



Mission: Building on the tradition of special interest in birds, Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society is organized to promote enjoyment and protection of the natural environment through education, activism, and conservation of bird habitat.

JAN 2024

VOLUME 54, NUMBER 1

Seeds of Success: Restoring Native Habitat to Public Lands



Wendy Velman

The Seeds of Success program was established by the Department of the Interior in 2001 to collect and conserve native plant seeds for the restoration of public lands degraded by fire, soil degradation and invasive species. According to the BLM web site, the program has already established more than 27,000 individual native seed collections in its national collection. This program received a boost in funding from the 2021 Infrastructure Act, and some of the projects will directly benefit Montana.

BLM currently has arrangements with tribes, universities, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources to collect foundation seed, plant crops for increase, and grow seedlings, all used in restoration efforts.

Wendy Velman has been the BLM Botany Program Lead for Montana and the Dakotas since 2011. During her time here in Montana she has worked to establish numerous partnerships to help collect, develop, and increase native plant materials for use in restoration efforts on BLM public lands. Much of the focus for the use of native seeds is to help diversify prairie habitat that was planted with non-native grass during the homestead era.

Wendy will talk about her work with Special K Ranch, Fort Belknap, Confederated Salish Kootenai, and the Dept. of Natural Resources State Nursery in Missoula. She will cover the efforts of the Montana Native Plant Society and 30 other partners to develop a Montana Plant Conservation Strategy that identifies the plant species and habitats of most conservation concern along with education needs. She will also discuss the importance of pollinator conservation and the BLM efforts to research and implement actions for native pollinators.

Join us on **Monday, January 15th** for the YVAS Program held at the Mayflower Church on the corner of Poly and Rehberg Lane, when Wendy will discuss these topics in depth.

A social with coffee and cookies begins at 6:30 PM; the program begins at 7:00 PM. YVAS programs are free and open to the public. They are held on the 3rd Monday of the month.



Community Fellows heading into the field to collect seeds.

Photo by Cristina Eisenberg, Fort Belnap Project Director.

Birding Field Trips

AT PRESENT, THERE ARE NO TRIPS SCHEDULED IN FEBRUARY OR MARCH. ALERTS WILL BE SENT VIA EMAIL OF ANY IMPROPTU TRIPS. Contact Carolyn Jones at carolyn684@gmail.com to be included on the **Bird Trip Notification List**. Check the yvaudubon.org website, Facebook, and the YVAS Flyer for any schedule changes including times, cancellations, or new trips. The 2024 Bird Trip Calendar will come out soon and will be included in the Flyer.

Field trips depart by car from the Rocky Mountain College parking lot on Rimrock Road next to Billings Studio Theater at 8:00 am, unless noted differently in the specific trip information shown below. Please DO NOT bring pets. Passengers will share gas costs with drivers.

Jan 1, 2024 Mon	Yellowtail Dam Afterbay Annual New Year's Day Trip 8am Rocky Mountain College	Brian Henderson, leader Sack Lunch
Jan 6, 2024 Sat	Mid-Winter Eagle Count 8am Rocky Mountain College	Brian Henderson, leader Sack Lunch

Did You Know YVAS Has an Aluminum Recycling Program?

YVAS has been collecting and recycling aluminum for many years. The refund money supports YVAS' Education Fund for such things as educational signs, Citizen Science Kits at the Billings Public Library, Arbor Day and other display tables, and educational grants.

Larry Handsaker, who has been heading up this effort for the last 12 years, says that aluminum recycling goes on steadily but there has been little growth in recent years. Aluminum items, such as cans, signs, old license plates, and most things aluminum and clean are accepted. No bottle caps, aerosol cans or paint/solvent containers please.

If you would like to support YVAS' Educational Fund, drop off your aluminum items at Larry's (918 Avenue C) or at Helen and Peter Cummins (519 Highland Park Drive, 406-248-8684). If you have a large load, Larry will be happy to pick it up. Contact him at 406-855-9832 or larryhandsaker@gmail.com to make arrangements or if you have any further questions.



Aluminum Facts:

- Did you know that one aluminum can will save enough energy to light a 100 watt light bulb for four hours?
- Recycling scrap aluminum requires only 5% of the energy used to make new aluminum from the raw ore.
- Aluminum can be recycled over and over again without any loss of quality. Aluminum is one of the most recycled materials on earth.

Submitted by Deb Regele

Congratulations Helen Carlson Cummins!

For over 50 years Helen has contributed to the Billings community teaching birding classes, leading field trips, and serving as President of Yellowstone Valley Audubon during seven terms. She continues to monitor osprey nests, to participate in the Christmas Bird Count, and to observe her many birdfeeders from home.

