

*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.*

FEB 2024

VOLUME 54, NUMBER 2

## WHY GRASSLANDS? AN EXPLORATION OF THE ECOLOGY AND CONSERVATION OF IMPERILED LANDS



John Carlson

John Carlson is the Regional Grassland Conservation Coordinator for the US Fish and Wildlife Service Prairie and Mountain Region based in Billings, MT. He was formerly the Branch Chief for Resources and Sage-Grouse Implementation Lead for Montana/Dakotas Bureau of Land Management in Billings. Other relevant positions he has had include Wildlife Biologist with the BLM in Glasgow, MT and the Zoology Program Manager at the Montana Natural Heritage Program in Helena. Additional irrelevant positions include bread store worker, fence builder, and snow shoveler at an Antarctic base. John obtained his BA in Zoology from the University of Montana and MS in Zoology and Physiology from the University of Wyoming.

He was born and raised in northeastern Montana and has had a strong interest in wildlife in general and birds specifically for as long as he can remember. His life in Billings intersects with his boys Benton and Crean, Quill the Flat-coated Retriever, and his wife Laura.

Five years ago, YVAS was fortunate to have John speak at a program centered on his travels and bird photographs. This February, his talk will focus on the urgent questions related to grasslands and wildlife conservation.

Join us on **Monday, February 19th** for the YVAS Program held at the Mayflower Church on the corner of Poly and Rehberg Lane, when John Carlson will provide answers to the question of “why grasslands?”

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.

*Submitted by Bruce Waage*



Sprague's Pipit by John Carlson

Keep up with YVAS news on our [Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/yvaudubon) and [Website](https://yvaudubon.org/)

<https://www.facebook.com/yvaudubon>

<https://yvaudubon.org/>



## Chirps and Tweets



- ◆ The results of Yellowstone Valley Audubon's 2024 Christmas Bird Count can be found on our website under Birding. The bird tallies go back to 1973. Check it out! <https://yvaudubon.org/christmas-bird-count-2/>
- ◆ The January 15th YVAS program by BLM botanist Wendy Velman focused on Seeds of Success, a national native seed collection program for research, germplasm conservation, and ecosystem restoration. If you want to review her presentation, or dig deeper into a topic, you can take advantage of her online resources now posted at the YVAS website. <https://yvaudubon.org/>
- ◆ The **2024 YVAS birding field trip calendar is out!** Thanks to Carolyn Jones and our dedicated trip leaders for making the field trips possible. The list of locations and leaders is posted on our website right [HERE](#), and of course it is included in this issue of the February Flyer.
- ◆ Rebecca Mathias is joining the YVAS Board of Directors. She brings a wealth of experience to this role from her work with the Montana Audubon Center as Community Programs Coordinator and Teacher Naturalist.
- ◆ The Board of Directors is looking for volunteers to make cookies for our upcoming programs. If you would like to volunteer, contact Deb at [debregele@gmail.com](mailto:debregele@gmail.com) or 406-200-7873.
- ◆ Helen Carlson Cummins would like to thank all YVAS members for the cards and good wishes sent on the occasion of her 100th birthday. They were very much appreciated!



Eagle Count along the Yellowstone by Ginny Waples

## Montana Audubon Center Events

Register in advance for all events at <https://mtaudubon.org/center/>

**Nature Nuts Preschool Program:** Tuesdays 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/](http://www.mtaudubon.org/center/familyprograms/)

**New Moon Night Hike:** Friday, Feb 9, 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 required

**Owl Prowl:** Friday, Feb 23 from 6:30pm-8pm

We'll talk about the different species of owls that live in the area, and go for a hike to look and listen for them. Please wear warm layers and boots (our trails may be muddy, snowy or icy!) for our search for these winged marvels. Suggested donation \$5/Member, \$10/Non-Member, Free for children <12 (must be accompanied by an adult.) Advance registration is required.

