



# YELLOWSTONE VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

- FROM THE PRAIRIES TO THE PEAKS.

*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.*

MAR 2026

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## Spring Inspiration for Sustainable Gardens



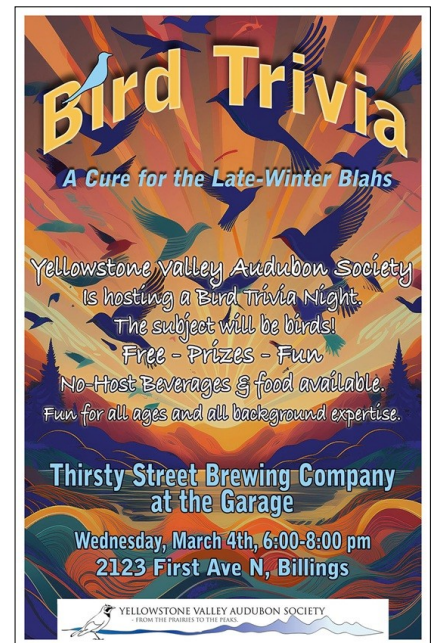
Zoe Craft of Billings NRCS

Zoe Craft works as the District Conservationist for Yellowstone County Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). She works with landowners, farmers, ranchers, and land managers around Yellowstone County to deliver technical assistance as well as financial assistance through NRCS's conservation programs. Zoe is a graduate from the University of Wyoming with B.S. in Energy Resource Management and Environment & Natural Resources, with minors in Soil Science and Reclamation and Restoration Ecology. She is passionate about soil and working with folks to help them get connected to resources. She also enjoys working with the upcoming generation to get them exposed to the agriculture that surrounds them here in the county and has hosted a 'Soil Your Undies' event alongside the Billings Public Library's summer reading program for the past two summers.

*Submitted by Bruce Waage*

Join Zoe Craft, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 7PM at the Mayflower Church, as she discusses small scale conservation in our urban settings, minimizing disturbance in gardening, season extension options, how to design pollinator plantings, resources available, and more assistance that NRCS can provide for anyone who is interested!

This past year, the Billings NRCS field office partnered with other local organizations to host the first Pollinator Fair: a pollinator-themed event to showcase resources in the community and provide outreach to the public. This year's fair is planned for June 20, 2026, in Pioneer Park, and we are hoping that the event continues to grow.



YVAS programs are free and open to the public, held on the third Monday of the month at the Mayflower Church on Poly and Rehberg Lane. A social with coffee and cookies begins at 6:30 PM; the program begins at 7 PM.

VISIT THE YVAS WEBSITE [YVAUDUBON.ORG](http://YVAUDUBON.ORG) OR [FACEBOOK.COM/YVAUDUBON](https://FACEBOOK.COM/YVAUDUBON)

## YVAS Events Coming Up!

### Programs

**Monday, March 16: Zoe Craft, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service**

Zoe Craft is a Soil Conservationist who will speak on planting gardens and other practical applications for pollinators.

**Monday, April 20: John Carlson, The Nature Conservancy**

John Carlson brings long experience in grassland and sagebrush conservation. He also has a parallel career as a Polar seabird biologist, nature tour guide and wildlife photographer.

### Bird Trivia Night

YVAS is hosting Trivia Night at Thirsty Street Microbrewery (aka The Garage Pub) on Wednesday, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 6:00-8:00 pm and the subject will be birds! It's free, there are prizes, and, best of all, it's fun.

### Birding Field Trips

**Sun March 29<sup>th</sup>** Mike Weber will lead a trip to Big Lake to view migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. Starting from Rocky at 8AM.

**Sat April 11<sup>th</sup>** Stan Heath and Susan Hovde will lead a trip into the Pryors, "Search for the Sagebrush Sparrow." Starting from Bridger at 7:30AM.

### Osprey Orientation

Dr. Marco Restani will lead the annual Osprey Orientation programs for new and returning Osprey nest monitors. Saturday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, in the Community Room on the first floor of the Billings Public Library at 1:00 p.m. And Saturday, March 28<sup>th</sup>, at the Livingston-Park County Public Library at 1:15 p.m. (More info on page 6.)