Helen was born and raised in Lovell Wyoming and was living in Bozeman when she discovered the joy of birding. Her eureka moment came with the viewing of an Eared Grebe at the headwaters of the Missouri River in Three Forks. Soon after, Helen moved to Billings and became an active member of the YVAS.

Her generous spirit and fearlessness are best illustrated by the story of her first birding trip to Alaska recounted by Nancy Wiggins in the June 2017 Flyer:

"After being hospitalized in 1984, her recovery goal was to go on the birding trip of a lifetime to Gambell, Alaska, with WINGS Birding Tours. Being Helen, she was soon hired by WINGS to cook for tour groups, producing popular meals on a single burner stove (later upgraded to 4 burner) for 20 people at a time, for 13 years."

About 10 years ago, Helen married Peter Cummins. She met Peter by chance when he came to the US from his native England for a nephew's wedding and took a side tour to Montana and Wyoming to fit in a little birding. They both taught a field course in bird identification to Rocky Mountain College students until COVID interrupted.



Eared Grebe (photo by John Kendall, Flickr CC)



Helen Carlson Cummins 2007

Where do Peter and Helen like to go birding these days? Often, they make a big loop on the country roads heading southwest to Laurel, then along the Yellowstone to Columbus as far as Holmgren, then north toward Rapelje and back to Billings by way of Big Lake. This is the same route they use to monitor osprey nests during the Spring.

Helen and Peter keep meticulous lists of all the birds they see and have trip lists and annual lists going back 50 years.

Helen celebrates her 100th birthday on December 29, 2023.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY HELEN!



Sandhill Cranes over Rosebud - Photo by Bruce Waage

Nov 4 Yellowtail Dam Afterbay Trip: Journey and Destination

Three cars, with Stan Heath in the lead, headed east into the blinding sunrise down Old US 87 towards Hardin. We were lucky to have Raylene Wall among us, an outstanding birder from Grass Range who chronicled our trip on Ebird. Not a ranch or home in sight, just unending prairie dog towns. About 12 miles down the road, we spotted one Bald Eagle after another. We pulled over where a flock of ravens circled with the eagles and found three deer skeletons plus an assortment of high-heeled boots, only one of each pair. There were more questions than answers regarding both the boot scenario and the carcass dumping.

Stan provided raptor ID pointers on the way to Hardin. Every other utility pole contained a Red-tailed Hawk. We saw 2 Golden Eagles on this stretch.

The Afterbay was the expected water bird bonanza. Enthusiasm was only tempered by the wind that both birders and ducks tried to escape. A Snow Goose and 4 Cackling Geese among the Canadians, but no Ross's. Raylene documented 27 species at the Yellowtail Dam including Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Wigeons, Mallards, Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Redheads, Lesser Scaup, Buffleheads, Hooded Merganser, Common Goldeneye, a Pied-billed Grebe and Coot. We climbed down a trail into the shore of the reservoir near the Dam to look for the American Dipper, but had no luck.

After stopping at a few irrigation ditches in the fading afternoon, Stan asked if we wanted to go back to Billings the long way or the short way, so of course we chose the scenic route on Highway 91, flushing 19 Sharp-tailed Grouse in the twilight, a lifer for me.



Submitted by Kristin Neva

Sharp-tailed Grouse by Raylene Wall

Montana Audubon Center Events

Nature Nuts Preschool Program: Every Tuesday 10 - 11am

Nature exploration comes naturally, especially for kids! Children ages 1 to 4 (and an accompanying adult) join our teacher naturalists for guided outdoor play and learning about nature in Billings and beyond.

Suggested donation \$5/child or free for MAC members

Advance registration is required - visit www.mtaudubon.org/center/familyprograms/

New Moon Night Hike: Friday, Jan 12, 2024 6:30pm-8pm

Discover the mystery and magic of the outdoors at night under the New Moon. During this unique guided experience, we'll tap into our own sensory awareness and mindfulness as we experiment with our ability to navigate in the darkness. We'll also discuss how different types of animals have adapted to thrive at night.

Wear warm layers, bring a flashlight and walking shoes.

