bird by glancing down at the binoculars, then having to re-find it once you lift binoculars into place.

California naturalist John Muir Laws suggests this: when you see a bird, point your nose at it and keep your nose pointed at it as you raise your binoculars to your eyes. I've been trying this recently and it really works.

That is, until the bird hops to another treetop. Then you have no choice but to lower the glasses and start over. Don't drop the binoculars all the way down – rather search for the bird over the top of the binoculars so you can quickly put your optics to work.

Sure, it's frustrating to have a potential lifer disappear before you can get a closer look. That's all part of the joy of birding. And still easier than the old shaker of salt.

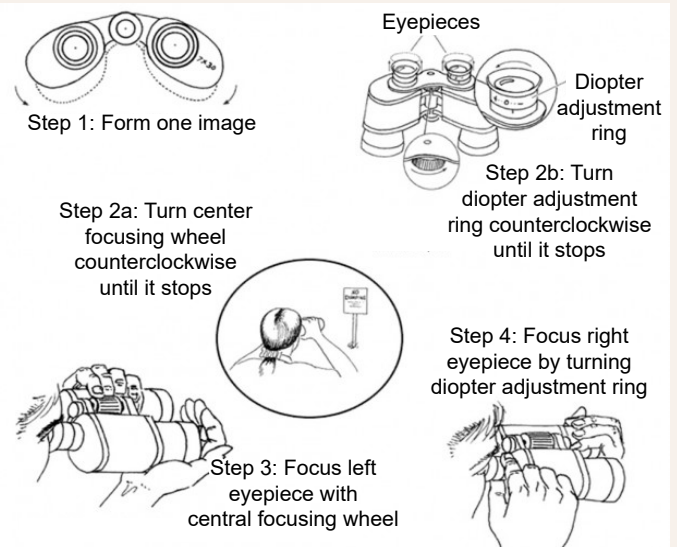


Diagram by Cornell Lab of Ornithology

State Land Board Approves the Purchase of Owen Sowerwine Conservation Easement

Press Release from Flathead Land Trust



The Montana Land Board granted unanimous approval for a purchased conservation easement on over 400 acres of pristine riverine habitat along the Flathead River near Kalispell on Monday. The purchase of a conservation easement on the State School Trust Land east of Kalispell, known as Owen Sowerwine, will sustain the state's management of the property as natural habitat for birds, fish and wildlife, and generate long-term funding for Montana's K-12 schools. It will also secure public access for outdoor pursuits such as trail walking, birdwatching, hunting, fishing, and conservation education, ensuring that these activities continue to thrive for generations to come.

Designated as an Important Bird Area by Montana Audubon, Owen Sowerwine is an ecological stronghold lying in the heart of one of the most complex sections of the Flathead River, a braided area including islands, sloughs, wetlands, and gravel bars. It is an integral component of an over 13,000-acre conservation network of privately and publicly protected land along 50 miles of the Flathead River and north shore of Flathead Lake, providing habitat for federally listed grizzly bear and bull trout and many other species, while safeguarding water quality in the Stillwater and Flathead Rivers and Flathead Lake.

Seeking permanent protection of Owen Sowerwine has been a passion of many organizations and individuals for decades. Born of a desire to protect the site as a natural area under the Natural Areas Act of 1974, an effort was led by Owen Sowerwine, an avid outdoorsman, dedicated conservationist, and community leader, for whom the area is named. The Flathead County Parks Board, Flathead Audubon Society, and Montana Audubon held short-term leases and licenses on the land over the years, which served as temporary fixes while collaborative partners sought a permanent solution for protection. More recently, the Flathead Lakers, Flathead Audubon and Flathead Land Trust have worked collectively toward purchasing a conservation easement on Owen Sowerwine as this permanent solution.

