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the Pileated Post

Newsletter of the Flathead Audubon Society

Tree Swallow

Photo from Wild with Nature

Business Conservation Achievement Award - Owl Research Institute

By Pam Willison

The Owl Research Institute will be presented with Flathead Audubon's 2024 Business Conservation Achievement Recognition Award at the upcoming March 10 meeting. Founded in 1988, the Owl Research Institute (ORI) is a recognized leader in owl conservation through research and education. Based in Charlo, Montana, they support the protection of viable owl populations through long-term research and monitoring of various owl species, their prey and their habitat.

Photo courtesy of ORI

ORI promotes informed natural resource management by sharing their findings with land management agencies, conservation organizations, and landowners. They also provide education to a global audience through field trips, live and online presentations, research publications, newsletters, live cams and social media channels. Current ORI research and monitoring projects include Snowy, Great Gray, Long-eared, Short-eared, Northern Pygmy, Northern Saw-whet, Northern Hawk, Flammulated, Boreal, and Barn Owl species. In addition, ORI conducts a fall migration study of small forest owls and a winter raptor survey.

ORI staff commits considerable time and energy to field research. If you've had the chance to join them or see their presentations you know this requires staff who are durable, tough, intuitive, smart, and dedicated. Their work takes them deep into the woods, wetlands and tundra for long hours, often involving working into the night and under challenging weather conditions. Their website says "we often experience exhaustion, frustration and exasperation," while also noting that "when it's all said and done, we love what we do."

ORI's Founder and President, Denver Holt, is an authority in the world of owl research and current team leader for Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's Snowy Owl species account. Denver's work has been featured in television, radio, film and print publications, including National Geographic, BBC, PBS and the New York Times. His research has been published extensively in scientific journals, and he is a popular speaker at symposiums and bird festivals.

Denver is joined by Research Biologist Beth Mendelsohn, a graduate of the University of Wyoming's wildlife ecology and genomics program and veteran of 12 years studying raptors. A longtime ORI volunteer, Beth joined the staff in 2019. She conducts extensive field research on North American owl species; facilitates ORI's internship and volunteer programs; and gives presentations to schools, communities and colleagues.

In addition to Denver and Beth, the ORI team includes Director of Development and Office Manager Jeanna Clifford, Volunteer Researcher Steve Hiro, and Applied Technology Specialist Troy Gruetzmacher. Rounding out the team is ORI intern Gabriela Mendes from Brazil and Field Technician Hayley Madden.

Flathead Audubon thanks ORI's staff and volunteers for their hard work, dedication and science in support of owls.

MARCH AUDUBON CALENDAR

Monday, March 3, 5:30pm. FAS Board of Directors Meeting. Gateway Community Center Room 26, US Hwy 2 West, Kalispell. (East side of Gateway West Mall along Glenwood Dr.) You may bring your dinner.

Monday, March 10, 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 page 3.

Sunday, March 23-Monday, March 24. Freezout Lake and the Snow Goose Migration, Choteau. See page 5.

Saturday, March 29, 9am-noon. Owen Sowerwine Spring Migrant Field Trip. See page 5.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Get to Know the Bohemian Waxwing

By Linda Fine Hunt

Photo by Eric Lipton

At the top of my driveway stands a mountain ash tree. In the fall, clusters of bright red berries decorate its branches, and flocks of waxwings feast on these berries. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, I never saw Bohemian or Cedar Waxwings until I moved to Montana. Waxwings caught my attention because they remind me of female Northern Cardinals, birds I miss. At first, I didn't realize I was observing two different species of birds in the same flock. Cedar Waxwings are smaller, browner, and less vibrantly marked than their Bohemian counterparts. The rarer species is the Bohemian Waxwing, scientifically known as *Bombycilla garrulus*.

Bohemian Waxwings are named for their wandering behavior. Outside of the breeding season, they move from place to place in search of the next patch of fruit trees to raid. Like a starling bird in size, they are adorned with a distinctive crest and a striking plumage of buff-grey. Their black facial markings and pointed crest are complemented by wings patterned with white and bright yellow. The tips of some wing feathers are a vivid red, reminiscent of sealing wax, which is the origin of the bird's common name. Both sexes are similar in appearance, with the females slightly less marked.