## From Montana Audubon: Wings Across the Big Sky Festival

wings across the big sky

2026

Presented by  GLACIER BANK



Mark your calendars and join us this summer in Kalispell, **June 12 -14, 2026**, for the Wings Across the Big Sky Festival! Both Montana Audubon and Flathead Audubon Society are celebrating 50 years, so we've been hard at work putting together a birding festival to commemorate the incredible history of both organizations.

Field trips will visit locations in the greater Kalispell area, including local conservation areas, state parks, and private properties under conservation easements not normally accessible to the public. Special trips will focus on birds and native plants and bird photography, or get your exercise in as you bike and bird Going to the Sun Road in Glacier National Park!

Registration brochures will be mailed out in the coming months, and registration will open in March 2026.

*Submitted by Lauren Smith  
Montana Audubon*

*Learn more about the Pollinator Fair from Zoe Craft in the March 16 YVAS Program.*

# POLLINATOR FAIR

**FAMILY FUN EDUCATIONAL EVENT**  
Join us for an immersive and hands-on event, celebrating the importance of pollinators.

**ACTIVITIES:**

- Activity Booths
- Games
- Face Painting
- Inflatable Obstacle Course
- Food Trucks

**ENTRY FEE FREE!**

**EVENT DETAILS**  
**20 JUNE 2026**  
**11AM - 3PM**  
PIONEER PARK, BILLINGS MT

## Montana Audubon Center Events

Learn more about these and other activities on our website: [mtaudubon.org/center](https://mtaudubon.org/center)

**Nature Nuts:** Every Tues, 10-11 am (Children ages 1-4 with accompanying adult.) Register in advance.

**Morning Bird Stroll:** Sat, Mar 14th 8:30 - 10:00am - great for beginning birders!

**Weekend Wonders Family Program-** Sat, Mar 14th, 10:30 am - 12 pm

**Native Plant Symposium March 28 in the Public Library**

9:30 am - 1:30 pm. \$20 per ticket

Discover meaningful ways to make a difference for native plants at this year's Native Plant Symposium! Building on a legacy of community engagement and expert-led learning since 2016, our symposium offers an inspiring platform to explore the dynamic world of native plants and their vital role in our local ecosystems.

This year, our focus is on retelling the memories, knowledge and experience of those who came before us, and using this to shape the future of our Montana landscape.

Produced in collaboration with local Billings organizations, businesses, and community members, the Native Plant Symposium is your gateway to creating natural, wildlife-friendly spaces while fostering a closer connection with the environment. Whether you're a seasoned gardener, a budding naturalist, or simply curious about how you can help conserve native plants, join us for an engaging day of learning, inspiration, and community stewardship.

Schedule, presenters and resources may be found on the website: **Native Plant Symposium 2026.**

<https://sites.google.com/mtaudubon.org/nativeplantsymposium2026/schedule-of-events>

*Submitted by Emily Chilcoat  
Montana Audubon Center Director*



The Bird Wild Festival is not associated with YVAS or National Audubon, but we are providing information about this event that may be of interest to our members and community.



## Jackson Hole Birding Festival: Bird Wild

**Wed. May 27 – Sat. May 30, 2026**

Center for the Arts, 240 S. Glenwood, Jackson,  
Wyoming

Event link: <https://www.jacksonholebirdingfestival.com/>

What: Birding, wildlife and nature festival for all ages and abilities

Description:

Experience the iconic American West at the Jackson Hole Birding Festival! Explore the beauty of the wild Jackson Hole valley and the stunning biodiversity of the Greater Yellowstone region, rich in public lands, adventure, and more than 300 bird species. Join us for an unforgettable wildlife experience amid the spectacular Teton Mountains. Choose from 30+ unique tours and experiences by day, hear fascinating presentations about bird and wildlife science and conservation work by night, and explore the dynamic community of Jackson, Wyoming.

Speakers include Denver Holt, of the Owl Research Institute, author and photographer Paul Bannick on woodpeckers, and Lisa Marie Ansell Frazier of the Buffalo Youth Nation Project.

