

April 2021

Birding Observer



Five Valleys Audubon Society, a Chapter of the National Audubon Society

Shorebirds & Water in the Arid West, the topic of our April Program Meeting

Please join us on Monday, April 12th at 7:00 PM by Zoom to hear Stan Senner present his talk, Shorebirds and Water in the Arid West. You won't want to miss this!

Across the arid Intermountain West, a network of land-locked saline lakes and associated freshwater wetlands provides habitat for millions of birds like Wilson's Phalaropes and American Avocets during migration or breeding or wintering seasons. Intense use of water in the arid West coupled with a warming climate means that many saline lakes are in decline, which in turn has huge implications for western birdlife. Audubon's Vice President for Bird Conservation, Stan Senner, will focus his talk on what is happening to saline lakes, the amazing birds that rely on them, and their connections to Montana. Western water issues are a priority for the National Audubon Society, and Stan will discuss the future of saline lakes in the West and what can be done to conserve them.



Stan Senner is Vice President for Bird Conservation with the National Audubon Society. He has worked for Audubon for nearly 20 years, including 10 years as state director in Alaska. Stan represented The Wilderness Society in Alaska during passage of the Alaska Lands Act, worked on a committee staff in the U.S. House of Representatives, and coordinated the joint federal-state restoration and science programs following the Exxon Valdez oil spill. He has a M.S. degree in biology from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and wide experience in applying science to public policy and natural resources conservation. He and his wife now make their home in Missoula.

Chapter Board Meetings

Through the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, Five Valleys Audubon Society Board meetings will be conducted via Zoom.

When: 1st Monday of the Month, from 7:00-9:00pm

Where: Zoom Meeting

Contact: To join, contact Andrea Stierle at andrea.stierle@mso.umt.edu in advance.

To Attend Stan's Presentation, please tune in on April 12th, shortly before 7:00 pm, Mountain Time.

Join the Zoom Meeting

<https://audubon.zoom.us/j/94499222881?pwd=bDNIRVlxVFo3by93RDNBQjFfcStVdz09>

Meeting ID: 944 9922 2881

Passcode: 607438

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*please
join us*

Peeps from the Board: A Tale of Tails

By Edward Monnig

This past summer in my backyard on the edge of Mount Jumbo, a most unusual bird hopped across our native plantings. It looked like a Spotted Towhee or perhaps an American Robin but had no tail. Seemingly unhampered by the absence of tail feathers it then flew into a nearby serviceberry bush. From a distance I could see that it had alighted on a nest that I had not noticed previously. Even with my binoculars little was visible but the signature red eye of the towhee.



Tail feathers are an important part of bird's flight control and guidance system. Fortunately, this towhee could sustain itself and its nestlings with help from its mate and by foraging for insects, berries, and seeds on the ground. It did not need the flight dexterity of a flycatcher that preys on winged insects.

Tail feathers and tails in general provide a variety of functions for different animal species. The prehensile tails of monkeys in Central and South America are the ultimate fifth appendage. These tails can be used for grasping and hanging from branches and manipulating objects. Curiously, while African monkey species often have similar tails, none have grasping prehensile tails.

Another important feature of tails is coloration. The white-tailed deer's tail serves as a communication device, particularly for female deer. White-tail does have larger and whiter tails than the bucks, and does are more likely to flag their tails and run when they sense danger. This is part of their matriarchal instinct to protect the herd. Solitary bucks are much less likely to flag their tails and run as I can vouch from tracking them and, instead, sneak over the ridge and into the scope of a hunting partner.

Many bird species exhibit some white tail feathers, often along the edges of the tail. The humble Junco is a case in point. These ground feeding birds often forage in flocks and when alarmed flash white outside tail feathers as they dart off. These white tail feathers may communicate danger to the rest of the flock.

I have also wondered whether this trait could be maladaptive. Could flashing white tail feathers allow a predator to better track the fleeing bird?