These birds breed in the northern forests of North America. Bohemian Waxwings are known for their irruptive southern migrations in search of fruit during winter. They roost communally in dense trees or hedges, sometimes alongside other wintering species.

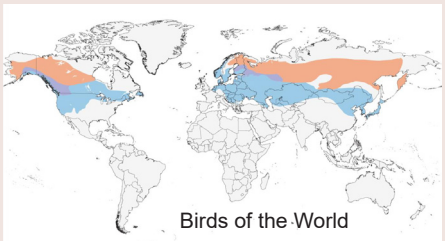
Christmas bird census records in Winnipeg, Canada, have shown as many as 4,724 in 1989 to as few as one bird in 1992! Over time, the Bohemian Waxwing population increased due to ornamental plantings of fruit trees such as crabapples and mountain ash. Both provide the birds with a feast of fruit. Bohemian Waxwings now enjoy a large population and an extensive breeding range. They face no significant long-term threats, and they know how to utilize disturbed habitats.

Bohemian Waxwings possess intestinal enzymes that catalyze sucrose (sugar). Their intestines are twice as wide as those of other birds and are relatively short. This allows them to digest large volumes of fruit efficiently. When fruit and berries are scarce, they supplement their diet with insects, flower buds, and tree sap. Interestingly, all waxwings can metabolize ethanol, making them susceptible to intoxication from consuming too much fermented fruit. They may sometimes gorge themselves on sugary fruit to the point where they cannot fly. You might find them motionless beneath a crabapple tree. They usually recover after a few hours of rest. If you encounter a waxwing that appears to be sleeping on the ground, leave the bird alone in a safe and quiet area with access to fresh water.

A 1974 study in Manitoba documented instances of Bohemian Waxwings dying after flying into buildings due to intoxication from eating fermented crabapples. The study concluded the birds had an alcohol content of nearly 3% and blood alcohol of 73 milligrams per 100 milliliters. For humans, that would be above the limit for driving, let alone flying!

Bohemian Waxwings form monogamous pairs. They nest during July and August, when fruits and berries are available to feed their young. They construct their nest as a cup made from grass, weeds, and plant fibers lined with fine grasses and animal hair. A typical clutch consists of four-to-six pale blue spotted eggs. The female incubates the eggs for 13 to 14 days. The chicks hatch in an altricial state, meaning they are naked, dependent on their parents, and have their eyes closed at birth. Both parents are responsible for feeding the chicks, which fledge approximately 14 to 16 days after hatching. After fledging, the young birds are cared for by their parents for an additional two weeks.

Seeing tufted heads of Bohemian Waxwings inspired me to learn more about these birds because they resembled my hometown's favorite baseball bird. Maybe Northern Cardinals will discover Montana. Meanwhile, let's plant more mountain ash and crabapple trees. They add beauty year-round and support the survival of both Bohemian and Cedar Waxwings during their migration through Montana.



Birds of the World

MARCH PROGRAM

Short-eared Owl Research Results and Conservation Insights on Montana's Grassland Owl

Presented by Beth Mendelsohn, Owl Research Institute (ORI) Research Biologist

What's behind the "nomadic" lifestyle of the Short-eared Owl? Why do their seasonal movements vary anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand miles, and why might they also differ widely in timing and location? Join ORI's Research Biologist, Beth Mendelsohn, as she presents her findings on these questions and others during our March 10th meeting. By conducting winter owl roost surveys and documenting both nesting sites and chick success rates, Beth hopes to unravel the mysteries behind Short-eared Owl population decline and identify possible mitigation strategies.

Photo courtesy of ORI

Beth Mendelsohn earned her graduate degree from the University of Wyoming, with an emphasis on Great Gray Owl genetics. She has been a research biologist with ORI since 2019. Beth shares her passion for field biology, natural history, and long-term research through public speaking, scientific papers, and introducing the public to field research in action.

MARCH MEETING FAS

Our meetings are available both in person and virtually. For those attending the meeting in person on Monday, March 10, 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 info@flatheadaudubon.org

Videos of previous FAS meeting programs are available at https://flatheadaudubon.org/videos.