**The Language of Love with poet Anne Holub-** Saturday, Feb 10, 2024 from 3pm-5pm (*Adults 21+*)

Join us for this fun writing event -- combined with a food and wine tasting -- the weekend before Valentine's Day. We'll read a few classic and modern takes on love poems and discuss what makes them so special. We'll cap off the event with a complimentary red wine sampling and food pairing. Advanced registration is required.

\$15/person for Members/\$20/person for NonMembers  
\$25/couple for Members/\$35/couple for NonMembers

*Rebecca Mathias*  
Community Programs Coordinator  
(406) 294-5099 (Office)  
[rmathias@mtaudubon.org](mailto:rmathias@mtaudubon.org)

## Openings for New Osprey Nest Monitors

About this time every year, YVAS birders naturally begin thinking and planning for spring migration, whether it's watching eBird's migration maps or planning which birding trips to join.

About this time every year, many of YVAS' Osprey nest monitors will be watching the rivers for 2024's first Ospreys to pass through or even claim their nest. The "prized" bonus is when the adult osprey has a green band on its leg indicating it has been banded along the Yellowstone River in accordance with YVAS' Osprey Nest Monitoring Project.

AND about this time very year, YVAS opens its training to new nest monitors for the upcoming spring and summer work. If you are interested in observing and recording data at Osprey nests from April through August, there will be an Osprey Orientation program in March in Billings and in Livingston. It is required for all new nest monitors and encouraged for returning monitors. For more information on becoming a nest monitor, call Deb at 406-200-7873.

*Submitted by Deb Regele*

## Banded Paradise Valley Osprey found in Clearwater Florida!

Six-year-old 04/H, one of the ospreys banded by Dr. Marco Restani in the osprey nest monitoring project along the Yellowstone River in Montana, was recently found stuck on a condo balcony on Florida's Gulf coast. The full story is reported with a photos and maps on the [YVAS Facebook page](#). Personnel from the Seaside Seabird Sanctuary, shown in the photo examining the osprey, are checking his physical condition before release.



## New Year's Afterbay Trip

Our group of 9 birders led by Brian Henderson left Rocky at 8am on January 1st to travel to the Yellowtail Dam Afterbay. We took a leisurely drive on Old Hardin Road where we spotted a number of raptors. Several Ferruginous Hawks posed and flew for us giving nice views of "windows on the wings" and the long gape from beak tip to under the eye. We also saw Rough-legged Hawks and some of us got good views of the black carpal patches on the underside of the wings. Thank you, Brian, for pointing out these identifying marks.

As we headed toward the Afterbay, we saw numerous immature Red-tailed Hawks both flying and perching. I'm not sure we even got a good count, there were so many!

Finally, the Afterbay. There were probably tens of thousands of birds! The best moment for me was finally getting to see a Cackling Goose near a Canada Goose for comparison. The size difference was obvious in that situation, but the much smaller Cackling beak was also a good identifier. Two Snow Geese were spotted, one white morph, one black. Some of the group spent quite some time trying to get a good view of what was "maybe" a Ross's Goose sleeping across the bay from us. When it finally decided to wake up and raise its head, the yellow beak gave us the answer: a domestic goose hanging with his wild buddies! After that wild goose chase it was time to head home. Lucky for us, the weather was unusually mild.