The conservation easement will be purchased for its appraised value of \$970,000. Project partners obtained the funding to purchase the conservation easement from multiple large grants, as well as smaller foundations and organizations, and donations from hundreds of community members. Local philanthropists Jim and Lisa Stack's generous \$50,000 donation through Whitefish Community Foundation recently closed the final funding gap. The project is now fully funded and ready to move forward.

Approval from the Land Board was required to complete the conservation easement. The Montana State Board of Land Commissioners holds the legal authority to determine how State School Trust lands are managed. The Board is comprised of the state's five highest elected officials — Gov. Greg Gianforte, Secretary of State Christi Jacobsen, Attorney General Austin Knudsen, Superintendent of Public Instruction Elsie Arntzen, and Commissioner of Securities and Insurance Troy Downing.

"We're very excited to have received approval from the Land Board to complete the purchased conservation easement to permanently protect Owen Sowerwine. This is an important step forward for the project and we are grateful. We can now move forward to close on this incredible project and hope to do so early in 2024," said Flathead Land Trust Executive Director Paul Travis.

CORRECTION

An error occurred on page 10 of the December 2023 Pileated Post. We mistakenly referred to the 2023 Bigfork Christmas Bird Count (CBC) as the 49th year, when in fact, it is the 50th. Craig Hohenberger had recognized it was the 50th - since last year he called the 2022 CBC the 49th. We apologize for the error.

50th Bigfork Christmas Bird Count Completed

By Linda Winnie

The first Bigfork Christmas Bird Count (CBC) took place in December 1974. This means that the birders who combed the Bigfork Count Circle for birds on December 16 of this past year were engaged in an historic task. They were carrying out the 50th Bigfork CBC!

Ron Lang, then pastor of the United Methodist Church in Bigfork, organized that first Bigfork Count, and worked with a group of Bigfork birders to draw the 7.5-mile radius count circle that would span a wide variety of bird habitats. They chose to center the circle at the intersection of Highways 35 and 83, near the "Little Brown Church" north of Bigfork, so it would include more than 30 miles of the Swan and Flathead Rivers, the north end of Flathead Lake, and habitats varying from the croplands of the Lower Valley to the spruce-fir and cedar-hemlock forests in the Swan and Crane Mountain foothills. Among those who worked with Lang was Jeanne Robocker (later central to the Flathead Audubon Society (FAS) Education program), who afterward recalled that she made sure the circle included her own house near Egan Slough, an area she knew contained a wide variety of bird species.

The 1974 Bigfork CBC was one of the eight Counts held in Montana that year. In 2022, 27 Counts took place in Montana. The compiler for the first Count was Ron Lang. Compilers since then include Dan Sullivan (first President of FAS), Wanda Jamieson (third President), Jeanne Robocker, Dan Casey (for 28 years!), and Craig Hohenberger (currently in his 9th year).

That first Bigfork CBC, only 37 species were observed. The next year, 58 species were found, and the number stayed well above that in subsequent years. No data on number of participants is available until the third Bigfork Count, when 18 people took part. In general, records on early Bigfork Counts are spotty until 1990, but what is available shows the species numbers increasing, while the average number of participants reaches a plateau. The data that is available allows us to compare numbers of participants and species averaged over six early Bigfork counts, with averages over the three most recent groups of 10:

Years	Average Participants	Average Species
1976-1981	29	66
1993-2002	35	81
2003-2012	33	82
2013-2022	33	85

Buried in these averages are several notable high numbers. In 2011 the Bigfork CBC became the first CBC in Montana to reach a species count of 90; and in the last 10 years this high has been equaled or exceeded three times: in 2017, 98 species were recorded; in 2019, 92; and in 2021, 90.

The 1974 Bigfork CBC led fairly quickly to the formation of the FAS in 1977. The story is told by Dan Sullivan in the March 1977 issue of the Accipiter Express, the first newsletter of the FAS:

"The Flathead Audubon Society is only three months old, but its real origin began in December 1974 with our first Audubon Christmas Bird Count. From the people participating in the count, the Lower Flathead Valley Bird Club [also known as the Bigfork Bird Club] was formed. Special credit goes to Ron Lang, formerly of Bigfork, whose initial interest and initiative organized the count and the bird club. Ron's formative efforts essentially resulted in the formation of our Audubon chapter.