Highlights from the February 3, 2025 Board of Directors Meeting

By Michele Totz, Secretary

- The Great Fish Committee will meet to start planning for the 2025 fundraiser.
- New FAS merchandise ideas were discussed.
- Jess has been busy connecting with schools and visiting classrooms.
- The importance of monitoring current legislative actions was stressed. Please stay involved by receiving Legislative Action Alerts.
- Julie Oswald and Molly Miller are the new members of the Newsletter Committee.
- FAS current wish list: another person for the Conservation Committee, more field trip leaders, and a Vice President.

Peeps from the President

By Darcy Thomas

Photo by Rob Thomas

I love winter. I love winter for its snow. It is such a beautiful time of year when snow covers the mountains. Winter sunsets are breathtaking as alpenglow washes over the landscape. Hoar frost changes nature into crystalline beauty. Sunny days cast an illusion of diamonds glinting in the snow. Children laugh and scream as they zoom down hills on sleds. Gliding through the snow on cross-country skis with the hush of snow enveloping the landscape is invigorating and peaceful at the same time. I even enjoy snow shoveling - up to a point! Winter can be a cozy time of year. A time to settle into an overstuffed chair by a fire, read a good book and enjoy a cup of hot chocolate with a splash of Mountain Mint.

Best of all, winter means feeding the birds and enjoying close-up views of them as they nab sunflower seeds, taking them to a nearby perch to crack them open. Woodpeckers are especially enjoyable to watch, pecking away at suet while balancing with rigid tails. Juncos and chickadees feed in a frenzy to keep warm. Birds turn into little puffballs with their feathers fluffed up.

Yet, as much as I love winter it is wonderful to watch the landscape shake off the grip of ice and snow. Water begins to open. The drip, drip, drip of snow melting off the roof stirs dreams of planting a garden and watching green things bud and bloom.

March is the very beginning of the awakening of nature. By the end of the month Snow Geese migrate in huge numbers, stopping at Freezout Lake to rest and feed. I hope you are planning to join Bob Lee on his Snow Goose Migration field trip to watch the spectacle of geese rising from the ponds at dawn. (For details refer to the “March 2025 Field Trips” information on page 5.) Closer to home pintails leave for their breeding grounds while wigeons, redheads, teals and other waterfowl return to the valley in big numbers. Church Slough is a great place to practice your identification skills and watch breeding displays. I hope you like the color blue because Mountain Bluebirds return in March. Watch for them along the roadways. Pretty soon the landscape will be green and the yearning to get outdoors will consume you. Put on your muck boots and don’t take them off! Have fun!

Nest Notes

By Jess Garby, Flathead Audubon Education Coordinator

Photo by Michell DeLeon Tyler

Illustration by Jess Garby

Happy March, Audubon family! I hope you’ve all been enjoying the bright blue-sky days, regardless of the cold. I know I have. It’s a very special month, where the Great-horned Owls perched outside my window hoot me to sleep most nights; the Red-winged Blackbirds at my feeder have begun to sing; and American Goldfinches fill my days with their subtle sunshine colors.

I have fully immersed myself in the education world here in the Flathead Valley. Recently I visited the Creston School, a new school for Flathead Audubon Education. I was so impressed with the enthusiasm shown by the kindergarteners, first graders and second graders I spoke to there. One first grader had a particular interest in birds, eagerly raising his hand to answer every question I had. He told me his favorite bird is a Swainson’s Hawk. At his age, I didn’t even know different species of hawks existed! Since my presentation the teachers tell me their students have been imitating bird calls and songs. This class truly inspired me and gave me hope for the future of birds and bird conservation. I also spent multiple days educating 7th graders at West Valley School. Again, I was astonished by how much bird knowledge the students had!

I’m currently teaching the “Intro to Birds of NW Montana” class at Flathead Valley Community College Senior Institute. The class meets once a week for 6 weeks, beginning in February. I wonder if the students will impress me as much as the K-12 students!

On a personal note, I want to share a few things that made February so special. I was happy to see the success of FAS’s first Board Game Night, with 18 people in attendance playing *Wingspan* (see page 8 for more on that). Another highlight occurred while birding on Superb Owl Day (a fun play on Superbowl) with Jake, Cindy, and Tom. We were blessed with a singular call note from a Varied Thrush. In true Jess fashion, I squealed “VARIED THRUSH” instead of following proper birding etiquette and staying quiet to try and find the singing bird. I also spent many February evenings watercoloring birds I observed during the month, adding American Dipper, Barrow’s Goldeneye, Belted Kingfisher, and Northern Saw-whet Owl to my collection.

