

“Okay! Time to GO!” Bob would holler. We’d jump in his truck and speed off to the next pre-ordained stop on the Birdathon route. We were on a schedule – a tight schedule - we had places to go, birds to find and about 17 hours of daylight in which to do it. And we didn’t just do it, we did so well that we broke Bob & Steve’s previous Birdathon record of 148 species, set last year.

Bob Martinka is known around Helena and the state of Montana for his amazing and beautiful bird photography! **Steve Hoffman** is the Executive Director of Montana Audubon and has been birding for something in excess of 40 years. **Garrett Carlsen** (16) is also an expert birder and spied several key birds that otherwise would’ve been missed. They all know their birds! More importantly, they know the specific songs and the habitat that each bird likes and/or requires. These factors played a BIG role in the success we enjoyed last Friday the 13th of June – a Lucky Day for us!

Our first stop was up Orofino and Grizzly Gulches, just south of town. Here, in the gradually dawning light, birds were singing – LOTS of birds, including: the **Yellow-rumped Warbler**, **Yellow Warbler**, **Red-breasted Nuthatch**, and the **Western Tanager**, to name just a few. Within 30 minutes we found, or...heard, about 23 species of birds that love the gulch habitat of mixed deciduous and conifer forest.

Bob hollered and off we went to the Fairgrounds’ pond. There we found my favorite, the **Great Blue Heron** and the beautiful **Wood Duck**. At Spring Meadow Lake we spotted a **Spotted Sandpiper** and a beautiful **Bullock’s Oriole**. These birds, and the others on the bird list, obviously enjoy the habitat near and around water. This is where Garrett spied a distant **Cooper’s Hawk** that the rest of us would’ve missed. A short distance away we stopped at a bridge over the Ten Mile Creek and found a pair of **American Dippers**.

“Let’s GO!” We switched to more mountainous terrain with little or no water, save for the 30 minutes of rain we encountered. Here we found **Clark’s Nutcracker**, **Swainson’s Thrush**, **Willow Flycatcher** singing over the ever-present clear, lilting song of the **Ruby-crowned Kinglet**. Knowing each of their songs was essential here, as they are difficult to impossible to see in a forest setting.

Once we arrived at the Nevada Creek Reservoir we could easily see the waterfowl paddling around on the water. We found birds such as the **Ruddy Duck**, **Double-crested Cormorant**, and the **Northern Shoveler**. At Brown’s Lake we again found waterfowl and other species that live in that particular habitat, such as the **Black Tern**, **Vaux’s Swift**, **Virginia Rail** and the **Sora**. The **Rufous** and **Calliope Hummingbirds** were buzzing about the feeders at a residence near the town of Lincoln.

We spent about 3.5 hours at Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area. Steve & Bob had many “target species” they knew from experience we should find there, including: **Marbled Godwit**, **Black-necked Stilt**, and the **Black-crowned Night Heron**. They were right, and we added 20 species to our growing list. We also enjoyed a very special treat of an adult **Long-eared Owl** and a fledgling, having been led to the spot by folks we met there – Jaime & Lisa Johnson. Later we found three (3!!) recently-fledged **Great Horned Owls**. And just before leaving Freezout, Bob spied a **Herring Gull**, which is pretty unusual. At

about the same time, Bob braked hard on the gravel road to avoid running over a Prairie Rattlesnake, stretched-out asleep in the sun, no doubt to warm himself!

“We’re burning daylight here! Let’s GO!”

On the way back to Helena, we stopped and walked 50 yards into a wide-open, short-grass prairie. Steve knew this was Longspur habitat, and, sure enough, a pair of **McCown’s Longspurs** appeared and flew up and down, back and forth over our heads, interacting with each other with their acrobatics!

Next, we drove through the scenic Little Prickly Pear Canyon and found **Lazuli Buntings** (“Lazuli” means azure-blue) and **Yellow-breasted Chats**...BEAUTIFUL! Once in Helena we knew right where to find a nesting pair of **Merlin**, thanks to City Commissioner, Dan Ellison, who generously showed them to me the night before our Birdathon. Our last species, the **Common Poorwill**, was heard from the flanks of Mt Helena at 10:05 p.m. as darkness overcame daylight, concluding a most beautiful sunset, bringing the total count for the day to **151 species!!** That is one amazing feat accomplished, not by accident, but by knowing and being able to differentiate the various birdsong, knowing habitat preferences, and ensuring we visited each key habitat.

I’m honored to be part of this group of expert birders on this most remarkable day!

Birdathon is a fundraiser for our local chapter – Last Chance Audubon Society (LCAS) – and the state office – Montana Audubon. Thank YOU for sponsoring me and my team, and supporting birds and habitat throughout Montana.

Please make checks payable to: LCAS

And mail them to me at: Janice Miller, 815 11th Ave., Helena, MT 59601

Thank you for supporting the Birds!

Janice Miller – The Helena Solitaire