

February 2021

Birding Observer



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

The Lives and Deaths of Northern Goshawks in Southwestern Montana

Please join us on Monday, February 8th at 7:00 PM on Zoom to hear Jack Kirkely present his talk entitled The Lives and Deaths of Northern Goshawks in Southwestern Montana. Jack will summarize his quarter century of research on goshawks which included radio telemetry work to help shed some light on their year-around movements as well as their summer habitat preferences during the breeding season. You won't want to miss the short video segments that he shot from an observation blind showing some of the typical behaviors of adults provisioning and protecting their nestlings.

John S. "Jack" Kirkley is a professor of Biology at the University of Montana Western. He earned his bachelor's degree in pre-professional zoology at Ohio Wesleyan University in 1975 and his master's and doctoral degrees in biology-ecology at Utah State University in 1985. He has now fulfilled a 36-year career as a biology professor at UM-Western in Dillon and plans to retire in June 2021.

As a scientist, Dr. Kirkley is an ornithologist who specializes in the study of birds of prey. For more than a quarter century he has conducted his studies on the ecology of



Northern Goshawk

Northern Goshawks, which breed in the mountain forests of southwestern Montana, focusing his investigations on their nesting habitats, as well as using radio telemetry to document their heretofore unrecognized use of valley habitats as preferred overwintering areas, in contrast to their old growth forest breeding habitat. From 2014-18, Jack opportunistically added the Great-tailed Grackle to his studies, because that sub-tropical species had begun to expand its breeding range into Montana. He documented the first confirmed instances of nesting by this rare species in Montana, as well as the first DNA-proven case of its hybridization with the Common Grackle.

Jack has served in leadership roles in local and statewide Audubon organizations, as well as being an activist for the Montana Wilderness Association's conservation issues. He has received the Founders Award from the Montana Wilderness Association and the Lifetime Achievement Award from Montana Audubon.

In his retirement, Jack hopes to continue pursuing his research interests and his outreach and service to the community as an emeritus professor who will maintain a connection with the institution to which he dedicated his entire career, The University of Montana Western.

**To Attend Jack Kirkley's Goshawk Presentation,
Time: February 8, 2021 at 6:45pm Mountain Time.**

To Join Zoom Meeting:

<https://zoom.us/j/93571127368>

Meeting ID: 935 7112 7368

One tap mobile

+16699006833,,93571127368# US (San Jose)

+12532158782,,93571127368# US (Tacoma)

Dial-in number from Montana:

+1 253 215 8782 US (Tacoma)

Or find your local dial-in

number: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/kerE45fWQV>

Chapter Board Meetings

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, Five Valleys Audubon Society Board meetings will be conducted via Zoom.

When: 1st Monday of the Month, from 7:00 to 9:00 PM

Where: Zoom Meeting

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

Philip L. Wright Memorial Research Awards By Bill Gabriel (in memoriam)

In 1976 Professor Philip L. Wright gathered several U of M professors, students, and a few other birders to found the Five Valleys Audubon Society. Among the chapter's goals was: "To promote research on wildlife and other natural resources." Accordingly, in 1981 FVAS announced a program of Study Grant Awards that granted a total of \$700 to 3 University of Montana graduate students. The \$700 came from the FVAS operating budget, and Jim Brown remembers sitting on the Board and wondering if such expenditures would bankrupt the chapter.

In 1984 FVAS revised the Study Grant program, renamed it Field Biology Research Awards, announced the program in the chapter newsletter, and continued to fund awards from the annual budget. From 1984 through 1991 a total of \$1,900 was awarded to 9 students. In 1992, that program was in turn replaced by the Philip L. Wright Research Award program. From 1992 through 1998, 12 students received awards totaling \$3,641.50, all from the FVAS annual budget.

Our Chapter has a Facebook page!