MARCH 2025 FIELD TRIPS

CHURCH SLOUGH SPRING MIGRATION, SATURDAY, MARCH 22, 9am-noon.

Join Jake Bramante to view returning waterfowl at Church Slough in the Lower Valley area and in Somers area wetlands. Mid- to late March is the prime time to see large flocks of incoming migrants, including Tundra Swans, Greater Scaup, and Eurasian Wigeon. If conditions are right, it is possible to see thousands of waterfowl of 15-20 species. Field trip is limited to 15 participants. Contact Jake at jake@flatheadaudubon.org or 406-250-8394 to reserve spots and for logistics (meeting time/location/carpooling). Sign up is required.

FREEZOUT LAKE AND THE SNOW GEESE MIGRATION, SUNDAY-MONDAY, MARCH 23-24.

Snow Geese and other waterfowl will soon move from wintering grounds to their arctic breeding grounds. Join Flathead Audubon, led by Bob Lee, on Sunday, March 23, through Monday, March 24, to see the Snow Goose migration stopover at Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA) near Choteau.

We will meet at 10am on Sunday, March 23, in the Evergreen Burger King parking lot, 1363 U.S. Hwy 2 E. (corner of Hwys. 2 and 35). A suggested driving schedule and route will be provided. We'll proceed to Choteau, arriving in time for afternoon goose watching. On Monday we'll head back to Freezout Lake just before daybreak to watch the "mass ascension" of Snow Geese. Then we'll search out birds in the local agricultural fields. Participants can return to Kalispell at their own pace.

In recent years an extraordinary number of people have come to watch this Snow Goose phenomenon. There is no indication how many geese might be there this year. Please make your own arrangements for lodging and make them early, as they fill up quickly. Primitive camping is available at the Freezout Lake WMA. However, these sites may fill up quickly as well. Local motel options include the Stage Stop Inn (406-466-5900), Gunther Motel (406-466-5444), and Big Sky Motel (406-466-5318). An Airbnb cabin is also available in Bowman's Corner (andrewgertge@gmail.com).

To sign up and for more information, please contact Bob Lee at RML3@centurytel.net. Note that he will be out of town for part of this time, and it may take a while to respond. All participants should acquire a Montana Conservation License. See "Renewal Time: Conservation License" below for more information.

OWEN SOWERWINE SPRING MIGRANT BIRD WALK, SATURDAY, MARCH 29, 9am –noon.

Join FAS Vice President, Pam Willison, and FAS Education Coordinator, Jess Garby, for a beginner's bird walk at Owen Sowerwine to welcome early spring migrants. This walk offers a fantastic opportunity to connect with nature and learn about the diverse avian species that inhabit the area. Participants are encouraged to bring binoculars. If you need a loaner pair, please let us know in advance. Whether you are a seasoned birder or just curious about the natural world, this walk will be both educational and enjoyable. To sign up, please email Jess Garby at jess@flatheadaudubon.org or call 406-250-8293. Dress for the ever-changing Montana spring weather, as the walk will take place rain or shine.

Renewal Time: Conservation License (March-February)

By Margaret Parodi

Effective July 1, 2023, everyone age 12 or older is required to have a Montana Conservation License to access most State Lands (not including State Parks). Since there are numerous Audubon field trips that use State Lands, we encourage all Audubon members and field trip participants to get this license. Fishing access sites, wildlife management areas, wildlife habitat protection areas, and Montana State Trust Lands, including the Owen Sowerwine property, are examples of places where this license is needed. The Conservation license "year" runs from March 1-February 28. This license is automatically included in Montana fishing and hunting licenses, and can also be purchased separately. It is available at all places that sell Montana fishing or hunting licenses, such as any Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) office, sporting goods stores, and some gas station/convenience stores, as well as online at the FWP website (https://fwp.mt.gov/buyandapply/conservation-license). For Montana residents the cost is: Adult $8, Senior (62+) $4, Youth (12-17) $4. Non-resident cost is $10.

Flathead Valley Bird Report

By Dan Casey

Rare and Notables – Mid-winter 2024/2025
See also: https://ebird.org/region/US-MT-029?yr=all.

