

Last
Chance
Audubon
Society



Last Chance Chat

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

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Christmas Bird Count in the Time of Pandemic

This year has been challenging for everyone. Covid-19 has changed how we work, how we communicate with each other, and how we enjoy the birds around us. These impacts continue as we head into the Christmas Bird Count season. After much discussion, the Last Chance Audubon Society Board has made the difficult, but appropriate, decision to hold this year's Christmas Bird Count without community participation. The situation and logistics were deemed too challenging to conduct the count safely with the consistent and significant participation of Helena's birding community. This is a disappointing decision, and we share your frustration. However, the health and well-being of our community is the priority of the LCAS board.

This year, the Last Chance Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count will be conducted by the section leaders only. Each section leader will travel their assigned route and count the birds seen and heard. The day will not be the same without the camaraderie and fellowship of a team of interested birders. But the count will be conducted, and the scientific methodology built into the CBC will ensure the data collected is valid and meaningful.



*Last Chance
Audubon
Christmas Bird
Count - 2020*

Lapland Longspur by Sharon Dewart-Hansen.

However, individual participation in the count is still possible. If your home is within the boundaries of a CBC circle, then you can stay at home and report the birds that visit your feeder on count day. If you are interested in conducting a feeder station count, please contact the Last Chance Audubon CBC count compiler (Coburn Currier – clicurrier@hotmail.com) who will provide you with the details necessary so your data can be included in the count.

Thank you for your interest in the Christmas Bird Count and for your understanding with the difficult decision the board felt was necessary. We hope you all stay safe, have a wonderful holiday season, and continue to enjoy the birds around you!

Virtual Presentation: Great Blue Herons in Montana

At this time, LCAS is not planning to resume monthly meetings in person until September 2021. However, MT Audubon presenters Carmen Borchelt and Bo Creech recently recorded a presentation for Bitterroot Audubon about some unique methods of surveying Great Blue Heron rookeries in Montana in 2020. The presentation is available on YouTube, in the comfort of your home and on your own time. View it here: <https://youtu.be/Q5RbE8562Dg>.



Birding: How it Changed My Life ***Guest President's Perch by Bob Martinka***

Several decades ago, in anticipation of my upcoming retirement, I penned several goals – 11 of them – that I wanted to pursue in my newfound leisure. The goals included some specifics, such as things to make, travel destinations, mind and body health, and possible income sources. As my family and friends at the time would have guessed, most of my goals were related to hunting and fishing, both lifelong pursuits and arguably the primary reasons I was living in Montana. Recently, I thought of revisiting and grading myself on these goals. Evaluating my successes.... and failures... would be an interesting exercise.

So how did I do? What grade did I deserve? Initially, I did a lot of hunting and fishing, especially the latter. In fact, I even became a fly-fishing guide to feed my interest and add a little income on the side. **GRADE: A.** On the hunting side, my interest lay mostly in upland gamebirds, some of which I had to pursue in other states. **Grade: C.** As for genealogy and family history, my goal was to trace my primary lines back three generations in Europe. In pursuit of this goal, Kathy and I even visited a few ancestral locations in Europe and met with relatives there. **Grade: A+.** As for achieving several of my other goals, success was variable, and I would grade myself with a **B.**

Now to the “meat” of this message! One of my goals was stated as follows: “Montana bird list of 300+ species; 500+ U.S. species.” While I have always been a casual birder, I never really got to the point of “compulsion” or “addiction”. And it was several years after retirement before the birding bug really hit me. My wife Kathy and I took a short vacation in spring 2001 to Madera Canyon in southeast Arizona, a famous birding location. One morning, I joined a group of birders who were being guided by an expert. Something clicked in me that morning, after having viewed several species that would have been exceedingly difficult to ID on my own. Almost immediately upon arrival back in Helena, I did some research and ended up buying an awfully expensive pair of binoculars. A spotting scope purchase followed soon afterwards. I was hooked. The die was cast. Just a few years afterwards, I exceeded my original goal for number of species. And I added a world species list that now approaches 30% of the world’s birds. Hunting and fishing, originally such passions for me, are no longer a part of my life.