\$10/person for Non Members, \$5/person for Members, Free for children <12

Advance registration is requested - visit mtaudubon.org/center/adultprograms/workshopsclasses/

*Submitted by Rebecca Mathias
Community Programs Coordinator
(406) 294-5099 (Office)
rmathias@mtaudubon.org*



Chirps and Tweets



- ◆ Bob Landis gave an outstanding show of his most recent wildlife videos in the Dec 18 program attended by over 100 people.
- ◆ Christmas Bird Count and Feeder Watch were carried out on Dec 16 by dozens of volunteers under the experienced leadership of Jerry and Lois Dalton. YVAS has been carrying out the annual survey of birds and reporting to National Audubon for 80 years.
- ◆ The YVAS Board awarded the Billings student Isaac Augustine a conservation grant of \$1000 to build a Barn Swallow nesting structure in Rose Park. The project has been sanctioned by Parks and Rec.
- ◆ Board member Steve McConnell spoke in a Dec 12 program on Urban Forestry organized by the Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council and gave details on the \$1 million grant received by Billings to plant trees on city streets to improve green infrastructure. The grants will also help establish an Urban Forestry Management Plan for the city.
- ◆ Bird trip leader and former YVAS President, **Ruth Vanderhorst**, has asked us to publish her phone number **406-371-5957**, since she is temporarily without email service after a problem with her computer. If you are trying to get in touch with Ruth, please call her.



Dec 16 YVAS Christmas Bird Count - Photo by Tom Turley

Rare Day at 48th St Pond

Late morning of November 12th I walked into 48th St Pond from the East to see what waterfowl might be there. Two weeks earlier during a cold snap about half of the pond complex was frozen, but today no ice remains.

The water from the 48th street pond is being pumped into the Shiloh Conservation Area and the main lake is being drawn down, exposing a rather large mudflat. As I drew closer, I noticed a lot of shorebird activity. I expected the regulars such as Killdeer and if I was lucky, Greater Yellowlegs. Killdeer were plentiful as I saw a dozen and as many Greater Yellowlegs. The yellowlegs are late migrants but to see them in numbers was delightful. I then spied a bird that looked as if it might be an American Golden-Plover or a Black-bellied Plover in its non-breeding plumage.

Checking the field marks closely I was about 90 percent certain that it was a Golden Plover. The confirmation came when it raised its wing and there was no black axillary mark, which its chunkier, black-bellied cousin has. To my surprise, the mudflat also had a Pectoral Sandpiper, about one-half dozen Long-billed Dowitchers and a handful of Wilson Snipe.



American Golden-Plover by Jan Thom
12 Nov 2023, Macaulay Library (ML611068382)

Then I encountered a shorebird whose ID baffled me. I was torn between a Dunlin and a Stilt Sandpiper. Their winter plumage is similar as well as their bill size and head shape. Since I had seen a Dunlin only once before in Montana, I thought this rare bird could not be a Dunlin. So, I went home thinking it was a Stilt Sandpiper. The next day Jan Thom went there, saw the birds and texted me: "Are you sure you did not see a Dunlin?" I went back to the 48th St pond during my lunch hour with a good bird book and sure enough it was a Dunlin! Key points of difference: Dunlins have shorter, dark legs, while the Stilt Sandpipers have longer, light yellowish legs.

Had I been sitting on a chair while watching the shorebirds, I would have fallen off when I spied this wayward bird. It looked like an oversize Common Grackle with a tail a bit longer than its body. It was a Great-tailed Grackle feeding among the shorebirds. This bird was way out of his normal range in the Southwestern US and Mexico! More blackbird drama ensued as a flock of 7 Rusty Blackbirds flew down onto the mudflats.

Here is some context for these rarities: In 40-plus Montana birding years, this was my 3rd time seeing Rusty Blackbirds and American Golden Plover. And it was my second time seeing a Dunlin and Great-tailed Grackle.

Submitted by Mike Weber



Dunlin by Jan Thom 13 Nov 2023
Macaulay Library (ML 611100977)

Record late and early Migrant sightings

Montana Bird Advocacy has updated its list of record early and late dates for migrant birds in Montana. New records have been set for 17 species in 2023--four of these records were observations within sixty miles of Billings.

Record early dates include Forster's Tern reported by Jan Thom on April 17th, 2023 near Bridger and Western Sandpiper reported by Susan Hovde on April 22, 2023 at Big Lake.

Record late dates were contributed by Matt Cahill's report of Red-Eyed Vireo on October 28, 2023 near Hardin and Stan Heath's report of American Golden-Plover (*same individual seen by Mike Weber & Jan Thom above*) in Billings on November 16, 2023.

The complete updated list is available from Montana Bird Advocacy at <https://www.montanabirdadvocacy.org/>

Submitted by Ginny Waples and posted on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/yvaudubon>) on Dec 6th.