Varied Thrush
Photo by Dan Casey

Open water lasted well into the winter period, and several waterfowl and other waterbird species followed suit. **Northern Pygmy-Owls** were widely reported, but interestingly, **Bohemian Waxwings** were not. **Rough-legged Hawks** also seemed less abundant and widespread than usual, being outnumbered by **Red-tailed Hawks** on most local raptor routes. There were numerous reports of at least one **Ferruginous Hawk** between Polson and Ronan, from Dec. 19 (Braydon L. and Dan S.) through at least Feb. 9 (James M.). An immature **Cooper's Hawk**, typically our rarest winter accipiter, was photographed west of Ronan Dec. 27 (James M.), and single adults were seen there and near Polson Jan. 27 (James M., Shawn R.). The only **Snowy Owl** report was a single bird near Columbia Falls on Dec. 28. Individual **Snow Geese** joined Canada Goose flocks near Somers Dec. 18 (Emily E.) and near Moiese Jan. 23 (Shawn R. and Raylene W.). Two **Greater White-fronted Geese** at Polson Dec. 31 (Mani G.) were found again Jan. 29 (Braydon L.). Diving ducks, unexpected in winter, included a **Long-tailed Duck** at Ducharme Point Jan. 7, and a White-winged Scoter at Bigfork Feb. 8 (Dan C.). A **Yellow-billed Loon** found on Lake McDonald during the Glacier CBC Dec. 22 (Dan F.) was just the fifth local record. Dixon Lane near Polson has proven to be a reliable place to find **Dunlin**, even in winter, with a maximum of 8 seen there this year Jan. 21(Shawn R.). A **Short-billed Gull** at the Flathead landfill Dec. 29 was still present on Jan. 31 (Emily E.). Lingering "half-hardy" birds included a **Spotted Towhee**, present at a Polson feeder from Dec. 16 through at least Feb. 3; a **Common Yellowthroat** on Post Creek near St. Ignatius Jan. 8 (Anon.); four **Common Grackles** at Ronan Dec. 26 (Braydon L.); and a **Yellow-headed Blackbird** at Ronan Jan. 6 (Shawn R. and Raylene W.). Also notable were a "**green morph" Pine Siskin** near Lake-of-the-Woods throughout the period (Elliott R.) and a **Boreal Chickadee** east of Polson Feb. 8 (Luis R.). Lastly, a **Varied Thrush** at Owen Sowerwine Feb. 9 (Jake B. and Jess G.) was typical for a first arrival date, but a welcome reminder of the seasonal changes ahead!

What to Expect - Late Feb - Early March

As soon as the marshes begin to thaw, the **Red-winged Blackbirds** will begin setting up territories. Waterfowl numbers will start to build by early March, particularly **Tundra Swans**, **Northern Pintails** and **American Wigeon**. Hawk-watching should still be rewarding as the snow recedes and voles are more vulnerable. If spring breaks early, the first **Mountain Bluebirds**, **Western Meadowlarks**, and **Tree Swallows** may arrive before the next monthly summary arrives in your inbox.

Earth Day Expo at Flathead Valley Community College (FVCC)

By Jess Garby

Flathead Audubon Society's Jess Garby and the Education Team will be participating in Earth Day Expo at FVCC on April 19 from 9am to 3pm. The theme is "Healthy Planet, Healthy Community." The team will share information on the importance of birds and habitat conservation from their table in the Auditorium. Bird walks throughout campus and the surrounding area will also be offered. We hope to see you there!

Education Program Augmented

By Darcy Thomas

Recently the Flathead Audubon Education Program saw Ansley Ford and Ken Fielder join veteran education volunteers, Cindy and Tom Roberts, to assist Education Coordinator, Jess Garby. After their first meeting each of them took education kits home to itemize contents and make recommendations on what needs to be added or updated. They are excited to help Jess with field trips, events, and other program needs. Ansley is a past FAS Board Member and member of the Education Committee, and Ken has been a FAS member since 2018.

