



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.

JUNE-JULY 2026

VOLUME 56, NUMBER 5

Migration of Western Burrowing Owls



Western Burrowing Owl Photo by Anthony Locatelli, Ph.D candidate in Dr. Conway's Lab in Idaho Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit

The Burrowing Owl is classified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in WY and MT, making this full life-cycle conservation project extremely important. The Burrowing Owl population has dropped by about 55% during the last 50 years as tracked by the North American Breeding Bird Survey. Recent developments in solar-powered GPS technology in the form of smaller transmitters are helping researchers collect data on the elusive seasonal migration and winter ranges of Burrowing Owls that nest in Montana and Wyoming during the summer months. Results of this long-term study will soon be available to guide conservation efforts.

Andrea Orabona is President of Red Desert Audubon and retired as the statewide Nongame Bird Biologist for the Wyoming Game & Fish Department. She collaborates on this project with Dr. Courtney Conway from the USGS/University of Idaho and his research partners from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico.

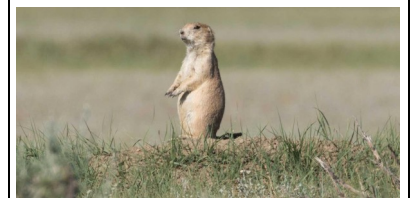
Andrea will discuss the need for this work, project objectives and methods, and results of Burrowing Owl migration thus far.



Andrea Orabona with Burrowing Owl Photo by Mark Gocke, WGFD

Check out the [Smithsonian Zoo](https://www.si.edu/explore/conservation) for more information on the ecosystem of burrowing prairie animals in Montana.

Black-tailed Prairie Dog photo by Andy Boyce



The Burrowing Owl presentation is a special event in addition to the YVAS monthly programs. Join us on Thursday, July 16th at 7 PM to learn how biologists trap and track Burrowing Owls to identify their migration routes and wintering areas using satellite transmitters. Free and open to the public, the presentation will be held at the Mayflower Church on Poly and Rehberg Lane.

VISIT THE YVAS WEBSITE YVAUDUBON.ORG OR FACEBOOK.COM/YVAUDUBON

Phipps Birds and Blooms Hike

Submitted by Carolyn Jones

On April 25, a chilly, windy, overcast day, 5 intrepid birders showed up for the annual trek to the top of Phipps Park. We had 2 new, young birders along who were interested in joining more YVAS field trips. We saw 17 species, including 10 Mountain Bluebirds.

One bird I haven't seen in a number of years was the Red Crossbill, but we saw 8 during our walk. It must be a good year for pine cone production.

As we finished our Phipps circuit, we saw male and female Mountain Bluebirds at box # 1. Just a short distance away, we spotted another male and female pair, which have been sighted in that area at least 3 times this year. The question is, where are they nesting? If you are walking Phipps, check around when you reach the top and see if you can find where their nest hole might be.

It was a very enjoyable morning. It pays to show up rain or shine!

Photos by Rebecca Seago

Mountain Bluebird



Yellow-rumped Warbler



Field Trips Coming Up!

Contact CAROLYN JONES at 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
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
Aug 9	SUN	7 AM Rocky/ BST parking lot	Shore birds, Hawks, and Prairie birds	Mike Weber
Aug 15	SAT	8 AM Itch-Kep-Pe Park, Columbus, near restrooms	Bridger Creek	Stan Heath and Susan Hovde
Sep 11-13	FRI - SUN	Malta campground, Friday PM	Malta and Bowdoin NWR, RSVP to leaders, please	Stan Heath and Susan Hovde
Sep 19	SAT	8 AM Red Lodge Town Pump	Hawk Watch on Meeteetse Trail, road condition permitting	Marco Restani

Early Spring Beauty

Photos by Rebecca Seago



Willet at Broadview Ponds



Upland Sandpiper at Molt



Vesper Sparrow from Molt



Sora in Yellowstone County

A Nest with a View

Last year, volunteers for the YVAS Osprey Nest Monitoring Project identified about 75 nests in use by incubating ospreys along the Yellowstone River from Gardiner to Miles City. Only one of those nests was on a tree; all the others were on artificial structures.

A little over 90% of active Yellowstone River osprey nests are located on nesting platforms, most of which were erected to divert ospreys from nesting on energized power poles. This is good news because, in Montana, power poles have been a popular substitute for trees, with consequences that include power outages and electrocution of the birds.

In addition to platforms, nesting ospreys used two energy poles, two bridges, a light pole and a communications tower in 2025. This year, monitors have also reported nests on an antique derrick and a second light pole.

