

*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.*

**MAY 2026**

**VOLUME 56, NUMBER 4**

## The Yellowstone National Park Bird Program



Trumpeter Swans running on take-off Photo by David Haines

Yellowstone National Park's landscape is home to approximately 150 breeding bird species and supports many other species during seasonal passage through the region. The Yellowstone Bird Program monitors a suite of species and bird communities with some long-term data exceeding 90 years. Some of this data has identified species declines, the recovery of bald eagle and peregrine falcon from the negative effects of widespread DDT use, bird community responses to changes in the environment, and more. This talk will provide an overview of Yellowstone's Bird Program and highlight monitoring, research, and management for trumpeter swans, peregrine falcons, golden eagles, and willow songbird communities.

David Haines is a wildlife biologist with more than 20 years of experience studying birds and is currently Yellowstone National Park's Bird Program lead. David has a bachelor's degree from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo in ecology and systematic biology, and a master's degree from the University of Montana in wildlife biology. He has been affiliated with Yellowstone's bird program since 2011, first as part of the Yellowstone Raptor Initiative, a five-year program established to collect baseline demographic data on previously overlooked species in Yellowstone. At the University of Montana, David studied the breeding ecology and resource selection of golden eagles across Yellowstone's northern range.



David Haines banding a Western Tanager

Join us on Monday, May 18th at 7 PM for our next YVAS program featuring Daine Haines. Free and open to the public, the presentation will be held at the Mayflower Church on Poly and Rehberg Lane.

## YVAS Events Coming Up!

### Programs

**Monday, May 18: David Haines, Yellowstone National Park Biologist**

David Haines leads the Bird Program in Yellowstone monitoring a suite of species and bird communities in the park with some long-term data exceeding 90 years.



**Thursday, July 16: Andrea Orabona, Avian Biologist**, will speak about a research project studying the migration of Burrowing Owls. The program lead is Dr. Courtney Conway at USGS/ University of Idaho, and includes owl populations in Montana and Wyoming. See poster below.

### Birding Field Trips

We have 5 field trips coming up in May to satisfy every interest. Please note that the popular Stillwater River trip date was changed from May 30 to May 23rd.

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

## Migration of Western Burrowing Owls Across North America



**July 16, 2026**

Time: 7:00 PM

Location: Mayflower Congregational Church – Billings, Montana

Speaker: Andrea Orabona

### Join Us

Learn how biologists trap and track Burrowing Owls to identify their migration routes and wintering areas using satellite transmitters

### Sponsored By

YELLOWSTONE VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY  
<https://yvaudubon.org>

Burrowing Owl  
Photo: Ly Dang, Audubon Photography Awards

## Montana Audubon Center Events

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

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

**Morning Bird Stroll:** Saturday, May 9th 8:30 am to 10:00am. Great for beginning birders!

**Weekend Wonders Family Program-** Sat, May 9th, 10:30 am - 12 pm. Every month features a nature theme, an outdoor adventure, and a hands-on learning experience from an expert in their field.

**Amphifestival 2026:** Friday, May 8<sup>th</sup> 6:00 – 7:30pm

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the Montana Audubon Center will host a free Amphibian Education Night for all ages featuring family-friendly activities aimed at celebrating and learning about amphibians. Participants will have the opportunity to explore the unique characteristics of amphibians and discover the common threats they face. Attendees can enjoy educational games and create amphibian-themed crafts. There will also be prizes, snacks, and fun giveaways and herpetology hike tours around the property throughout the evening.

*Submitted by Emily Chilcoat  
Montana Audubon Center Director  
Office: (406) 294-5099*

## Listen and Learn (Quoth the Raven)



Raven photographed in Yellowstone National Park by Ginny Waples

Quite a few years ago I took ornithology from the infamous Professor Norm Schoenthal. He made the class so much fun that I repeated it several years later. We were given an assignment to observe a species of bird for about three months. Since ravens live above my house it was an easy choice.