Great Gray Owl by Bob Martinka.

That is not the end of the story! A compulsion to document the birds I was seeing led to embracing digital photography, which was a relatively new technology 20 years ago.

Photography has now become a major part of my birding experience. Then one day, in pursuit of some special bird photos, I detoured a bit and began taking shots of dragonflies. Soon this became another addictive spinoff from birding. Travel for birding adventures also fit well with my passions. Birding goal grade: **A+++.**

Overall, of course, the grades do not matter. All of these relatively new directions that my life has taken really did change and expand my world. But the change that I hold most dearly is finding the fantastic, like-minded individuals that have become my friends and acquaintances. Thank you, **BIRDS** and **BIRDERS**, for my **NEW WORLD!!!**

Renew Your Membership!

In spite of Covid-19, LCAS remains very active in support of habitat protection, education, and citizen science (and just check out this packed newsletter issue!). As we reach the end of the year, this is the time for annual membership renewals. Dues are still the same low rate: \$15 per household, or \$25 with a hard copy newsletter subscription. Please join us for another year – renew today!

October eBirder of the Month: Stephen Turner

Last Chance Audubon's own Stephen Turner was recently selected as one of two winners of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's monthly eBird Challenge. Stephen submitted a minimum of five eBird checklists on Cornell Lab's [October Big Day](#) (October 17) and was entered into the drawing for a pair of Zeiss Victory SF 8x32 binoculars. Carl Zeiss Sports Optics sponsors the challenge each month. Stephen's name was randomly drawn from 4,641 eBirders who qualified for the contest. His birding story is featured on the eBird website and can be found at [October eBirder of the Month](#). Stephen is a devoted member of Last Chance Audubon. He serves the chapter on the Board of Directors and also as the webmaster. Congratulations, Stephen!



Upland Sandpiper by Bob Martinka.



Stephen birding at Cape May, New Jersey. Photo by Patty Turner.

It Is That Time of Year...

...when Sandy Shull usually stands up in front of you at the membership meeting and asks you to participate in the annual non-auction fundraiser. So this year, imagine her standing in your living room promoting the first (and hopefully only) virtual non-auction, *socially distanced* fundraiser. Even though we aren't able to meet as a group, LCAS continues to support important projects and programs financially. Please take a minute and write a check to LCAS and mail it to PO Box 924, Helena, MT, 59624 or donate online at www.lastchanceaudubon.org. **It is quick, it is easy, and it is important.** Thank you!

Montana Audubon Update: Legislative Session

The 67th Montana Legislature will be like no other. Marching toward the session's January 4 start date with a ballooning Covid-19 pandemic and a major shake-up in the make-up of our elected officials makes it hard to know what to expect. MT Audubon's physical presence in the Capitol halls may be limited by Covid, but they are not backing down from the challenge. Following a summer of learning to carry on during a pandemic, MT Audubon is ready to research, organize, testify, and lobby – remotely or not – to defend Montana's wildlife, wildlife habitat, and bedrock environmental laws.

Though there will likely be a major reduction in federal pressures to weaken foundational laws like the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Clean Water Act, we already know that a number of state-level conservation challenges are coming. These include efforts to dismantle the Habitat Montana program (a Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks habitat protection program) and attacks on the state's Greater Sage-Grouse conservation program, conservation easements, public ownership of public lands, and climate change initiatives.

Affecting state policy in a normal year isn't easy. And Covid-19 only makes matters worse.

Fortunately, this year the MT Audubon staff is bolstered by a new Conservation & Legislative Assistant, Carmen Borchelt. Carmen will take on this role from December through April after a short, well-deserved break following the completion of her term as MT Audubon's 2020 Big Sky Watershed Corps member.