Ospreys usually return to the same nest every year. Young ospreys, making their first migration back north at an age approaching two or three years old, usually find that prime nesting sites are already claimed. This can lead to trouble for both the first-time nest builder and for Marco Restani, wildlife biologist for NorthWestern Energy. Marco will pull new nesting material off energized power poles to discourage ospreys from pursuing that option. Sometimes the solution is to provide a new platform near the pole as an alternative.



Osprey nest in dead tree near the Yellowstone River, Montana
Photo by Ginny Waples

Even experienced ospreys can be driven to unsafe nesting sites, if they return to find an incubating Canada Goose ensconced on their nest. This spring, one osprey pair found a goose in their nest and went to work building a new nest on the same bridge, while their YVAS nest monitor breathed a sigh of relief. Some ospreys will wait until a goose has finished incubating and then get a late start at nesting—a better choice than taking the power-pole gamble.

Human-altered landscapes create a shortage of good nesting trees and inadvertently provide substitutes, such as power poles, that imitate the snaggy trees that ospreys look for. A good nesting tree has a flat top to support the nest and is in an open area where ospreys can maneuver and avoid predators.

Yellowstone National Park, just south of the YVAS Osprey Nest Monitoring Project, exhibits the nesting choices ospreys make in a more natural habitat. There are about 30 pairs of nesting ospreys in YNP (compared to about 80 pairs recorded for 2002--a decline largely attributed to the introduction of lake trout and subsequent decimation of cutthroats).

A study of the characteristics of osprey nest sites in Yellowstone by Jon E. Swenson was published in 1981 (*Journal of Field Ornithology*, v.52, issue 1) from his observation of 55 nests. At that time, he found 45 nests (82%) in trees and 10 (18%) on rock pinnacles. Ospreys were using pinnacles in the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone.

Tree nests observed by Swenson were built at or near the top of trees. 89% of these trees had broken tops. Ospreys also showed a preference for dead trees and 29% of the tree nests were built on dead trees in burns. Consistent with these findings, the only tree nest in our current YVAS Osprey Nest Monitoring Project is on top of a dead tree in a burn.

For more information about the Yellowstone National Park nest site study:

Swenson, Jon E. (1981) "Osprey Nest Site Characteristics in Yellowstone National Park,"

Journal of Field Ornithology. Vol. 52 : Issue 1 , <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jfo/vol52/iss1/18>

For more about ospreys in Yellowstone National Park:

Smith, Douglas, et al. *Yellowstone's Birds; Diversity and Abundance in the World's First National Park*. Princeton University Press.

For more about the YVAS Osprey Nest Monitoring Project, go to the YVAS website: <https://yvaudubon.org/osprey-monitor-project/>

Submitted by Ginny Waples, with thanks to Marco Restani for helpful clarifications

Two Moon Park Fallout May 17



A branch dripping with Cliff Swallows on a chilly morning at Two Moon Park Photo by Ginny Waples

A dozen birders headed north along the trail that hugs the woody hillside below Yellowstone River Road. Despite the drizzly rain, we started out hot by finding several splashy male American Redstarts singing and flitting through the leafy canopy of Siberian elms. Among the Redstarts we heard a couple Least Flycatchers and then watched as they chased each other. Song Sparrows and Common Yellowthroats could be heard singing in the dense shrubs. The vibrant “sweet sweet sweet, you’re so sweet” song of the Yellow Warbler seemed everywhere, as we observed dozens of these bright lemon-yellow birds along the trail. We saw several Gray Catbirds and heard their mew calls.

As we continued our walk, we heard a couple Swainson’s Thrush call notes and soon found several acting like vireos gleaning insects from leaves in the treetop. Several began singing and the group was delighted to hear the liquid flute-like notes of this thrush. Usually, these birds are hard to see as they sulk in the undergrowth. A distant song of a Red-eyed Vireo and a Black-headed Grosbeak were heard, and an Ovenbird sang its “teacher teacher teacher” song but we never got eyes on any of the birds.

We had perhaps 8 Lazuli Buntings singing on our 2-mile loop. These birds can be challenging to see as often they sing from high in a cottonwood canopy, I never did see one, but the rest of the group saw a singing male. Lazuli Buntings in my experience often sing into early August, when most songbirds are done for the season.

One bird that is often described as having a jungle-like call is the Yellow-breasted Chat and we heard and saw it when we reached the first clearing. The Chat has a bright yellow breast with a black line through its eyes and a wide white eye ring. Over this same clearing circled a female Northern Harrier.