YVAS MEETINGS & PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Next Board of Directors Meeting: Jan 8, 2024 —The YVAS meeting of the Board of Directors will be held from 4pm to 6pm. Board of Directors meetings are held the second Monday of the month. Board meetings are open to all members.

In-Person Program: Jan 15, 2024. Programs will be held on the third Monday of the month at the Mayflower Church on the corner of Rehberg Lane and Poly Drive in Billings. Doors open at 6:30 for coffee and cookies; the program begins at 7:00 pm.

Board of Directors

President: Open – Contact any Board Member
 Vice President: Vacant
 Secretary: Sue Weinreis 406-855-4181
 granpeak47@gmail.com
 Treasurer: Pam Pipal 406-245-4517 ppipal@charter.net

Board Members

Carolyn Jones 406-670-4449 carolyn684@gmail.com
 Steve McConnell 509-868-8277 mcconnells@billingsmt.gov
 Kristin Neva 406-672-8912 ksneva@gmail.com
 Deb Regele 406-200-7873 debregele@gmail.com
 Bruce Waage 406-698-3126 bruce.waage@outlook.com

Committees and Assignments

Christmas Bird Count: Jerry Dalton 406-656-3656
 jerrydalton96@gmail.com
 Facebook: Ginny Waples 406-850-1056
 waplesv@gmail.com
 Field Trip Chair: Carolyn Jones 406-670-4449
 carolyn684@gmail.com
 Flyer Editor: Kristin Neva 406-672-8912
 yvasflyer@gmail.com

(Committees, continued)

Injured Raptors: Montana Raptor Conservation
 Center 406-585-1211
 Injured Waterfowl: WJH Bird Resources 406-652-
 7175 wjhbird@yahoo.com
 Membership Data: Deb Regele 406-200-7873
 debregele@gmail.com
 Mt Bluebird Habitat Project: Carolyn Jones 406-670-4449
 carolyn684@gmail.com
 Sue Weinreis 406-855-4181
 granpeak47@gmail.com
 Osprey Nest Monitor Coord: Deb Regele 406-200-7873
 debregele@gmail.com
 Osprey Research Coord: Marco Restani 460-425-2608
 restani@stcloudstate.edu
 Program Committee: YVAS Board of Directors
 Publicity: YVAS Board of Directors
 Recycling (aluminum): Larry Handsaker 406-855-
 9832 or 918 Ave C, Billings
 Recycling (baling twine): Deb Regele 406-200-7873
 debregele@gmail.com
 Website: Deb Regele 406-200-7873
 debregele@gmail.com

Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society
 Application for New & Renewal Membership



Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization. Our federal tax ID number is 51-0206955.

Please enroll me as a supporting member of Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society. I understand I will be supporting local Chapter activities and receiving the local newsletter. I will enjoy full family Chapter benefits.

Make check payable to **Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society** for \$25. If applying for a new or renewing student membership, make check for \$15 and indicate academic affiliation.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Email _____

Do you want to receive the YVAS Flyer electronically?
 ___ YES ___ NO

Send this application and your check to:

Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society
 P.O. Box 1075
 Billings, MT 59103-1075



**YELLOWSTONE VALLEY
AUDUBON FLYER**
P.O. Box 1075
Billings, MT 59103-1075
RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

**Non-Profit Organization
PRST STD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BILLINGS, MT
PERMIT NO. 27**

*** Membership Updates ***

In an effort to keep our members advised of their membership status, names of those with expiring or recently expired memberships will be printed at the back of each Flyer. A renewal reminder card is also sent either by email or USPS. YVAS now has a 60-day grace period for renewals.

YVAS is affiliated with the National Audubon Society. We do not share your membership information including your address, phone or email address with any other organization.

If you have any questions regarding your membership, please contact the Membership Administrator at:
YVAS.membership.data@gmail.com.



Expired or expiring memberships:

November 2023 - Jim Snyder

December 2023 - Mary Fitzpatrick, Kari Longshore, Leslie Marty, Linda Pickard, Barb Pitman,
Sherlene Robison-O'Dea, Pat Sweeney & Teresa Erickson

Memberships coming up for renewal:

January 2024 - Jerry & Lois Dalton, Michael Downing, Tom Erskine, Catherine Frazer, Kraig Greenfield, Larry & Janice Handsaker, Jim & Lilian Hartung, Karen Heil, Carolyn Jones, Aiko Kawano, William & Bonnie McIntire, Pam Pipal, Lisa Ranallo, Jim & Jean Sells, Gail Speck, Mike Weber

February 2024 - Will Crain, Barbara Garrett, John & Carol McNeal, Larry Newell & Marlene Pirtz, Charles Paris, Sarah Stockburger