<https://www.facebook.com/fvamissoula/posts/3616180525096167>

We welcome contributions. If you have local photos or bird-related content to share, please contact Jacob Glass, our Facebook Administrator at jacobpglass@gmail.com. Because we cannot come together, I find these connections helpful and hope you will send your photos and content our way.

Thanks for considering this,
Rose Leach.

An Endowment to Fund the Awards

Professor Philip L. Wright died in 1997, and in 1998 the FVAS Board of Directors decided to establish an endowment in his name to provide ongoing funding for the small research grants that had been funded year to year from the FVAS operating budget. The goal was to raise \$20,000 for the endowment, and to use the annual income from that for the awards. We have succeeded beyond all expectations, and now, 22 years later, the Philip L. Wright Endowment amounts to \$92,208 and we have awarded \$39,969 to 65 students in grants of \$150 to \$1,200. Our management rules permit 4% of the year-end value to be used for research awards the following year. That will be \$3,688 for 2020.

A Request for Proposals (RFP) for 2021 has been distributed within U of M, proposals will be due near the end of March, and awards will be made early in April.

And now The Pitch - If you would like to help this fund grow, and support more student research, turn to the membership application near the end of this newsletter. The fourth item on the left is for "Philip L. Wright Fund." Write in the amount of your contribution, put Philip L. Wright Fund on the memo line of your check, and send it to FVAS, P.O. Box 8425, Missoula, MT, 59807.



2017 P.L. Wright Research Award Winner Cedar Mathers-Winn, who worked with UM professor Erick Greene on alarm calling networks by birds and mammals. Cedar was later awarded a Tolle-Bekken Award for his innovative research.

Annual Chapter Meeting & Elections

Hello Chapter members,

It was fun to see many of you—at least virtually— on our Zoom meeting in January, listening to the Great Blue Heron mapping project. Thanks for tuning in!



Our annual meeting, which occurs in March, is when we have our elections for Board of Directors and Officers. If you would like to join our Board, please contact one of our nominating committee members - Andrea Stierle (andrea.stierle@mso.umt.edu) or Edward Monnig (emonnig01@gmail.com) for details.

Board member duties generally revolve around attending our monthly Board meetings (7-9 pm on the first Monday of the month from Sept through May, except in Sept when we move it to the Tuesday to avoid Labor Day). We have an engaged Board, so that tasks are usually evenly split among our members.

This coming year, we have enough Board members to meet the minimums for our Bylaws, but we are not at our maximum number, so there are still openings if you would like to join.

The terms for Secretary (Andrea) and President (me!) are also due to expire. Both of us have said that we would stand for re-election, but would welcome nominations of others to run. Again, please contact the nominating committee for details.

We are planning to hold the vote via a Zoom meeting on our regular membership meeting time, so the 2nd Monday of March (8th), 7 pm. We need approximately 30 members to attend to hold elections. A slate will be presented, and we will just need a show of hands to proceed. That same evening, we will have another informative bird program, which will be nice (thanks to Susie Wall for getting our informative slate of speakers lined up).

Thanks everyone for your support,

Rose Leach, President

Follow-up note from January: In answer to Kay Duffield's question, Great Blue Heron nests weigh from 5.7-10.6 lbs. (Source: Birds of the World online). Thanks, Kay!

2021 Montana Audubon Legislative Update

The 2021 legislative session has begun! Montana Audubon will lobby to protect birds, other wildlife, and their habitats. As you may expect, the 2021 session is going to be very different by allowing Montanans the ability to testify without traveling to Helena. This has long been a goal of many legislative leaders, but that wish became a necessity with the pandemic and the need to limit the number of people in the Capitol. Montana Audubon's lobbying team is prepared and ready to take on the State Capitol remotely and help you too! We hope you'll take advantage of this new opportunity!

We just delivered our first remote testimony this week, on Senate Bill 85, a bill that would double in some instances and quadruple in other instances, the taxes on wind projects in Montana. We joined two dozen opponents, including many wind developers and industry experts in this opposition. Now that we have a flavor for remote testimony, we will be prepared to tackle the wildlife issues coming our way. Later this month we'll start to hear bills about trapping, lethally removing grizzly bears, and a whole slew of changes to land use planning regulation and subdivision development. We are definitely on defense!