Registration opened Jan. 15 at <https://www.jacksonholebirdingfestival.com/>

Presented by [Wild Excellence Films](#)

## Meet the YVAS Board of Directors

### Where are you from and what is/was your profession?

I was born on a dairy farm in Dickinson ND where we spent a lot of time outside. Now retired, most of my jobs were in the customer service field where I managed the order/shipping departments for manufacturers and distributors.

### What bird hooked you into birding?

I have always loved ducks and other waterfowl. What is not to like about birds that sit still and let you observe them? Ornithology with Norm Schoenthal at EMC was all I needed to set me on the birding path.

### What is your favorite Montana bird species?

I love the Ruddy Duck. They are so comical with their blue bill and stiff tail. I chuckle every time I see one.

### What is a conservation topic you are most excited about right now?

Climate change and the droughts that result are a big one for me. What happens when there are no longer any filled potholes in the spring, or the reservoirs have gone dry? I am also really interested in invertebrates and our use of pesticides that are contributing to their decline.

### What is your funniest, most interesting, or favorite piece of Wildlife/Bird Trivia?

Once, while walking around a small lake at a Bird Refuge outside of Salem OR, we heard a drumming sound very close to us. It was the weirdest sound and at first, I thought it must be a bullfrog. Suddenly, a large brown bird took flight and flew a short distance away into some cattails. It continued its drumming sound, and another answered. Thankfully, it stood still, and we were able to identify it as a Bittern. It was a very magical moment for me, and I haven't seen one since.

### What do you like best about YVAS?

I love getting together with members who share an interest in birds and their environment. And I especially love that Audubon is interested in conserving habitat for birds and other animals. I must admit that I am a very casual birdwatcher, rarely keeping a list. But I love all birds and the environment they live in.

### Where is your favorite spot to go birding?

Any place there is water. Big Lake in the spring is always special. And I am never disappointed by the Broadview Pond. Such a small body of water but usually so much to see!

*Submitted by Sue Weinreis*



Kris Decker joined the YVAS Board in Nov 2024



Ruddy Duck photo courtesy of the Maryland Zoo, Baltimore



American Bittern Photo by Greg Drawbaugh  
ML57213441

## ¡HOLA—It's the Bird of the Year!



Horned Lark, Pryors, April 4, 2024 / Ginny Waples

Every January the American Birding Association reveals their Bird of the Year with great fanfare to spotlight conservation challenges facing birds. Their 2026 choice has special significance for the Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society because the ABA's highlighted bird is the bird we chose for our logo--the Horned Lark.

"From the Beartooth Mountains to the prairies of Eastern Montana" describes the focus area of YVAS. The scientific name for our logo bird is *Ermophila alpestris*. *Ermophila*, from Greek, means "desert-loving" and *alpestris* is Latin for "of the high mountains." It's clear why YVAS chose the Horned Lark. The American Birding Association is celebrating the Horned Lark for being so widespread that it is found on five continents, but ABA warns that the species is threatened by habitat loss. The HOLA is designated "a common bird in steep decline" at All About Birds.

Horned Larks need open habitats with lots of bare ground. They avoid forests, tall grasses, and dense shrubbery while thriving in shortgrass prairies, arid shrublands, and alpine tundra. In our area, they breed in locations as seemingly diverse as the dry land below the Pryor Mountains and the high country of the Beartooth Plateau. In other parts of the world, you might find Horned Larks on beaches and dunes.

The Western Meadowlark, despite its status as Montana's state bird, heads south for winter, while the Horned Lark, a resident or short-distance migrant, can be found year round in Montana, especially east of the Divide. Horned Larks show up for the Christmas Bird Count in state-wide totals ranging from hundreds to

thousands (averaging 2,500). The CBC count at Chester alone managed to log a record 3,912 larks on December 16, 2006! (*Birds of Montana*).

About the meadowlark...for all its melodious loveliness, it is not a true lark, but rather an Icterid, most closely related to blackbirds, orioles, and grackles. The **Horned Lark** is the only true lark native to the New World.

It is the male of the Horned Lark species who sports the devilish little "horns" of feather tufts that can be raised and lowered. The drabber-looking female is camouflaged for nesting on bare ground where she will find a natural depression or excavate a cavity in which to lay eggs. Horned Larks spend a lot of time on the ground; young larks can run a couple of weeks before they can fly. HOLAs are monogamous and territorial in summer, and then after breeding season, become social and join flocks which sometimes include Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs.

