

Today, anything can happen!

This became our motto.

When Coburn saw a Swainson's Thrush walking along the sandy beach at Spring Meadow Lake – out in the open – and then saw another, and then another, he couldn't believe it. He had just taken a class of students there the day before and there wasn't a Swainson's thrush to be found.

As the day progressed, we found the thrushes at nearly every stop on our route through the Helena Valley, and even two at Coburn's home upon our return – VERY unusual for a species that tends to hide in the vegetation and let its flute-like song be the main identifying trait.

The reason for this uncharacteristic occurrence of thrushes is probably the same reason we had "hordes" of earthworms making "worm-trails" all along Grizzly Gulch's unpaved roadway – R.A.I.N.! We heard thunder the night before, it rained through the night, and we encountered rain periodically through our Birdathon day. At Hauser Dam it rained so heavily we lunched in the car and compared species lists. We're guessing that the storm "grounded" the Swainson's thrush tribe throughout the Helena Valley and beyond.

Yet, I somehow failed to get a photo of a Swainson's thrush.

While we were in Grizzly Gulch (at oh-dark-thirty), two Mallards flew overhead. We didn't know from whence they came, or where they were going, but, we happily counted them, as anything can happen!

Driving slowly on Head Lane hoping to see a Bobolink, Coburn exclaimed, "There's one – flying right towards us!" And sure enough, as though we were a magnet, it flew swiftly in and landed on a fence-post nearby. A second Bobolink flew straight toward our car - idling in the muddy driving lane - and, again, landed nearby on a fence-post. Coburn scanned the field and reported seeing and hearing several more. He said, "We're surrounded!" Knowing the Bobolink is in serious decline worldwide, we were delighted to see them. "Anything" WAS happening.

But, I didn't get a photo of the Bobolink.

For years we've all known of the Wood Ducks living at the Fairgrounds. For our Birdathon we didn't see them there, but found them at Spring Meadow Lake and K-Mart Ponds - strange, but true.

Every body of water and every waterway had MANY swallows dashing, swooping, and darting to and fro – many more than usual - so many it made me think of clouds of gnats - weird. Also, when we turned and were walking back to the car from the boat ramp at Lake Helena, again Coburn cried, "LOOK!" Hundreds of gulls were coming toward us after rising-up from the ground, maybe a mile distant, in the shadows of heavy, dark rain clouds, with the deep-blue mountains beyond. They flew over our heads with a swooping sound, and circled low over the surface of the lake, while we kept looking towards the source point to the north as flock after flock flew our way. Anything can happen!

Although we saw thousands of birds, we failed to find some common species, like the Dark-eyed Junco, Hairy Woodpecker, Green-winged Teal, Common Loon, or Common Goldeneye, but found some tricky ones to keep us thinking. There was a raptor FAR across Lake Helena, visible only through the spotting scope, which appeared to have white on the top of his head, but otherwise wearing the plumage of a Red-tailed Hawk. There was a finch near Black Sandy singing a song we didn't recognize, and just past Black Sandy a finch with a lot of deep red plumage on its head and chest that wouldn't pose for a portrait. Then there was a flycatcher at the Upper Prickly Pear Fishing Access off of York Road who posed nicely, thank you. We eventually decided was an Olive-sided Flycatcher – because, well, "today, anything is possible!"

See the attachment for a list of birds seen and where.

After getting out of the car numerous times, walking through mud, sprinkling rain, and wet vegetation, our feet and rain-pants got muddy, the rain dripped from the legs of the pants into our shoes. Coburn said the seat-warmers in my Subaru helped him realize just how cold his feet had become, as he adjusted the car's heater to vent down towards his cold toes. This isn't standard weather for a birdathon, but, today, even this was possible.

Coburn has a quick, sure memory for bird identification, whether it be by plumage, vocalization, the flap of its wings or style of flight. It was a pleasure to spend the day with him and garner 104-bird species in under 12-hours. We do all of this in order to raise funds to do things that ultimately benefit birds and their habitat in the Helena area by many means: removing burdock so songbirds don't get snagged, buying and providing area schools with birding field guides, sponsoring field trips to learn more about

challenges facing our migrants, and providing scholarships to local high school graduates aiming to benefit the planet in some fashion, through their education that fits with our LCAS mission statement:

Last Chance Audubon promotes understanding, respect, and enjoyment of birds and the natural world through education, habitat protection, and environmental advocacy.

More projects are in-the-wings, as it were, including the Golden Eagle Migration Survey (GEMS) happening this fall on top of Duck Creek Pass in the Big Belt Mountains, where we will have two full-time observers counting migrating raptors from September 1st to November 2nd. We are working with Montana Audubon, Fish, Wildlife & Parks, and the US Forest Service to make this happen. The survey yields important data illustrating the health and well-being of Golden Eagles, (or not) as an indicator of how well “we” are taking care of our planet. We are delighted to host this Count on a major flyway for eagles, hawks, falcons and osprey. Western Montana boasts several other Hawk-Watch sites as well.

The funds raised through Birdathon will be split between Last Chance Audubon and Montana Audubon to go towards such worthwhile projects.

Thank you for considering supporting our chapter’s efforts and those of MT Audubon.

Please make checks payable to: LCAS (Last Chance Audubon Society)
And mail to: Janice Miller, 815 11th Ave, Helena, MT 59601

I was able to take some photos (after all, *anything* is possible!) during our Birdathon, including two Turkey Vultures hanging their wings out to dry. I have posted them on my Flickr site:

(Hold the “Ctrl” key down on the link and click your mouse)
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/blueheronwanderer/albums/72157666244312433>

Thank you for your support.

(Keep in mind - this is a “friendly competition” between four Birdathon teams - which team can raise the most money!?)
So, remember, “Today, ANYTHING can happen!” Our team might even win! (With your help!)

Thank YOU!
Janice Miller
May 22, 2016