In this legislative session, as in others, MT Audubon will be active, supporting sufficient budgets needed protect our wildlife, our access to public lands, and our right to a clean and healthful environment. Sign up for their "Action Alert Network" mailing list so that you can join in and make your voice heard (<https://mtaudubon.org/join-our-online-network/>).

Jane Beasley Book: *For the Love of Birds*

Just in time for holiday gift giving, a new local book is available: *For the Love of Birds: The Illustrations of Jane Shull Beasley*. Jane left a deep legacy in Helena as an exquisite artist, avid birder, radio personality, and owner of one of Montana's most notable destination stores, Birds and Beasleys.

Now, thanks to her daughter Sandy Shull, her many fans can own a collection of Jane's beautiful colored pencil renderings, complete with species information and fun facts that Jane loved to share.

The hardcover book contains 70 Jane Beasley colored pencil illustrations and informative commentary from Jane: a beautiful compilation of nature and art.

For the Love of Birds will be available at Birds and Beasleys starting in early December – call the store (406-449-0904) to reserve a copy. The book is published by Farcountry Press.



Duck Creek Pass Hawk Watch: The 2020 Season by Adam Richardson

The fall 2020 Duck Creek Pass Hawk Watch has come to an end and now begins the hard work of compiling the data into a migration report. I hope to have it finished early in the New Year. This is an excellent opportunity to share the enthusiasm I have for witnessing spring and fall migration. Fred Tilly, who discovered the fall Bridger Mountains hawk watch site as well as the spring site I count at Cave Knoll, will assist with the report. In a recent email exchange he pointed out the impacts of weather on the population trend analysis:

“There is a large school of thought in the hawk counting community that holds the view that the details are of no particular importance and that the actual counts over the years can simply be used as is for population trend analysis with no consideration of factors that may have reduced or increased the count in a particular season. I do not agree, especially with the changes in the weather/climate that we are seeing in recent years. It is likely that weather-related influences to counts will form a new normal and that may increase or decrease the count totals in such a way that a 5- or 10-year data series now may not be comparable to series from the past because of continuing adverse or advantageous weather factors.”

Many members of Last Chance Audubon Society have heard me express this thought while counting at Duck Creek Pass; it was encouraging to hear the same sentiment from Mr. Tilly, who has been observing raptors for over 40 years.



The fall 2020 count began on August 22 and ended October 26. I had planned to count through November 10, but on October 24 nearly 4 feet of snow fell at 6,500 feet on the east side of the Big Belts. I was snowed in at a lower camp near Gypsy Lake and had to ski 7 miles round trip to the site and back. Once at the site, the drifting snow made observations extremely difficult.



American Kestrel by Adam Richardson.

After attempting to observe on October 26, I made the hard decision to end the count early this season. Having missed nearly 11 days between October 13 and October 26 due to winter storms, it was apparent that this season's count would be an outlier at best in accurately assessing the raptor population using this migration corridor. Along with the weather setbacks, the early part of the season was impacted heavily by the smoke and haze from the wildfires burning throughout the intermountain west. Haze and smoke reduce thermal lift and it has been my experience that raptors are either hard to detect due to limited visibility or they simply don't come up to the ridges, flying down the valleys instead when severe fire haze is present. The last and most important issue which impacted my count this season was my unfamiliarity with the prevailing flight lines the raptors take at Duck Creek Pass. It wasn't until the beginning of October that I recognized how many raptors were flying low down over the fields on the west side. Once I began watching these lower flight lines, my daily totals increased dramatically.