I observed Mama raven talking to Baby who had lost courage after fledging and ended up at the base of the Rims. Mama talked Baby back up the rock face to the top --he climbed! Later in the season I heard the teenagers flying around calling each other names and daring each other to try crazy aerial maneuvers. All this time I was learning “raven talk” and a lot of the time I knew what was happening before I even saw the ravens.

Early this spring I heard a couple of ravens cruising and chatting with each other. Then I saw what looked like a white hawk (probably a Red-tailed Hawk) join them for a bit of congenial cruising above the Rims. Skip to the middle of April and I heard “danger” calls, so I got my binoculars out and saw the mom and dad ravens furiously “croaking” and chasing the white hawk who was obviously looking for a meal. I could tell from their voices what they were saying, and it wasn’t nice.

The take-away from this story is that there is more to bird watching than just “watching.” Listen and discover what the birds are saying.

*Submitted by Carolyn Jones*

## 10 FIELD TRIPS COMING UP!

\*Note that the Stillwater River trip originally scheduled for May 30 has been changed to May 23.

Contact CAROLYN JONES at [carolyn684@gmail.com](mailto:carolyn684@gmail.com) to be included on the **Bird Trip Notification List**. Alerts will be sent via email about any changes or impromptu trips, and participants can seek or offer carpooling.

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

Date	Day	Meeting Place & Time	Description	Leaders
May 9	SAT	8 AM Rocky/ BST parking lot	Broadview Ponds area	Carolyn Jones and Bill Morgan
May 17	SUN	8 AM Two Moon Park	Hike Two Moon	Mike Weber
*May 23	SAT	8 AM Itch-Kep-Pe Park, Columbus, near restrooms	Stillwater River/Woodbine area	Carolyn Jones
May 26	TUE	5 PM Parking area at the entrance to Riverfront	Riverfront evening stroll, bring mosquito repellent	Cathy Breeding
June 6	SAT	8 AM Itch-Kep-Pe Park, Columbus, near restrooms	Bridger Creek loop	Stan Heath and Susan Hovde
June 9	TUE	8:30 AM Red Lodge Town Pump	Red Lodge area	Stan Heath and Susan Hovde
June 13	SAT	7:30 AM Bridger park on US-310, end of town, with statue of Jim Bridger	Bear Canyon in the Pryor Mountains	Stan Heath and Susan Hovde
June 16	TUE	8 AM Bundy Bridge FA	Yellowstone WMA near Pompey’s Pillar	Megan O'Reilly/ Daniel Johnson
June 20	SAT	8 AM Love's Truck stop, Hwy 47 just off 190 Hardin	Grant's Marsh, Hardin	Megan O'Reilly/ Daniel Johnson
June 27	SAT	8:30 AM Bridger park on US-310, end of town, with statue of Jim Bridger	Sage Creek in the Pryor Mountains	Stan Heath and Susan Hovde

## Big Lake Bird Fix

Eighteen birders gathered on this rather mild early spring day, but I became concerned, as it was obvious that some participants were suffering from winter birding deficit disorder. And I was one of them. Upon reaching Molt, the pond north of the grain terminal was partially full, and 3 dozen Ring-billed Gulls fed in the shallows. Red-winged Blackbirds and Meadowlark songs echoed off the outbuildings. The trill of a singing Horned Lark rained from above as the bird hovered high overhead.



Horned Lark Photo by Ginny Waples

The next stop was along the road that takes you into the NE corner of Big Lake. To the west of the road is a meltwater pond that was almost bone-dry last fall but was brimming with snowmelt on this day. The pond is close enough to the road that all the birds can be easily identified with a spotting scope. With the midmorning sun on our backs, we feasted on the fine colors of the spring ducks. One of the handsomest ducks is the male Canvasback with its rich, chestnut-colored head and neck, black breast and contrasting white back and flanks and dark tail. Just one of these ducks is a showstopper. But we had hundreds. I stopped counting at 700 Canvasbacks, and I am sure there were more on part of the pond that was hidden by cattails. Another smart looker is the Green-winged Teal, 23 of these, tiny compared to their distant cousin the majestic Tundra Swans that were loafing about and we saw just over 2 dozen or so. On some of the Tundra Swans you could see the small yellow spot at the base of the bill.