I recently read a study that may shed some light on this quandary. In northern snowbound latitudes weasel species generally turn white in the winter. Two of these

species, the long-tailed weasel and the short-tailed weasel sport black tips on their tails in contrast to otherwise white bodies. These black tips would seem to make the camouflaged weasels more visible.

One hypothesis is that the black tip provides a survival advantage to weasels by distracting the predator away from more critical body parts. To test this hypothesis researchers trained three Red-tailed Hawks to attack a brown colored model of a long-tailed weasel which they pulled along a track. They then substituted three winter-colored weasel models; one was all white; one was white with a black tipped tail; and the third was white with a black spot on the back. As hypothesized, the hawks were less successful at taking the weasel model with the black tipped tail. Apparently that black tip confused the focused hawk attacks.

And let us reconsider our nesting Spotted Towhee bereft of its tail feathers. In its fully feathered state, its tail feathers would have sported white markings along the margins. Were these white spots enough to confuse a marauding neighbor cat who came away with tail feathers and not the whole bird? One can only speculate.



But beyond speculation, my final plea: house cats kill hundreds of millions of birds every year in the US. Please keep your cats indoors.

Postscript: The American Bird Conservancy has an excellent website with information on various bird-related topics including the threats posed by cats and other invasives as well as suggested activities to ameliorate the threats. The link to this site: <https://abcbirds.org/threat/cats-and-other-invasives/>.



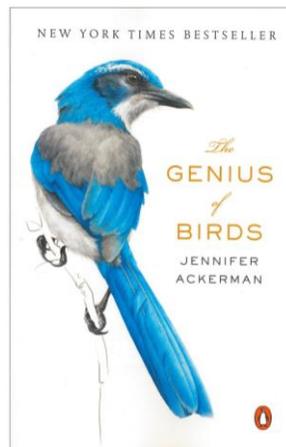
Pandemic Reading: *The Genius of Birds*, Reviewed By Jackie Wedell

Jennifer Ackerman's book *The Genius of Birds* examines bird intelligence in fascinating detail. Ackerman defines genius as "the knack for knowing what you're doing – for 'catching on' to your surroundings, making sense of things, and figuring out how to solve your problems."

Within a framework of a travelogue of her journeys across oceans and continents, Ackerman begins with a solo hike through giant tree ferns in the mountainous rainforest of New Caledonia, in a search for wild New Caledonia Crows (*Corvus moneduloides*), reputedly the world's smartest bird. Ackerman later observes the work with these crows at the University of Auckland's research station on the island. Experiments suggest that these crows can comprehend water displacement, dropping stones into a water-filled tube to raise the water level so they can get a drink, discriminating between heavy objects that will sink and light ones that will only float.

We are all familiar with the elaborate mating dances of males of many bird species. On the east coast of Australia, Ackerman observed the Satin Bowerbird (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*) take courting to a new level. The male Satin Bowerbird typically spends weeks building a "bower," not for use as nest, but to showcase his talents. This structure of upright twigs can stand a foot high with two parallel arched walls. This particular bird preferred blue and decorated his bower with a parrot's blue tailfeathers, lavender lobelia blossoms, navy blue hair ribbons, fragments of cobalt blue glass, a blue bus ticket, and a baby blue pacifier. When a female stopped by to observe, the male bowerbird launched into a dance like a wind-up toy, followed by a feint attack against imaginary aggressors. He concluded the display with a series of calls mimicking the sounds of mammals and other birds in the area. Researchers have observed that successful males not only build the most symmetrical and well decorated bowers, they also orient their bowers for optimal lighting and utilize optical illusion to make their displays look more impressive.

