

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.

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Summertime and the Livin' Ain't Easy for Female Ospreys

Ninety days. That's approximately how long it takes to lay an osprey egg, incubate and hatch it, and nurture the nestling until the day it fledges. Most of this work is done by the female osprey, while the male provides fish to the female and nestlings.

Nesting Cycle

When a mated pair is together, the female is visibly larger. Although both ospreys will defend the nest—from owls, eagles, ravens, etc.—the female is often the more aggressive and her extra bulk is an asset. In addition to fending off avian invaders, a female osprey copes with extremes of weather as she incubates one to four eggs for about 39 days and then protects the nestlings for another 50 to 55 days. Generally, the female does about 75% of the incubating.

Yellowstone River ospreys usually begin egg-laying in early May, and nesting season lasts until the young fledge in early August. Because this is Montana, the nesting period ranges from freezing temperatures to extreme heat, with threats of snow, hail, and wind.

Battling the Montana Elements

Incubating ospreys can protect eggs from surprisingly cold and wet conditions. While monitoring two Billings nests during incubation this spring, I recorded snow in late April, temperatures as low as 25° a couple weeks later, and an early-May rain and hailstorm. The eggs hatched on schedule. In hot weather, females stand at

the nest for hours, forming an umbrella of shade with their wings to protect nestlings, while the only source of water for the young is in the fish brought to the nest by males.

In 2023, a webcam at the Boulder County Fairgrounds (CO) recorded a female osprey protecting three eggs throughout a prolonged storm as pea-sized hail piled up around her. The drama went viral; the eggs survived and successfully hatched. ([News article and video on 9news.com.](#)) Ospreys can be surprisingly resilient, but an increase in extreme weather fueled by climate

change is a potential stressor.

Climate Threats & Nest Failures

Not all weather events have a happy ending. This season, several Yellowstone River osprey monitors reported failed nests when they found nesting material blown off platforms where they had previously observed incubating ospreys. Hail with heavy rain was the

probable cause of another nest failure, when very young nestlings could not survive the cold, wet conditions. A heat wave with its record-breaking peak on July 11th was fatal to the young week-old nestlings in our study area. Nestlings are especially vulnerable to extremes in temperature for the first two to three weeks after hatching, when they cannot self-regulate body temperatures. -----Continued on page 2-----

By Ginny Waples, with thanks to Marco Restani for his editing help.



Female Osprey with 3 nestlings. Photo by Ginny Waples

-----Continued from the front page -----

Summertime and Livin' Ain't Easy for Female Ospreys

Nourishing Fledglings

By the end of the nesting season, a female osprey can lose at least 10-15% of her body mass, more than a male will normally lose. Feeding the rapidly growing nestlings usually comes before her own meals. On Day 91 (or so) of nesting season, the young ospreys fledge, but they will keep returning to the nest to be fed until they learn to fish for themselves. Their mother, however, is not likely to be there. The male is the one who keeps showing up. Full-sized, fledged ospreys will stand on the nest making heart-wrenching cries for food while the female is nowhere to be seen. While fledglings are being catered to by a male, I have seen his mate perched above the river, presumably attending to the matter of regaining her lost weight in preparation for migration.

Migration and Dispersal

When the female migrates, it will be a separate journey and destination from her mate and the juveniles she nurtured until they fledged. Each member of the family will travel separately and arrive at diverse locations, usually along the Gulf Coast, but also as far south as Puerto Rico and Costa Rica.

We can easily observe female osprey behavior during nesting season, we but know less about the life histories of female ospreys that fledge from nests along

the Yellowstone River. To collect data on natal dispersal, migration, lifetime breeding success, and mortality, ornithologist Marco Restani bands nestlings with green bands unique to his study and gains information from later reports of sightings of the alphanumeric code on the bands. Seventy-five percent of the green-banded ospreys that return to the Yellowstone River as adults are male. Where are the females?

Like most other bird species, females breed farther from where they hatched than males, increasing genetic diversity. The Missoula-based Montana Osprey Project has reported Yellowstone River females nesting at Galen and Gold Creek. An osprey banded at the Missouri River was observed by our Yellowstone River Osprey Project, and every year since 2020, Paradise Valley nest monitors have reported on a blue-banded female who fledged from MPG Ranch in the Bitterroot Valley in 2018. We can only speculate about where many of the *unbanded* females who nest along the Yellowstone River have come from. Perhaps the Gallatin, Madison, Jefferson, Bighorn Rivers--and beyond.