I strolled down a side trail and looked up and saw an immature dark-phase Broad-winged Hawk. The others were out of earshot, but the bird was observed later that day by other birders.

We kept winding our way along the hillside and approached the river. We stopped perhaps 20 yards shy of the shoreline and were surprised to see many perched swallows sitting in young cottonwoods along the water’s edge. We got great looks at Violet-green Swallows, Cliff Swallows, and Bank Swallows. After 10 minutes they startled into flight. We moved to the shore and could not believe our eyes as we looked up and down the river. Many hundreds, maybe a few thousand swallows weaved and darted sometimes just a few inches from the water surface. Multiple times the swallows buzzed by just a few feet from our heads. Occasionally a Spotted Sandpiper would be observed flying along the river and their wingspan is about the same as the swallows. We were in swallow heaven. Probably 90 percent were Violet-green Swallows.

The night had been cool and cloudy with temps in the 40s and an occasional sprinkle, and we had stumbled into a swallow fallout of epic proportions. Insect hatches and the relatively warmer river temperature produced a feeding bonanza. The swallows, dependent on flying insects to survive, came to the river to rest and feed for the next leg of their migration. This is not an unusual phenomenon to witness swallows on a cloudy and cool spring day, as they are attracted to lakes, ponds and rivers.



One Cliff Swallow and two Violet-greens in a tree full of swallows by the river Photo by Ginny Waples

Toward the end of the walk, we heard other birds singing that were not observed; an Orange-crowned Warbler, a Yellow-rumped Warbler, a Belted Kingfisher, Blue Jays, a Cooper’s Hawk, White-breasted Nuthatch, and a Warbling Vireo. In the river were Double-crested Cormorants and a lone Common Merganser. We were surprised to see a Hairy Woodpecker.

Although we missed seeing several species, the morning chorus of spring birds made up for it. We ended the day with 41 species observed.

Submitted by Mike Weber

Birding Adventure Down Under in New Zealand



Saddleback CC Photo

We visited New Zealand this winter and had the privilege of seeing some unique birds. As it is a subtropical island the vegetation is layered with man-size ferns, mosses, Nikau palm trees, the New Zealand fern tree and giant Kauri trees. The country is mountainous with windy, curvy, narrow roads, beautiful coastal drives and beaches. Each unique habitat had its special birds. Many birds are curious and friendly like the fantail, the robins and the Weka. I saw 77 species of birds in all habitats from high mountain areas (Kea) to the coastal (Yellow-eyed penguin). The people are friendly just like their birds. We searched many times for the elusive nocturnal Kiwis but only heard them.



Salvin's Albatross

New Zealand has been striving to be predator free to protect its native wildlife, flora and trees from introduced species. One technique they have used is predator-free fencing that accounts for the climbing ability of opossums, the jumping ability of cats and stoats and the burrowing ability of rats, mice, weasels and ferrets. The fences are about 6 ft tall, have a woven mesh skirt below the ground and a tight mesh wire weave. A hood generally sits over the top to deter the climbers. We visited a fence at Maungatautari completed in 2006 which is 29 miles long. The native vegetation and bird life have thrived.

We also ferried to several predator-free islands. When we stepped off the boat at Urupukapuka Island we were greeted with a constant soundtrack of rare native birds. One was the Bellbird, a nectar feeder, which has three distinct sounds that resemble the chiming of bells. The government promotes conservation and has school field trips to encourage the next generation to care for the special flora and bird life. A few of my favorite birds were the Sacred Kingfisher, Yellow-eyed penguin, Kea, Pukeko, Eastern Rosalia (most colorful and not endemic) and Saddleback.

Story and photos (except Saddleback) by Gail McGlothlin



Weka



Pukeko or Swamp Hen



Kea or Mountain Parrot

YVAS MEETINGS & PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Next Board of Directors Meeting: Monday, Aug 10, 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: Thursday, July 16, 2026. Next regularly scheduled program is held on the third Monday of the month, Sep 21, 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**
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Billings, MT 59103-1075
RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

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!

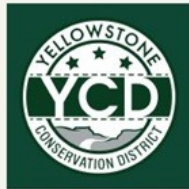


EVENT DETAILS

20 JUNE 2026

11AM – 3PM

PIONEER PARK, BILLINGS MT



Membership Updates



April reminders: Kathy Stokes

June renewals: Rita Cetrone, Nancy and Dale Detrick, Jenny Koffler, Carol Pearson, Jim & Jeanie Sells, Judy Weddel

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