As usual, we are going to need your help! During the session, through April of this year, we will email regular "Action Alerts" to help guide you to your legislators to submit comments on important committee hearings and critical votes. Make sure you are signed up, and have your friends join too. It's easy!

Please head to our website to find more information on how to get involved. mtaudubon.org/conservation-policy/legislative-participation.

If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to Amy Seaman (aseaman@mtaudubon.org) or Carmen Borchelt (carmen@mtaudubon.org).



BIRD NEWS: Pale Barn Owls Freeze Voles

By Marc Devokaitis

Reprinted from www.allaboutbirds.org

The ghostly visage of the Barn Owl is surely the stuff of nightmares for voles, the small mouselike rodents that are among the Barn Owl's most common prey. Barn Owls are efficient killers thanks to a combination of excellent low-light vision, silent flight, and otherworldly hearing. But it turns out some Barn Owls have an additional secret weapon in their hunting arsenal—moonlight.

Scientists have long puzzled over why adult Barn Owls (which are strictly nocturnal, so they hunt in the dark) can show a spectrum of color variations on their body feathers: Some individuals are a pure eggshell white, while others are streaked with pale rusty hues, and still others are a rich reddish brown. These color variations aren't due to the age or sex of the owl. Geography may play a role in European populations, with darker owls being more common in the north and lighter owls more common in the south. But variants occur together in all parts of the range, deepening the mystery of why the alternate plumages occur at all.

Now, new research indicates that owls with pure white plumage on their breast and belly have a distinct advantage when hunting, especially on clear nights with a brightly shining, full or nearly full moon. Scientists from Finland have been using cameras, GPS units, and direct observations to study a population of Barn Owls in western Switzerland for more than two decades, acquiring a wealth of information about breeding and feeding behavior in the process. In [the new study, published in September in *Nature Ecology and Evolution*](#), the scientists used this rich dataset to analyze how moonlight affects Barn Owls' hunting success.

Almut Kelber, Professor of Biology at Lund University in Sweden and an author of the study, writes, "In the bright moonlight, owls should be more easily spotted by prey such as mice. If this was true, hunting on moonlit nights would be trickier for white owls than for red owls, simply because white is more reflective and therefore more visible in the moonlight than dark red plumage. As it turns out, we couldn't have been more wrong."

Their analysis showed that indeed, Barn Owls were less successful hunters on moonlit nights. But when they looked at the relative success of darker vs. lighter Barn Owls, the story was more complex. Darker-colored owls consistently brought less food to their nests on moonlit nights. Paler-colored owls, on the other hand, seemed to

have equal or greater success in food-provisioning on nights when the moon shone brightly.

To further investigate, the researchers measured the reactions of individual voles to taxidermied red and white Barn Owls under two levels of simulated moonlight—new moon and full moon.



Different colored Barn Owls in Switzerland.
Photo by Isabell Henry

The stuffed owls were in a spread-wing position and were placed 5 to 6 feet above the voles, then hidden behind a dark curtain before being revealed to the rodents.

As expected, voles were better at detecting and reacting to owls under full moon conditions, and the most common reaction was to freeze. How long they stayed frozen depended significantly on what color the owl was.

Across all trials, the average amount of time a vole stayed frozen was around nine seconds. Under full-moon conditions, voles remained frozen nine seconds longer when facing a white owl than they did under the relative darkness of a new moon. Also under full moon, voles froze about five seconds longer when they encountered a white owl as compared with a red owl. In the darkness of a new moon, voles showed no difference in their response to the two different-colored owls.

"We think voles behave that way when encountering a white owl because they're scared by bright light reflected from the white plumage," says Kelber. (It's almost as if they were a deer in headlights.)