*Submitted by Carolyn Jones*



## Why count eagles every year?



Brian Henderson scanning for eagles on the Yellowstone River - by Ginny Waples

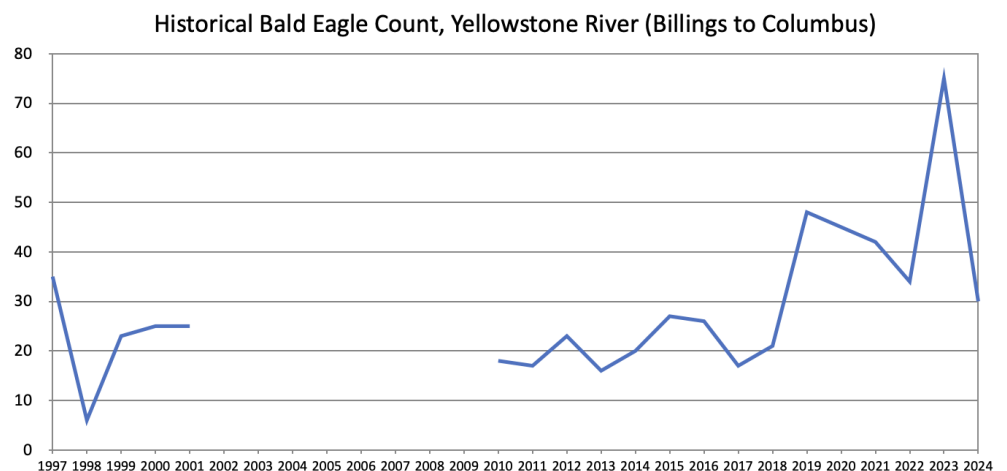
January 2024 marks the 45th year of the nationwide Midwinter Bald Eagle Survey that was begun by the National Wildlife Federation in 1979. Government agencies now oversee the survey, which also involves volunteer groups such as YVAS.

In 1963, the Bald Eagle was nearing extinction, with only an estimated 417 breeding pairs remaining in the lower 48 states. Compare this number to the estimated 10,000 breeding pairs when the Bald Eagle became our national symbol in 1782!

DDT was banned in 1972, and by the time of the first NWF survey, the eagle population was beginning to recover. Annual surveys continue to monitor this recovery. By 2007, when the Bald Eagle was removed from the Endangered Species List, there were an estimated 9,789 breeding pairs. Current threats to eagle numbers include climate change and lead poisoning from scavenged game meat.

This year's annual eagle survey was conducted on January 6, 2024. We counted 30 Bald Eagles (17 adults, 13 immature) and 1 Golden Eagle along the Yellowstone River valley from Billings to Columbus. Last year's count of 75 eagles was exceptional but was aided by the presence of several carcasses that attracted numerous eagles, ravens, magpies, etc! This year's total is a fairly typical number based on the attached chart of historical results. The gap in the data highlights the importance of continuing the survey.

*Submitted by Brian Henderson  
and Ginny Waples*





## Rehabilitation Success

On Nov 22, 2022, a hunter reported to us at Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks that a golden eagle was stuck in a fence near Acton. When we arrived after dark, we located her via spotlight alongside the road and she was not entangled in the fence. She did not put up much resistance when my volunteer Jerry Krause and I approached and captured her, using only a blanket.

While transporting her to the next leg of her journey, she began making sounds almost like a quacking duck. I realized it was her breathing and I didn't have much hope she would make it through the night.

The next morning, she was still hanging in and was transported to the Montana Raptor Conservation Center (MRCC) in Bozeman. She was diagnosed with lead poisoning and began treatment at MRCC.

After 83 days in rehab, FOUR rounds of chelation to remove the lead from her system and over a 2.5 lb. weight gain, we were able to pick her up in Bozeman and release her at the location we had picked her up on Ballard Ivie Road. We were unsure if this was her nest, as she was picked up in November, but shortly after we released her, on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023, she landed in the nest.

It would be great to get some reports if any bands are observed on the right leg of a golden eagle in this vicinity, going forward.

Please contact Megan O'Reilly at [moreilly@mt.gov](mailto:moreilly@mt.gov), 406-794-6154 if you see a banded golden at this location or observed a banded golden this past breeding season. As always, thanks for all your help and collaboration!

*Submitted by Megan O'Reilly*

Photos by Megan O'Reilly starting with capture of the eagle on 11/25/22, followed by MRCC rehab, transport, release and return to nest on 2/17/23.