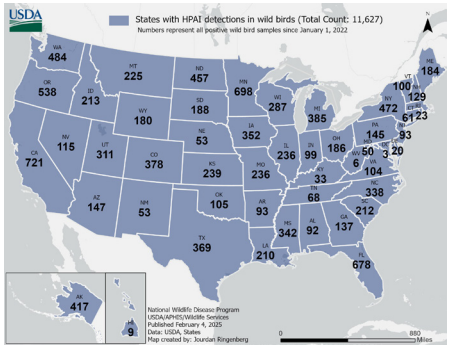
They will be a huge help to Jess and are a boon for our Education Program. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts Cindy, Tom, Ansley and Ken!

Conservation Corner March 2025

By Gael Bissell

Conservation Corner includes hyperlinks to help you access information and take action. If you are reading the paper Post please go to the electronic version of this article on our website to use these hyperlinks: https://flatheadaudubon.org/conservation/conservation-corner-march-2025/.

AVIAN FLU UPDATE – IT IS STILL HERE



U. S. Dept. of Agriculture

The highly pathogenic avian influenza (H5N1) has been circulating in the Western Hemisphere since early 2022. Commonly known as the bird flu, this type A virus was first discovered in Hong Kong in 1997. The virus is extremely deadly to poultry and other domesticated birds, waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, terns, raptors and other bird species. The good news is that currently the virus appears to be less virulent or deadly to songbirds.

Avian flu viruses are primarily transmitted via the fecal–oral route, meaning the disease is spread by ingesting food or water contaminated by infected feces. Many birds, such as waterfowl, can be infected without showing symptoms and become a reservoir for the virus. Over 400 million domestic birds have been exposed to H5N1 since November 2024, often leading to culling of the exposed birds. Type A viruses are known to mutate or change very easily over time.

Avian flu has also infected dairy cows throughout the country (though not in Montana yet), as well as a handful of humans who work with these animals. Most cattle survive their infections and only 1 of 67 humans who contracted the disease has died. This winter a new bird flu variant, one that may be more deadly to livestock, has been found in New Mexico cattle.

In Montana there have been 225 detections of avian flu in wild birds. Six were in the Flathead Valley, including Bald Eagle, Great Horned Owl, American Coot, Red-tailed Hawk and Canada Goose. This flu has also killed domestic cats, raccoons, skunk, fox, mountain lion, and two grizzly bears in Montana.

Current Recommendations For Bird Lovers:

Feeders/Baths: Feeding songbirds is currently considered safe (allaboutbirds.org) as long as you clean your feeders and bird baths regularly and monitor for dead or dying birds or other animals in your yard.

Feeding Near Domestic Flocks: Do not feed or provide water to wild birds near domestic flocks. If bird flu is detected in a flock all birds will need to be culled.

Nestboxes: When checking **songbird nestboxes**, wear disposable gloves and wash your hands thoroughly after handling. **Waterfowl/owl nestboxes** require greater care. Wear gloves and a mask; change or wash gloves and disinfect equipment between nestboxes; and change clothes and footwear before visiting any domestic poultry.

Birdwatching: Avoid contact with surfaces that have bird feces. Do not walk where geese, ducks, gulls, and eagles rest as you could inadvertently spread bird flu through your shoes and boots. If you discover you are in an area where waterfowl have concentrated, disinfect your boots. Consider using disposable boot covers.

If you find a dead bird and want to remove or report it:

- Wear gloves and a face mask.
- Place dead birds in a double-bagged garbage bag.
- Throw away your gloves and face mask after use.
- Wash your hands well with soap and warm water.
- Report dead birds to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (406-752-5501).

The situation with bird flu is still very fluid and could change over time. Let's be safe and do what we can to protect birds, other wildlife, and our domestic animals. Check out these important resources. Thanks!

Primary sources:

USDA: https://www.aphis.usda.gov/livestock-poultry-disease/avian/avian-influenza/hpai-detections.

All About Birds: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/avian-influenza-outbreak-should-you-take-down-your-bird-feeders/.

CDC: https://www.cdc.gov/bird-flu/situation-summary/index.html.

USGS: https://www.usgs.gov/centers/nwhc/science/avian-influenza-surveillance.

MTFWP: https://fwp.mt.gov/conservation/diseases/avian-influenza.

Flathead Audubon History Corner: Early Fight for the Lower Flathead River

By Ben Long

Riverside areas are among Montana's richest bird habitats. The Flathead River is also culturally precious to the Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). Perhaps it's logical then that one of Flathead Audubon's first conservation campaigns was to protect the lower Flathead River from an aggressive plan to dam and flood the lower Flathead Valley.