With some of the obstacles resolved, I am happy to report that this site continues to demonstrate incredible potential for accurately assessing raptor population trends. Considering that a few years ago, counts here were well over 4,000 – including 2,600 Golden Eagles – the Duck Creek Pass Hawk Watch is one of the best sites in western North America to accurately assess raptor populations, especially Golden Eagles. Some highlights from this season were detecting 16 species of the raptors that occur naturally in MT by September 13. If you like diversity in your count, the early season (the first 3 weeks of the fall count) yields excellent results. From October 3 through October 9, 1,038 raptors (including 788 Golden Eagles) soared past me. In my short four years of counting raptors, I have never before witnessed a movement like that. At times I would look north, eye level with the crude blind I counted from, and see a dozen coming directly at me. Having counted raptors at four other sites, the Duck Creek Pass Hawk Watch is my favorite. I look forward to counting at this site for the foreseeable future.

-- Adam Richardson

The View from Sevenmile Creek

Note: The surveys on Sevenmile Creek are a collaboration between Last Chance Audubon Society (LCAS) and Prickly Pear Land Trust (PPLT). PPLT acquired the Sevenmile property in 2016 for open space and habitat purposes. Stream restoration activities in the area are ongoing, and public access is not permitted at this time. PPLT provides access to LCAS volunteers specifically to conduct bird surveys and restoration activities. Questions? Contact Nate Kopp, nate@pricklypearlt.org.

November 24, 2020, was a momentous day at Sevenmile Creek. With an excavator, PPLT's restoration contractors diverted the final reach of the stream from its old, incised channel into a newly constructed, meandering one. Bird activity has stayed quiet this fall. It usually is this late in the year, and September's fire along with the presence of heavy equipment has surely contributed. But now the work is almost done: soon the habitat can begin to regrow. As we go through the winter waiting for it to do so and for the birds to respond, it is good to remember all the life of the springs past – and to hope for even more in springs to come. In that spirit, I share the following story from May 26, 2019.

At 5:30 a.m. the forecast was still the same: cloudy with rain. I had low expectations for the bird walk I was scheduled to lead on this moist morning. Two of my three known participants

had already canceled. But when I pulled up to the Lundy Center parking lot at 6:30 a.m., several birders were already waiting. More trickled in and our group swelled to ten, cheerful and variously decked out with boots, rain gear, binoculars, and cameras. An added bonus: in spite of the forecast, the rain was holding off.

A few minutes later we stood in the lush, grassy field that lies south of Sevenmile Creek, surrounded by singing Western Meadowlarks and Savannah Sparrows. The grass was soaked from the preceding evening's rain, but the wind was calm and the temperature was just right. For several weeks this spring, two Short-eared Owls had staked out grassland nesting territories here. We watched the horizon for their distinctive wingbeats, but today the skies were quiet.

As we reached the creek, we stopped and just watched as a whole community of songbirds revealed themselves in fleeting glimpses and quick bursts of song. Yellow Warblers and Lazuli Buntings had returned to their shrubby nesting habitat. Migrating White-crowned and Lincoln's Sparrows popped up, unusually late in the season. Bright yellow and black Common Yellowthroats darted through the shrubs. A Clay-colored Sparrow sang its unique series of buzzes, while frenetic Yellow-rumped Warblers flitted about, catching insects.

It was a stunning change from the bird survey I had done only two days before. May 24 had been a busy day, but today the bushes were *loaded* with migrants. In the rapid change of spring migration, days matter. The avian cornucopia continued as we made our way upstream. A Grasshopper Sparrow, rare in the Helena valley, sang from the same mustard stalk I had seen him on two days before, advertising a grassland territory. Six species of swallows dipped and banked over the ponds, hard at work catching insects. A brilliant orange-yellow Western Tanager hunted different insects in an alder.

By the time we turned around, my boots were sloshing with moisture – so much for waterproofing. A mystery flycatcher delayed me, and I found myself with only half of the group, far behind the others. As a few light sprinkles began, I perked up my ears: in the distance I heard the unmistakable song of a Bobolink!