Fifteen Snow Geese were sitting along the shoreline and nearby were as many Northern Pintails. A Bufflehead, Cackling Goose, Ring-necked Duck were spotted and a few Shovelers and Widgeon were bobbing among the Canvasbacks. The tew-tew-tew call of a Greater Yellowlegs was heard. A Sandhill Crane was hiding in the cattails.

Big Lake attracts a lot of eagles during migration with 5 Bald Eagles and 2 Golden Eagles observed.

The breeding island in the NW parking area of Big Lake, well, was no longer an island. It was still hard to reach as there is a large alkaline mudflat protecting it. Many gulls dotted the island with the California Gull occupying most of the nesting spots at the crest of the island and the Ring-billed nesting closer to the waterline. A dozen Double-crested Cormorants were on the top and are nesters there too. Far out on the mudflats 20 American Avocets were observed, a seemingly early return for these tall and graceful looking shorebirds. Common Goldeneye, Cinnamon Teal and Gadwall were new to the day's list of ducks.

We had hoped to see some pelicans this day, and we were about to depart for the day, and someone whooped, "there are pelicans!" And sure enough a pair of the enormous birds were spiraling downward in lazy circles and made a rather graceful landing atop the island. Upon landing they arched their heads skyward, showing off the spikes and plumes of feathers that adorn their heads at this time of the year. This pair looked like they were in love.

At the end of the day, I could see a glow in the eye of those that had been suffering from winter birding deficit disorder. Some were cured when the first meadowlark songs reached their parched ears.



Ring-billed Gulls and American White Pelicans on the Big Lake island Photo by Ginny Waples

*Submitted by Mike Weber*

## From Montana Audubon:

### Wings Across the Big Sky Birding Festival Returns for Its 25th Year

### Experienced Birders Needed for Colonial Waterbird Surveys



This summer, birders from across the country are invited to Kalispell, Montana, for the 25th Annual *Wings Across the Big Sky* Birding Festival, hosted by Montana Audubon and local partner Flathead Audubon Society. Taking place June 12–14, 2026, the festival celebrates the joy of birds, the wonder of Montana's landscapes, and the connections we share through nature. The weekend is packed with 30+ guided birding trips, two dinner banquets, a keynote presentation by HawkWatch International founder and former Montana Audubon Executive Director Steve Hoffman. Field trip spaces are limited, so sign up soon for the best selection.

Scholarships are available to help make the festival accessible to more participants. Flathead Audubon is offering up to 10 scholarships to cover festival registration for students, and Five Valleys Audubon Society is also offering scholarships to help cover festival costs, with priority given to FVAS members and Missoula-area residents.

Register and learn more on the festival website: <https://mtaudubon.org/events/wings-across-the-big-sky/>



American White Pelicans.

Photo: Bob Martinka

This year Montana Audubon is partnering with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks to carry out statewide surveys for colonial-nesting waterbirds. These surveys, which were last carried out in 2009-2011 (some sites were occasionally surveyed more recently), target about a dozen species of concern, including American White Pelican, Black, Common, Forster's and Caspian Terns, Franklin's Gull, Western Grebe, Great Blue Heron, White-faced Ibis, Black-crowned Night Heron, and Eared and Horned Grebes.

Most of the survey locations will be large National Wildlife Refuges and Wildlife Management Areas with breeding colonies on islands, lakeshores and in marsh vegetation, depending on the species. These sites include Benton Lake NWR, Browns Lake, Bowdoin NWR, Canyon Ferry WMA, Freezeout Lake, Medicine Lake NWR, Red Rock Lakes NWR, Ninepipe NWR (already assigned to a surveyor) and Arod Lake amongst others.