Kerr Dam (now called Seli'š Ksanka Qlispe' Dam) was built over tribal protest in 1938. Dams, of course, are important for irrigation, flood control and hydropower. However, by the 1970s people were increasingly worried that ecological values were often ignored in the process. In that decade the US Army Corps of Engineers proposed four dams between Kerr Dam and the confluence of the Flathead and Clark Fork Rivers. River features, such as Buffalo Rapids, would have been flooded, along with 51,000 acres of streamside and upland habitats.

Riparian habitats are crucially important in an arid state like Montana. According to Montana Audubon, riparian habitats comprise only 3 percent of the state's landscape but about half of our wildlife species spend at least part of their life cycles there. The Indigenous people of Montana depended on rivers for life support, transportation, and cultural values since time immemorial.

In 1977, Flathead Audubon took on the fight to protect the Lower Flathead. The chapter led flotillas of canoes down the Flathead River, taking decision makers, photographers, journalists, and locals downstream to see the landscape firsthand. "We did this as an informational thing for the general public," recalled early chapter president Rick Trembath, of Bigfork. "We wanted to show people all the wonderful places that would be underwater if those dams were to be built." Staffers from the National Audubon office in Washington, D.C., also took part. "It was a great excuse for them to get out of the office and see what was going on."

Other conservation groups and the CSKT also opposed the dams. Eventually, the Montana Congressional Delegation removed funding for the Lower Flathead from the US Army Corps of Engineers' budget. As a result, the proposed dam projects died and have since been largely forgotten.

Lower Flathead River
Courtesy of Flathead Raft Company

If you float the lower Flathead River through the CSKT Reservation today, you can expect to see Yellow Warblers, beaver and other wildlife using the river corridor. You may also notice native sweat lodges built along the riverbanks, as tribal members continue that traditional practice.

History books are filled with stories of the programs that built dams across the American West. Our cities and farms would not exist without them. Yet, it is also worth remembering and celebrating the battles over dams that were never built, like those on the Lower Flathead.

FAS Endowment Fund

Are you estate planning, looking to leave a legacy, or just want to make a contribution towards conservation? FAS has a permanent endowment fund through the Whitefish Community Foundation. Donating to the endowment fund will qualify you for part or all of the Montana Qualified Endowment Credit. For more information, contact Alan Davis at the Whitefish Community Foundation or visit their website at whitefishcommunityfoundation.org.

Wingspan Board Game Night

By Jess Garby

Photo by Jess Garby

A heartfelt thank you to everyone who joined us for the inaugural Board Game Night hosted by Flathead Audubon Society. Eighteen participants came together to enjoy the popular bird-themed game, *Wingspan*.

We hope to see even more bird enthusiasts and board game lovers at our next event. It's a great opportunity to meet fellow nature lovers and share your passion for birds. Keep an eye on our announcements for more details on the next gathering, and feel free to bring friends and family along for an evening of fun.

TRIBUTE GIFTS

In memory of Elly Jones

Jeff Jones

Patricia and Ron Peebles

Dan Sullivan

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.

SPECIAL GIFT DONATION FORM

In memory of _____
In honor of _____
Please send a notification of this gift to:
Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ ZIP _____

Donor's Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ ZIP _____
☐ Please do not acknowledge my gift in the Post

Please make checks payable to:
Flathead Audubon Society
P.O. Box 9173
Kalispell, MT 59904
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.

Nongame Wildlife Tax Check-off

When filling out your Montana tax form this year, think "wildlife" by donating to the Nongame Wildlife Program, found on Form 2, page 11, under Contributions. If your taxes are prepared, tell your accountant that you want to donate to wildlife! Your contributions are tax deductible on next year's return. Montana has more than 500 species of "nongame" animals that benefit from public support each year at tax time. Since 1983, the check-off has contributed over $27,000 annually to this important wildlife program.


Common Loon
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Content Editor Julie Oswald julie@flatheadaudubon.org
Layout Editor Susie Waldron susie@flatheadaudubon.org
Bird of the Month Editor Molly Miller whitefishmmm@gmail.com
Mail Distribution Jake Bramante jake@flatheadaudubon.org
Email Distribution Jess Garby jess@flatheadaudubon.org

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