While freezing can be a helpful prey response in avoiding predators in some situations, researchers think that in this case, the reaction gives the barn owl the advantage since they are already trained in on their target—a few seconds more for the white owls to snatch their prey.

Given this advantage, one might expect natural selection to favor the white owls, and for the darker owls to eventually disappear. But the study authors say that there may be other factors at play. For example, darker feathers tend to be stronger and resist wear better than lighter feathers. The redder owls might also be better camouflaged when roosting or stalking prey.

A Pandemic Birding Adventure

By Bill DeCou

On March 7, 2020, my wife and I arrived in Nairobi and checked into our hotel, next to Nairobi National Park. The usual dry season never arrived (due to climate change), and lush growth tended to hide birds and animals. Within minutes of entering the park we saw Ostrich, Helmeted Guineafowl, Yellow-necked Francolin, Gray Crowned-Crane, Saddle-billed and Yellow-billed storks, the elusive African Darter, Hamerkop, African Sacred ibis and African Spoonbill.

Overhead were Augur Buzzards, Black-winged kites, and White-backed Vultures. Game animals included Giraffe, a herd of African Buffalo, Bushbuck, Hartebeest, and Impala. To top it off, we saw a Black Rhinoceros and her calf, one of Africa's most endangered mammals.



Female Black Rhino and Calf

The next day we flew to Kilimanjaro airport and got a good view of Mount Kilimanjaro (and the snows of Kilimanjaro). We drove to the highlands and Gibbs farm, with beautiful gardens set in the forest to start Tanzanian birding. We saw a multitude of small birds, including Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater, Cardinal and Bearded Woodpeckers, and Chinspot Batis, as well as White-tailed Blue Flycatcher, Greenbuls, Sunbirds, Robin-Chats, and Grosbeak Weaver. We also observed a roosting Eurasian Nightjar—an amazing spotting by our local guide! From there, it was on to Ngorongoro Serena Lodge, perched on the rim of the crater, with stunning views of the crater below. The crater is about 20 square miles and probably has the highest concentration of game animals and birds in Africa, along with tremendous variety.

In the crater itself, we had quite a day. First, we saw both Black-backed and Common Jackals walking right next to our Landcruiser. Shortly thereafter we spotted three lions, some Spotted Hyenas, and three bull elephants, as well as some hippos out in the open walking around. (Usually hippos are in rivers or ponds with only their nostrils showing) Later, we drove through scattered herds of zebra, wildebeest, and Thompson's Gazelle highlighted against the crater walls. We saw flocks of both Greater and Lesser flamingos, ducks, herons, ibis, and pelicans. Other favorites were Abdim's and White Storks, plus the striking Secretarybird. Smaller birds included the spectacular Lilac-breasted Roller, Hildebrandt's Starling and

a striking male Rosy-throated Longclaw, topped off by a magnificent perched Martial Eagle.

On our way to the Serengeti, we stopped at a Masai village, comprised of manure daubed stick huts. It had rained quite a bit recently and the "mud" was at least half cattle manure. We did not want to touch anything or slip in the "mud." But of course we explored. We went into the hut, serving as a school. We admired the wooden carvings and native beadwork set out for sale. But we soon continued on our way, along the shortgrass prairie, where it was easy to see birds and animals. Whitebacked, Ruppell's and Lappet-faced vultures squabbled over a recent kill. Small birds abounded, such as Red-billed Hornbills, Red-billed and Yellow-billed Oxpeckers, Pygmy Falcon, Beautiful Sunbird, and the gorgeous Purple Grenadier were seen, along with many other birds. The many mammals that the Serengeti is known for, such as lions, Grants Gazelles, elephant herds, topi, and wart hogs, ignored us as we drove by. In addition, we were lucky enough to see Banded and Eastern dwarf mongoose, as well as a rare Serval (cat) and a mother cheetah, with her cubs, eating a Grants Gazelle.