EBird's map of Horned Lark reports shows thick clusters of observations on the west side of the Pryors, along the Beartooth Highway, and on the backroads to Big Lake, as well as a good supply of reports along rural roads in all directions from Billings. But even in town, it is possible to find a Horned Lark when it is not breeding season. EBirders have reported larks in Billings locations including on the Rimrocks along Highway 3, Dover Park, Shiloh Conservation Area, the 48<sup>th</sup> Street gravel pit, etc.

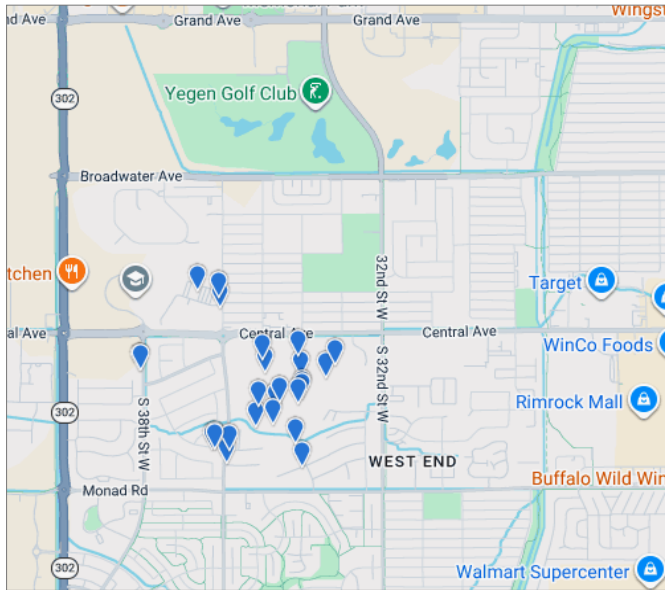
My curiosity was piqued by a cluster of a couple-dozen reports spanning the years 2017 to 2025, all coming from an area just west of 32<sup>nd</sup> Street between Central and Monad Roads.

There is still an agricultural field at this location, surrounded by Billings's commercial and housing growth. All of the reports from this site were by a single person—Mike Weber. I asked Mike if he could tell me more about how he found so many larks here. For starters, Horned Lark reporting has been aided by Mike's two black labs, who expect frequent walks and Mike often eBirds while dog-walking at the field.

Mike shared observations about this micro-habitat: "I have noticed that March seems to be the time when Horned Larks will be moving through and I will flush them from the field. Or I will hear them fly over in the fall as they have a very diagnostic call note. They don't breed there, but every summer I have Lark Sparrows and Savannah Sparrows breeding there. (*HOLA cont. p.6*)

*(HOLA cont.)*

About 3 summers ago I had Grasshopper Sparrows breed there. I have flushed Snow Buntings on a couple occasions when it was still dark and there was a lot of snow in the field. It helps to have a pair of black labs that need a lot of exercise. There are probably more Horned Larks there in the fall and spring than I actually eBird.”



Horned Lark sightings at a field within Billings recorded in eBird

How best to celebrate the Bird of the Year? Get outside and enjoy searching for them!

Pro tip from Mike: “By mid-March Horned Larks will be hovering high in the air singing a pretty jumbled, high-pitched song. I do a breeding bird survey that starts near Big Lake and winds west and a lot of my Horned Larks I record are singing birds. On the BBS route there is an area where there are a lot of fallow stubble fields and these places are typically devoid of much bird life, but I always get Horned Larks at these stops as they love short grass and open ground.”

For a short (7-minute) and informative video about Horned Larks, see *This Tiny Bird Just Became Bird of the Year (Here's Why)* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_EF3aHBBBM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_EF3aHBBBM)

For more information about Horned Larks in Montana, see *Birds of Montana* by Jeffrey Marks, Paul Hendricks, and Daniel Casey (c2016).