Ackerman sheds light on the remarkable migrations of many bird species, migrations long been assumed to be based on inherited instinct. Ackerman argues otherwise, presenting evidence that "bird navigation involves sensing, learning, and, above all, a remarkable ability to build a map in the mind, one far bigger than we ever imagined and made of strange and still mysterious cartography." Birds appear to use a complex system to navigate involving a "map-and-compass" strategy. The bird first determines where it is on its cognitive map and



the direction of travel to its destination. The bird then uses directional cues (the compass) to keep it on track. The bird brings many components into the equation: location of sun and stars, magnetic fields, landscape features, wind, and weather. Ackerman reviews the research that has led to this theory of navigation. The Clark's Nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*), for example, develops elaborate maps

of its environment. A single bird will gather more than 30,000 pine seeds, shell them, then bury them in caches, carrying them as far as 15 miles. Over a period of nine months a nutcracker will remember with 70% accuracy the location of caches despite changes in appearance of the landscape from snow, rain, or shifting soil cover. One theory is that Clark's Nutcrackers make mental maps involving trees and large rocks, and triangulate to find the cache. These maps must be accurate to within millimeters.

The *Genius of Birds* is full of wonderful examples of the power of "bird brains". As a retired psychologist whose work was based on observing and interpreting behavior, I found the book riveting. I read it long after I should have turned off the light many a night; it was a great escape from the pandemic. The *Genius of Birds* is widely available in new or used hardcover and paperback editions.

Wings Across the Big Sky – Regional Field Trips 2021

Join Montana Audubon for a unique field trip in your area on Saturday June 5th, 2021! Rest assured that the health and safety of our supporters is of utmost importance. As such, the Lewistown 2021 Festival will be postponed to 2022. In lieu of this annual gathering, Montana Audubon is hosting Regional Field Trips at various locations throughout the state.

- Choose a field trip with a Montana birding expert in the region of your choice.
- Get an all-access pass to educational and instructional workshop videos led by Montana Audubon scientists and experts.
- Receive a copy of the Montana Audubon Bird Guide to Familiar Species, and other MTA goodies.

Mark your calendar! Registration opens April 12th with all trips occurring on Saturday, June 5th, rain or shine. Visit www.mtaudubon.org for detailed field trip information and to register for a unique birding experience. Register Early. Field trip participation is limited.

Give a Night for Montana Audubon

Hello Friends! For the second year in a row Montana Audubon has had to cancel their annual gathering in Lewistown because of the pandemic. Alternative plans have been made, but many of us will miss the camaraderie and shared presentations and outings.

This gathering is one of the major fundraising events each year for Montana Audubon. In this year of the Montana Legislature's biennial session this funding is critical to support Amy Seaman, Carmen Borchet, and others as they work to promote conservation and minimize some of the worst impulses of this legislature.

In this time of the ongoing pandemic, my wife and I have noticed that we are spending much less money on travel. We have decided to donate the money we would have spent travelling to Lewistown directly to Montana Audubon. We will sorely miss the gathering, but will take some comfort knowing our donation is well-directed to Montana Audubon's important work.

Would you join us in donating the equivalent of one or two nights lodging at the Yogo Inn to the good work of Amy Seaman and others at Montana Audubon?

Mail checks to Montana Audubon, P.O. Box 595, Helena, Montana 59624. You can also donate online at <https://mtaudubon.org/> by clicking on "Give Now".

Thank you!
Edward Monnig
Five Valleys Audubon Society

LBCU Citizen Science Survey 2021

Are you ready to hear the 'currleeee' of the Long-billed Curlew? Well, grab your binoculars and get ready, because it's almost curlew season! These charismatic shorebirds will be trickling back into the state in less than two months and we need your help finding as many as possible in and around the Mission, Blackfoot and Helena Valley! Since 2013, volunteers have recorded curlews sightings in these three Montana valleys and this data helps inform statewide habitat models as well as highlight important tracts of intact grassland that are in need of conservation.

The Long-Billed Curlew Citizen Science survey will take place from April 8 - May 7 and May 8 - May 31. Please email Peter Dudley (peter@mtaudubon.org) or Carmen Borchelt (carmen@mtaudubon.org) for more information and to sign up!

GBHE Citizen Science Survey 2021

This project was created to bolster statewide efforts to survey Great Blue Heron nesting sites, which are typically conducted through flyovers, and cover the many miles of prime habitat along Montana's waterways. Despite this, it is commonly understood that the Great Blue Heron, like many of Montana's species of concern, require standardized surveys and rookery counts to ensure their conservation. If you are interested in volunteering, please join us for the one hour Zoom training on April 22nd to learn how to survey Great Blue Heron Rookeries. You can sign up at: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/great-blue-heron-event-tickets-147869825629>.