## Christmas Count at Four Dances and Pictograph Caves

It was a brisk winter morning at Four Dances Recreation Area, we stood behind trees to shelter ourselves from the biting wind as we waited for our fellow birders. Binoculars in hand and bundled up from head to toe, we walked up the trail in search of those brave winter birds. We spotted a few juncos that flitted into a fluffy pine tree and there was a great debate over which type of juncos they were. It was settled that there were two species present, and we moved forward towards the river to survey for raptors in between the rock formations. We found a few birds of prey

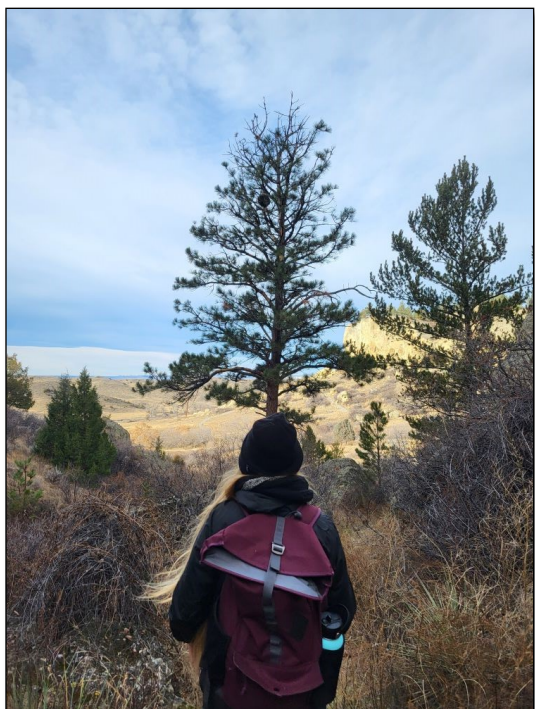
and some songbirds, but it was looking slim as far as overall numbers by the time we left Four Dances for Pictograph Caves State Park. It was a little livelier around Pictograph Caves, and I'm not just talking in terms of bird activity. There were lots of signs of rabbits, including a dead one in between the rocks, as well as chew marks on the shrubs and trees: a sure sign of porcupine activity. As we walked up the narrow trail, we heard a few small birds in the giant pines and junipers. Some of us ventured upwards onto a rock cliff with a bird's eye view of the gulch below. Binoculars glued to faces as we scanned the area for more birds when one person yelled, "there's a porcupine sleeping in that pine tree!"

We all scrambled up for a better look at this elusive creature. It was curled up, high in a giant pine tree, sleeping hard even as the wind swayed the branch left to right. It didn't move the entire time we watched it and it didn't seem bothered by the whipping winds or the unexpected observers. That porcupine sighting was a highlight for all of us and we ended our day with a group of Pinyon Jays that made this Christmas bird count a truly memorable one.

*Photos and story by Becca Mathias*



Pictograph Caves



Porcupine sighting!



MAC birding crew selfie

## YVAS MEETINGS &amp; PUBLIC PROGRAMS

**Next Board of Directors Meeting:** Feb 12, 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:** Feb 19, 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  
 Rebecca Mathias (419) 618-3537  
 rebecca.a.mathias@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

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**\*\*\* 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.

Your memberships help to provide for speakers at YVAS monthly meetings, the YVAS newsletter the *Flyer*, bird studies and conservation efforts. 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.



**Memberships up for renewal at the end of February:** Will Crain, Barbara Garrett, John & Carol McNeal, Larry Newell & Marlene Pirtz, Charles Paris, Sarah Stockburger

**Expired memberships within the '60-day Grace Period':** Kraig Greenfield (January), Larry & Janice Handsaker (January), Jim & Lilian Hartung (January), Karen Heil (January), Lisa Ranallo (January), Jim & Jean Sells (January), Mike Weber (January), Kari Longshore (December), Pat Sweeney & Teresa Erickson (December).

If you have any questions regarding your membership, please contact the Membership Administrator (Deb) at [YVAS.membership.data@gmail.com](mailto:YVAS.membership.data@gmail.com) or 406-200-7873.