The next morning we were up early, birding before breakfast at our Ndutu lodge, when our guide received a call from the Field Guides Texas office. The message was: "You need to, leave now! Tanzania's border will be closed for 30 days at 2:00pm, due to the Coronavirus, and Kenya will have a similar closure tomorrow." We threw our stuff in the Landcruiser and dashed for the airport, which was eight hours away. Fortunately, our guide's brother-in-law owns Tropic Airways, and he got us a charter flight to Nairobi. We were allowed to leave Tanzania, even though it was 2:20pm. From Nairobi, our guides got us out early the next afternoon bound for Dubai and then, San Francisco. I was scared. I certainly did not want to be stuck in Africa or Dubai or quarantined in an unfamiliar place. The flight to Dubai went well. There was a 12-hour layover there. Never before have I seen such a diverse group of people, all just as scared as we were.



Purple Grenadier

Eventually we arrived in San Francisco, during the early chaos of the pandemic. It took over two hours to get through Customs and Immigration, but eventually, we got back to Missoula. We returned in good health and began a 14 day "shelter in place quarantine." As I suspected, I returned from the trip of a lifetime, but it was nothing like I had imagined or planned.

Missoula Christmas Bird Count Summary

By Larry Weeks



The Missoula Christmas Bird Count was held on December 19, 2020 with face masks and social distancing. There were 80 participants in the field and 22 feeder watchers. We identified 90 species and 9643 total birds on Count Day and had 4 Count Week birds. The 90 species is a record number for the Missoula Count. Jim Brown's group had the only Northern Pintails and Redhead in Grass Valley. Steve Flood's group had the only Ruffed Grouse in LaValle Creek. Rose Leach's group had the only Wood Duck and Lesser Scaup along Mullan Road. Travis Blakefield had the only Ruby-crowned Kinglet at Tower St. Open Space. Dennis Heinemann's group had the only Dusky Grouse and White-winged Crossbill at Maclay Flat/Blue Mountain. Bob Petty and Ronni Flannery had 2 Green-tailed Towhees in the Rattlesnake Valley. Green-tailed Towhee is a super unusual bird west of the divide. Joe Regan's group had the only Yellow-rumped Warbler on Kelly Island. Denver Holt's group had 31 Long-eared Owls and Common Redpolls west of the airport. The feeder watchers also contributed to the species list. Heidi Halverson had an Anna's Hummingbird, Brian Williams had a Harris's Sparrow, Hedwig Wright had a White-crowned Sparrow, Kay Lambert had Cassin's Finches, and Judith Kiely had Lesser Goldfinches. The Count Week birds were a Lark Sparrow at Jalalieh Morrow's feeder, a Fox Sparrow at Hedwig's feeder, and Tad Lubinski had a Barred Owl and a Great Gray Owl at Maclay Flat. There was also a Say's Phoebe in Miller Creek which was just outside the Circle. Other leaders included Boo Curry who birded Council Grove and the Kona Ranch, Terry Toppins who drove around Big Flat, Vick Applegate who birded the State Nursery and Tower St. Open Space, Robin Anderson who birded Greenough Park and the U of M, Paul Hendricks who hiked Marshall Canyon to Woods Gulch, Will McDowell who birded Macauley Butte and Stevens Island, Brian Williams who birded the Stewart Peak trail, Cole Wolf who covered Crazy Canyon, Thomas Kallmeyer who birded Butler Creek, Elena Ulev who birded Moose Can Gully, Rose Stoudt who birded the Kim Williams trail and upper Clark Fork, Kristi DuBois who birded the Cusker Ranch, 44 Ranch and Hhiawatta Rd., Stan Senner who birded Farviews, and the author who birded Grant Creek. Other interesting birds included White-throated Sparrows at 3 locations, Varied Thrushes at 2 locations, 6 Northern Saw-whet Owls, and 29 Blue Jays. No Bohemian Waxwings this year.