Bobolinks are stunning black and white songbirds that make an incredible journey, traveling thousands of miles from wintering grounds in the pampas of South America. A few months of Montana summer find them nesting in wet expanses of grassland, the males singing an incredibly enthusiastic, bubbly song. But they aren't faring well. In Montana, Breeding Bird Survey information indicates that bobolinks declined by 2.3% per year between 1966 and 2010. Where there were a hundred Bobolinks in 1966, there are less than 36 today.

Bobolinks are pretty special. And in these two years of bird surveys at Sevenmile Creek I had only seen them singing here once before. That was in early July 2017, just after the hayfield across the road had been cut. Two males – perhaps from that hayfield – spent one morning singing from a fence, then disappeared. So a Bobolink here in May was superb news. But was this male really staking out a territory, or had I only heard him flying over? We opted to take a shortcut through the grassland to try to find out. Several hundred yards later, the bubbly song led us to him, perched on a fence and then a grass stem. A hopeful harbinger: perhaps a sign of nestlings to come.

When thinking the birds on a stream restoration site, it's easy to forget about the grassland. Understandably so: riparian zones



Lazuli Bunting by Shane Sater.



Bobolink by Shane Sater.

are the home of an incredible diversity of life. But Sevenmile Creek inspires me not only because of the stream, but also the expanse of grasses it runs through. Grassland here means meadowlarks, and so much more. It's a home for Short-eared Owls, Grasshopper Sparrows, and Bobolinks: the only place I know quite like it in the Helena valley. I hope that it may remain their home for countless generations more.

We at LCAS will continue to do surveys at Sevenmile Creek, hoping to watch the habitat and the birds here become more and more diverse. We are always happy to have more birders and field naturalists join us in this work. To learn more about helping with bird surveys or protecting habitat, please contact me, shsater@gmail.com.

-- *Shane Sater*

Membership Report

Please welcome **Last Chance Audubon Society new members:** Deborah Amesbury, Emily Brand, and John Love.

Sincere thanks to **Last Chance renewing members:** Warren & Evelyn Norton, Roni Eisenmenter, Steve & Judy Bayless, John & Carlene Armstrong, Barbara Belt, Ed Rumberger, and Cheryl Boid.



Northern Shovelers by Janice Miller.

Please also welcome **National Audubon Society new members:** Rose Leavitt, Judy Kilmer, Shannon Thomas, Rovenia Guest, and Dan Ellison.

Sincere thanks to **National Audubon Society renewing members:** Terry Copenhaver, Paul Ferry, Mike & Helen Murray, Barbara Cooper, Alicia Reber, Dick Franklin, and Helen Fee.

LCAS MEMBERSHIP: A new membership or renewal is \$15/\$25 per household (see below) and is current for one year, January 1 through December 31. You can join and/or renew by using our website's online **MEMBERSHIP** button. Please be sure we receive all your correct contact information. If you do not have access to the website you can join or renew by filling out a registration form located either in this newsletter or printed from lastchanceaudubon.org. Please send completed registration form and your \$15 check (or \$25 check if you wish to get the newsletter in hardcopy) to: LCAS, PO Box 924, Helena, MT, 59624. If you are not sure if you are up to date with your membership, please feel free to email the Membership Chair to verify.

PRINTED and ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTERS: We want all our members to stay informed about chapter news and happenings. If you do not have access to email, staying current with your chapter membership to Last Chance Audubon Society guarantees that you will continue to receive a printed version of our newsletter, but due to increased printing costs, we will be asking for an additional \$10 for processing. If you do have email access, please help us keep printing costs to a minimum and opt to receive our newsletter electronically. Those dollars we save will be spent for important bird habitat, education, and outreach. Thank you.

NAS MEMBERSHIP: If you would like National Audubon Society membership information or to renew with them, please direct an email to customerservice@audubon.org or contact them directly by phone at 1-844-428-3826. We are unable to forward memberships to National Audubon.

-- *Sharon Dewart-Hansen, Membership Chair, smdewarthansen@charter.net*

Last Chance Audubon Society
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Membership

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