The Great Blue Heron Citizen Science survey will take place from May 1 - June 15. For more information, please email Peter Dudley (peter@mtaudubon.org) or Carmen Borchelt (carmen@mtaudubon.org).

CHSW Citizen Science Survey 2021

We need your help locating more Chimney Swifts while they are active and nesting. Little is known about their nesting range throughout our state, Montana Audubon is turning to citizen science for answers. Unlike searching for other swifts, or many birds for that matter, Chimney Swifts are best surveyed in towns and near buildings with large chimneys! Surveys are short, occurring 30 minutes before until 30 minutes after sunset, with observers being stationed for just a short time at selected chimneys.

If you're planning a trip to eastern Montana be sure to put this on your list of things to do! You can also join us in the field during our "Chimney Swift Night Out" events in eastern Montana. Participants will learn about chimney swifts and population monitoring techniques, and then put that training to the test that evening as we search local chimneys together.



Join us at Makoshika State Park on the evening of June 4th, with more dates to come. For more information or to receive project outreach materials, please email Peter Dudley peter@mtaudubon.org.

Welcome New Members

Thomas Stahl
 Kathryn Griffing
 Jody Miller
 Sharon Woldstad
 Raso Hultgren
 Bonnie Tobalske
 Kimberley Avery

Mary Hejtmanek
 Harry Croft
 Katherine Vaughan
 Kim Ashwell
 Leilani Hadd
 Patty Hahn



To be an environmental and fiscal heroine or hero,
 Sign up for emailed newsletters!

If you subscribed to Audubon through National Audubon, we may not have your email address. To receive our newsletter and other bird news by email, saving trees and reducing FVAS newsletter expenses, please send your email address to Treasurer, Jean Duncan at treasurer@FVAudubon.org or Membership Promotion Chair, Scott Kluever at sjkluever@gmail.com.

Five Valleys Audubon Society Membership Application

Please support Five Valleys Audubon Society (FVAS). There are several ways to donate. Any method ensures that you will receive our *Birding Observer* newsletter and may participate in all chapter activities. *Please help us reduce our \$3,700 annual newsletter cost by signing up for email delivery. FVAS is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit.

Make checks out to Five Valleys Audubon Society and mail to: PO Box 8425, Missoula, MT 59807
 Or donate on our website: fvaudubon.org/join

- \$ _____ \$15 FVAS membership only, includes newsletter sent via email.
- \$ _____ \$25 FVAS membership only, includes newsletter sent via USPS.
- \$ _____ General Fund, use as needed for conservation, field trips, education and outreach.
- \$ _____ Phillip L. Wright Fund, small grants for student research.
- \$ _____ Legacy Fund, creating and supporting local urban bird habitats for citizen enjoyment without leaving the city.
- \$ _____ Total contribution
- _____ Volunteer - Please contact me. I would like to know more about how I may help birds and FVAS.

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Email: (Required to receive the newsletter and birding alerts via email.) _____

Please note: FVAS does not share email addresses with anyone except Montana Audubon. Your email address is safe with us!

Please be aware that membership in Five Valleys Audubon Society (FVAS) alone does not confer membership in the National Audubon Society (NAS). FVAS and NAS are separate 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations. To become a new member of NAS and receive Audubon magazine (or to renew a current or lapsed membership) visit the website: fvaudubon.org/nas. Using this website will ensure that FVAS receives a \$20 one-time credit for your NAS membership. All NAS members become members of FVAS. A third organization, Montana Audubon (MTA), is also an independent organization and receives no financial support from NAS. MTA handles statewide issues and is responsible for its own fundraising. To assist in this important statewide work you may contact MTA through their website: <http://mtaudubon.org/>. Please give generously to each organization. Although independent, we work together to protect what we all love.

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