It can be very challenging to count and identify large aggregations of colonial-nesting species, and some of the surveys will have to be carried out from boats or canoes, or from a long distance using spotting scopes, so we are looking only for experienced birders- preferably people who have carried out similar surveys in the past- who feel comfortable surveying most/all of our waterbird species, and are willing to travel to carry out 1-2 surveys per site. Montana Audubon can cover some of the travel cost.

If interested, please email Bo Crees at [bcrees@mtaudubon.org](mailto:bcrees@mtaudubon.org) and be sure to describe any experience in carrying out similar surveys.

*Submitted by Lauren Smith  
Montana Audubon*

## There is Nothing Like Looking if You Want to Find Something

A baker's dozen of birders turned off the highway onto Bear Canyon Road on Saturday morning April 11th on what was advertised as a "Search for the Sagebrush Sparrow."

The Sagebrush Sparrow is ranked as a Species of Concern in Montana. According to the Montana Field Guide: "Species is rare across the state outside of several breeding populations in southern Montana. Short-term trend is unknown and it faces threats from habitat loss due to invasive annual grasses and degradation of sagebrush habitat due to ranching."

To add to the challenge, the Sagebrush Sparrow, which requires uninterrupted Big Sagebrush for breeding habitat, is well-camouflaged, can stay low and hidden in the sagebrush, and often runs across the ground in lieu of flying. But--no worries--our trip leaders, Stan Heath and Susan Hovde, are SABS-seeking specialists.

Lured by the song of Sagebrush Sparrows, we were soon out of our cars and roaming through the sage flats. This resulted in views of distant SABS through spotting scopes. The best sighting came afterwards when a sparrow, perched near the road, was clearly viewed from a car. However, the time spent on foot wasn't wasted, as we enjoyed a bounty of Horned Larks, Western Meadowlarks, and Sage Thrashers. The male thrashers were delightful as they perched with outstretched wings to impress the opposite sex. And that is not all. There were cottontails hiding under the sagebrush, a chipmunk perched in the branches, and, best of all, a Greater Short-horned Lizard (aka horny toad).



Bear Canyon birders Photo by Susan Hovde



Sagebrush Sparrow Photo by Susan Hovde 4/11/2026

Susan gets the credit for spotting the very well-camouflaged lizard, which has been dutifully reported to Montana FWP.

Mountain Plover habitat was just a few more miles down a dirt road, so while in the neighborhood, we voted to look for them. The plover search was unsuccessful, but while wandering plover territory we discovered a large area virtually carpeted with Jurassic Gryphaea oyster fossils. "Devil's toenails," as they are commonly called, are easy to find in the Pryors, but this was an especially bountiful location.

Bear Canyon was irresistibly close. Walking up the trail, 13 species were recorded on eBird. Pine Siskins were prolific; Rock Wrens were heard more than seen; a small number of White-throated Swifts had arrived in the canyon. It was a beautiful and satisfying day.

*"There is nothing like looking, if you want to find something. You certainly usually find something, if you look, but it is not always quite the something you were after."*

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

For more about Sagebrush Sparrows in Montana:

Montana Field Guide <https://fieldguide.mt.gov/speciesDetail.aspx?elcode=ABPBX97040>

For more about Greater Short-horned Lizards and how to report a sighting to FWP:

<https://fwp.mt.gov/conservation/wildlife-management/greater-short-horned-lizard>

*Submitted by Ginny Waples*

YVAS MEETINGS & PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Next Board of Directors Meeting: Monday, May 11, 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, May 18, 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: Ginny Waples waplesv@gmail.com
Osprey Research Coordinator: Marco Restani restani@stcloudstate.edu
Program Committee: YVAS Board of Directors
Publicity: YVAS Board of Directors
Recycling (aluminum): Recycle to Reforest Containers in Stewart, Veterans, and Clevenger Parks
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



Sage Thrasher Photo by Ginny Waples

### Membership Updates



**March reminders:** Jim & Peggy Good  
**April renewals:** Chris Miller, Kathy Stokes  
**May renewals:** Jeff DiBenedetto

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).