Missoula Christmas Bird Count 2020		
Great Blue Heron 38	Wilson's Snipe 7	Golden-crowned Kinglet 7
Canada Goose 1,083	Rock Pigeon 452	Ruby-crowned Kinglet 1
Wood Duck 1	Eurasian-collared Dove 214	Townsend's Solitaire 19
Green-winged Teal 29	Mourning Dove 6	American Robin 13
Mallard 861	Great Horned Owl 29	Varied Thrush 2
Northern Pintail 8	Northern Pygmy Owl 2	Cedar Waxwing 146
Gadwall 2	Barred Owl CW	Northern Shrike 9
American Wigeon 11	Great Gray Owl CW	European Starling 22
Redhead 1	Long-eared Owl 31	Yellow-rumped Warbler 1
Ring-necked Duck 9	Northern Saw-whet Owl 6	Spotted Towhee 3
Lesser Scaup 1	Anna's Hummingbird 1	Green-tailed Towhee 2
Common Goldeneye 136	Belted Kingfisher 17	American Tree Sparrow 5
Barrow's Goldeneye 13	Downy Woodpecker 59	Lark Sparrow CW
Bufflehead 18	Hairy Woodpecker 23	Fox Sparrow CW
Hooded Merganser 19	Northern Flicker 225	Song Sparrow 58
Common Merganser 32	Pileated Woodpecker 14	White-throated Sparrow 5
Bald Eagle 61	Canada Jay 7	White-crowned Sparrow 1
Northern Harrier 5	Steller's Jay 16	Harris' Sparrow 1
Sharp-shinned Hawk 12	Blue Jay 29	Dark-eyed Junco 250
Cooper's Hawk 2	Clark's Nutcracker 150	Red-winged Blackbird 265
Northern Goshawk 3	Black-billed Magpie 394	Pine Grosbeak 3
Red-tailed Hawk 94	American Crow 256	Cassin's Finch 3
Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk 2	Common Raven 339	House Finch 451
Rough-legged Hawk 32	Black-capped Chickadee 736	Red Crossbill 658
American Kestrel 4	Mountain Chickadee 178	White-winged Crossbill 1
Merlin 4	Red-breasted Nuthatch 820	Common Redpoll 37
Gray Partridge 16	White-breasted Nuthatch 75	Pine Siskin 69
Ring-necked Pheasant 22	Pygmy Nuthatch 27	American Goldfinch 62
Dusky Grouse 1	Brown Creeper 22	Lesser Goldfinch 5
Ruffed Grouse 2	Pacific Wren 6	Evening Grosbeak 21
Wild Turkey 99	Marsh Wren 5	House Sparrow 683
Killdeer 14	American Dipper 4	
CW = count week	Total Birds: 9,643	Total Species: 90

Welcome New Members

Cheryl & David Belitsky
Joan Essen
Kristin Freeman
Inge Goetz-Cordova
Bradley Johnson
Diane Winter

Dear Readers,

Our membership totals are down for the year, due to the pandemic and our current lack of in-person programming. But our work continues in the background, we can assure you. We hope you will renew your membership soon, to help us in our mission of supporting conservation and bird habitat in our local area. We promise you will feel empowered when you do!

Thank you for your support,
Your local Chapter Board.

Five Valleys Audubon greatly appreciates those who renewed their membership this past month. We generally encourage members to receive their newsletter via email (to conserve resources and expenses), which is the default mailing option if provided by new members. If you want to change how your newsletter is delivered or have any changes to your mailing preferences, please contact the Membership Promotion, 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.

\$ _____ Legacy Fund, creating and supporting local urban bird habitats for citizen enjoyment without leaving the city.

\$ _____ \$25 FVAS membership only, includes newsletter sent via USPS.

\$ _____ Total contribution

\$ _____ General Fund, use as needed for conservation, field trips, education and outreach.

_____ Volunteer - Please contact me. I would like to know more about how I may help birds and FVAS.

\$ _____ Phillip L. Wright Fund, small grants for student research.

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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