As the bird club became established and began attracting new members who brought with them interests beyond that of birds, it became apparent that either we grow or lose these people. As a result, during the fall of 1976 we began exploring Audubon membership. At the end of our third Audubon Christmas Bird Count [1976] the club voted to join Audubon thereby forming the Flathead Audubon Society."

Information about early Bigfork Counts can be found scattered through the early FAS newsletters at <https://flatheadaudubon.org/about-us/pileated-post-archive/>. National Audubon offers data for all recent Christmas Bird Counts <https://netapp.audubon.org/cbcobservation/>. Audubon has published printed summaries of CBC results since the Count began in 1900. For reproductions see <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/science/christmas-bird-count/american-birds-annual-summary-christmas-bird-count>.



Cedar Waxwings

Photo courtesy of iNaturalist



Photo by JP Edge
Hungry Horse News

Conservation Educator's Niche

By Denny Olson

The long dark nights of this winter solstice time of year give us much opportunity to quietly contemplate the big unknowns in this world, and what constitutes the “spiritual” in our lives. For me, it is a sense

of wonder and awe about the size and mind-boggling complexities of our Milky Way and the Universe. It is the jaw-dropping intricacy, connectedness and balance of the ecological system of life on this planet. It is the paradox and convolution of everything that makes my hair stand on end and the blood rush to the tips of my ears. And all of these definitions are often in a context separate from organized religious institutions. Spirituality is often inclusive of most of them -- monotheist, dualist, pantheist, and atheist – it spans the entire spectrum.

A vivid example of one of my spiritual experiences happened while I was in graduate school. A fellow student, Tom, invited a few of us to his family's primitive lake cabin in far Northern Minnesota, literally on the border of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. It was at the beginning of winter, probably just before Christmas. A foot of snow had just fallen a few days before and bushwhack skiing on old logging trails was silent and beautiful in the winter wonderland.

We found a Saw-whet Owl in a nest hole – just keeping warm – right next to the cabin, started and stoked the wood-fired cookstove, made some hot borscht soup, ate and laughed a bit about our academic pursuits back at the university. We went outside in the darkness, the nearest electric lightbulb probably miles away, to a startling discovery. It wasn't dark at all. In fact, the entire sky from horizon to horizon was lit with a swaying, pulsing, multi-colored aurora. In a fit of uncharacteristic foresight, a few of us had brought ice skates, just in case. Sure enough, the lake was frozen over by below zero nights since the snowfall. It was black and smooth as a mirror.

As we laced up the skates, but staring at the sky, the only sound was an occasional whispered oxymoronic,

“Holy S ...”, and there seemed to be an unspoken agreement that we remain unspoken. As we skated away from the shoreline in different directions with the only accompaniment the swish of blade on glass ice, the animate aurora was above and below us in the reflection on the ice. The experience was three-hundred-and-sixty-degrees of complete immersion in a wild spectacle of solar flare igniting ionic charges in the upper atmosphere – and it was igniting every cell in my body in a metaphysical, multisensory, mystical and yes, spiritual experience within a world far beyond my understanding. The thing I remember most was the feeling of profound humility in the face of the unexplainable. It's what we call “magic”.

Many years later, I was fortunate to experience that humility again in the Canadian wilderness. I woke in the middle of the night in the humid summer, peeked out from my tent on the shoreline to the same kind of flashing red and blue and green aurora. I could not resist skinny dipping far out into the lake – immersed inside the mystery of space, goosebumps covering every square centimeter of my body, and being revisited again with the gift of my smallness and unimportance.

I'm a scientist and educator, but a sense of wonder and awe about my expansive “church”, this magnificent thing we call life, and the universe I am privileged to be a small part of, makes me spiritual indeed.