If you want Bird of the Year merch including Horned Lark themed T-shirts and mugs from the American Birding Association, go to <https://www.aba.org/product-category/horned-lark-merch/>

*Submitted by Ginny Waples*

*In case you missed this article in February's Flyer, you are in luck and here it is again!*

## Osprey Nest Monitoring and Annual Osprey Orientation Program

YVAS is gearing up for the return migration of our Yellowstone River Ospreys. Whether you are interested in becoming a nest monitor or attending one of the Osprey Orientation Programs or just need more information, contact Deb Regele at [debregele@gmail.com](mailto:debregele@gmail.com) or 406-780-0810.

Dr. Marco Restani will be leading the annual Osprey Orientation programs for new and returning Osprey nest monitors. The first one will be Saturday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, in the Community Room on the first floor of the Billings Public Library at 1:00 p.m. The other will be Saturday, March 28<sup>th</sup>, at the Livingston-Park County Public Library at 1:15 p.m. The programs include the natural history of Ospreys as well as how to collect standardized data for the project. Please note that RSVPs are requested for the Programs.

The Orientation is required for new nest monitors and provides 'refresher' training for returning monitors. There are always new updates on Osprey statistics. YVAS has been monitoring Osprey nesting sites since 2010 and banding nestlings since 2012. Last year, Marco banded the 1,000<sup>th</sup> nestling near Reed Point! Now is the time to get involved!

*Submitted by Deb Regele*



Osprey pair just returned to occupy the nest  
Photo by Ginny Waples

YVAS MEETINGS & PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Next Board of Directors Meeting: Monday, March 9, 2026 —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: Monday, March 16, 2026. Programs are held on the third Monday of the month at the Mayflower Church on the corner of Rehberg Lane and Poly Drive in Billings. YVAS programs are free and open to the public. Doors open at 6:30 for coffee and cookies; the program begins at 7:00 pm.

Board of Directors

President: Open
Vice President: Open
Secretary: Sue Weinreis granpeak47@gmail.com
Treasurer: Pam Pipal ppipal@charter.net

Board Members

Kris Decker krisdecker4@gmail.com
Carolyn Jones carolyn684@gmail.com
Kristin Neva ksneva@gmail.com
Deb Regele debregele@gmail.com
Bruce Waage bruce.waage@outlook.com
Ginny Waples waplesv@gmail.com

Committees and Assignments

Christmas Bird Count: Jerry Dalton jerrydalton96@gmail.com
Facebook: Ginny Waples waplesv@gmail.com
Field Trip Chair: Carolyn Jones carolyn684@gmail.com
Flyer Editor: Kristin Neva yvasflyer@gmail.com

(Committees, continued)

Injured Raptors: Montana Raptor Conservation Center 406-585-1211
Membership Data Admin: Kris Decker YVAS.membership.data@gmail.com
Mt Bluebird Habitat Project: Carolyn Jones carolyn684@gmail.com, and Sue Weinreis granpeak47@gmail.com
Osprey Nest Monitor Coordinator: Deb Regele debregele@gmail.com
Osprey Research Coordinator: Marco Restani restani@stcloudstate.edu
Program Committee: YVAS Board of Directors
Publicity: YVAS Board of Directors
Recycling (aluminum): LarryHandsaker larryhandsaker@gmail.com; drop off at 918 Ave C, Billings
Website: Deb Regele 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 (YVAS). I understand I will be supporting local Chapter activities and receiving the YVAS newsletter. I will enjoy full family Chapter benefits.

- YVAS is affiliated with the National Audubon Society, but membership payments and benefits are independent.
• YVAS cooperates with the Montana Audubon Center in some projects, but membership is separate.

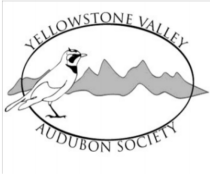
Make check payable to Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society for \$25. If applying for a new or renewing student membership, make check for \$15 and indicate academic affiliation.

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



In the winter, many Montanans are to be found in sunny Arizona where Bruce Waage photographed the Verdin, Vermillion Flycatcher, and Gambel's Quail posted above.

## Membership Updates



**January reminders:** Mike Weber.

**February renewals:** John & Carol McNeal, Larry Newell and Marlene Pirtz, Sarah Stockburger.

**March renewals:** Becky & Gregory Gill, Jim & Peggy Good, Claudia Janecek, Bob Mackin, Kathie & Steve Shandera.

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