In this season we are reminded that many, many churches and their congregations work hard for their disadvantaged brethren. They view this work as their duty. In the context of a world rapidly and permanently changing its climate on apocalyptic scale, it is far past time to expand the definition of “brethren” to include all life. Sacred beetles, sacred wolves, sacred bacteria, sacred snakes, sacred spiders ... sacred birds. They are Creation, and they need us to think beyond our little lives and worries, and help our children do the same. Without all of them, we would most certainly be dead. This, I believe, is our spiritual duty.



Chickadees feed on Cattail Moth larvae

Photo by Dan Lory, Chicago Ornithological Society

Pine Grosbeak and Owen Sowerwine

By Laura Katzman



Photo by Flathead Land Trust

Pine grosbeak can be seen at Owen Sowerwine during winter – in fact, they are yet another bird that only shows up at Owen Sowerwine in winter. They are a beautiful finch – males add a splash of red to winter and even females

have a showy yellowish head and rump and distinctive white wing bars. Why do we see these birds only in winter in Owen Sowerwine? They breed in boreal forests of Canada or mountain forests of the west but often move lower in elevation in winter to feed in areas with more abundant fruits and seeds. Their name says a lot about

them as “grosbeak” means “large bill,” and they have large bills used to crack open and eat seeds. In fact, pine grosbeaks are nearly vegetarians with almost 100% of their diet being made up of buds, seeds, and fruits – only adding a few insects while feeding their young to give them a high protein diet. Another cool thing about pine grosbeak is they sing in winter. The function of this winter song is unknown but a treat at a time of the year when the forest is fairly quiet. Enjoy this winter visitor!



Photo by Flathead Land Trust

Wings Across the Big Sky Field Trips Finalized

By Lauren Smith, MT Audubon Communications Specialist

SAVE THE DATE

wings MONTANA AUDUBON
across the big sky

May 31 - June 2, 2024
Helena, MT



Field Trip Highlight:
Birds & Botany

Mountain Bluebird | Photo by Bob Marinka

Our partners at Last Chance Audubon have some amazing field trips planned! We'll be sharing more information and previews on our website and social media leading up to the event, but we wanted to start by highlighting the “Birds & Botany” trip.

Along with surveying birds in riparian and sagebrush hills, trip participants will also pause to identify the predominant native plant species and consider the relationships between the birds and the plant communities that support them.

The trip concludes with stops to observe nesting boxes placed by the trip leaders, which have hosted bluebirds, swallows, and wrens. Stay tuned for more field trip highlights and festival updates!

NOMINATIONS

Hard as it is to believe, the Flathead Audubon Society elections for 2024 are quickly approaching. May will be here before you know it. This year we will elect a Secretary and a Treasurer, each for a two-year term. Anyone is welcome to run for those positions. And there are other ways to be involved as well, perhaps as a Director. Everyone is welcome and there is no limit to the number of Directors on the Board.

In addition, the Vice President position is currently vacant and needs to be filled. The Board could appoint an interim Vice President between now and May. Then, the membership would need to vote to have that person fill the remainder of the term.

If you, or anyone you know, would make a good candidate for any of these positions, please contact Bob Lee at RML3@centurytel.net or 406-270-0371.



TRIBUTE GIFT

*By Joey Kositzky, in the
names of Gerald Lundgren
and Alice Ford*

iStock photo



**Snow Buntings can
be found foraging in
agricultural areas**

(Bird of the Month continued from page 2)

Survival in severe weather conditions explains many of the habits and behaviors of the Canada Jay. These tricksters make good use of their smarts (remember - Corvidae family!) in order to meet the challenges of the harsh boreal and subalpine forests which they inhabit.

A SPECIAL GIFT is a way to honor or commemorate someone special to you by supporting Flathead Audubon's local projects in their name. Special gifts are acknowledged in this space each month with the name of the donor and the person honored.

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