For more information about the YVAS Osprey Nest Monitoring Project see:

<https://yvaudubon.org/osprey-monitor-project/>

For general information about ospreys:

Ospreys: The Revival of a Global Raptor by Alan F. Poole (c2019).

The Osprey by Tim Mackrill (c2024).

"THE OSPREY CLUB"

For a detailed and entertaining account of the osprey nest monitoring efforts of volunteers along the Yellowstone, check out the article by Jeff Moore carried in the Summer 2026 issue of the *Montana Quarterly Magazine*.

Jeff is a writer and photographer based in Livingston, Montana who specializes in outdoor subjects. He shadowed some of the nest monitors during the 2025 season and conducted in-depth interviews with the project leaders.

Although Jeff approached the osprey project with a journalist's perspective, he ended by becoming enamored with the conservation goals, the unique behaviors and life history of ospreys, and the cheerful dedication of the volunteer community. During the 2026 season, he became a volunteer himself, monitoring assigned osprey nests in the study area.

Jeff made a very gracious donation to YVAS in recognition of the photos Ginny Waples and Rob Michaelson contributed for his story.

The magazine is available for sale in Barnes & Noble and This House of Books in Billings, or in the Billings Public Library.

Submitted by Kristin Neva



YVAS Events Coming Up!

Programs

Monday, Sep 21 YVAS Program topic to be announced. YVAS programs are free and open to the public, held on the third Monday of the month, from September through May, at the Mayflower Church on Poly and Rehberg Lane. A social with coffee and cookies begins at 6:30 PM; the program begins at 7:00 PM.

Monday, Oct 19 YVAS Program featuring Dr. Marco Restani speaking on the 'Eagle Protection and Offset Program' implemented by NorthWestern Energy to aid eagle conservation.

Birding Field Trips

Sunday, Aug 9, Mike Weber will lead a trip to **Broadview Ponds** highlighting shore birds, hawks and prairie birds. Starting from Rocky at 7:00 AM.

Saturday, Aug 15, Stan Heath and Susan Hovde will lead the **Bridger Creek** trip . Starting from Itch-Kep-Pe Park, Columbus at 8:00 AM.

Saturday, Sep 19, Hawk Watch on the Meeteetse Trail if road condition permits. Marco Restani will lead. Meeting place is the Red Lodge Town Pump at 8:00 AM. Updates via email to the "Bird Trip Notification List."

Sunday, Nov 1, Yellowtail Dam Afterbay. Meet up at Rocky at 8:00 AM. Ron Kuhler will lead.

Why go to Fort Smith in November? According to Mike Weber, "Since the Afterbay does not freeze over, nor does the Bighorn River which spills from the Afterbay, it attracts a wide variety of waterfowl that normally would fly south for the winter." See more in his trip report from last year. [Dec 2025 YVAS Flyer.](#)



Evening Under the Big Sky

September 19, 2026

Montana Audubon Center's annual community celebration and fundraiser, ***Evening Under the Big Sky***, returns September 19, 2026, at 5:30 PM, bringing together supporters, partners, and friends for an unforgettable evening along the Yellowstone River.

Proceeds support outdoor education, conservation initiatives, and programs that connect thousands of children, families, and community members with nature each year.

Individual- \$95

Table (seats 8)- \$750

Childcare- \$30

Visit center.mtaudubon.org for more info and to purchase tickets.

Montana Audubon Center Events

Learn more about these and other activities on the website: mtaudubon.org/center

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

Morning Bird Stroll: Sat, Aug 8, 8:30 - 10 am

Enjoy a stroll by the river and learn a few birds on the way. Great for beginning birders!

Weekend Wonders Family Program: Sat, Aug 8, 10:30 am - 12 pm

Grass ID Workshop with Native Plant Society:

Tue, Aug 18, 6 -8pm – Grasses play a crucial role in our ecosystems. But telling one from the other can be a difficult task! Join highly experienced grasslands botanist Mark Majerus for an evening of discussing native plants, how to identify them, and why we should appreciate them.

Evening Exploration: Wed, Aug 26, 4–7pm

Explore and enjoy the ponds, the wildlife and the seasonal changes in our plants. Ask a naturalist your essential questions about animals and plants. Borrow field guides, insect nets, and binoculars. Or get in a canoe and explore the ponds with the setting sun.

*Submitted by Emily Chilcoat
Montana Audubon Center Director*

Meet Your YVAS Board of Directors: Bernie Quetchenbach



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

I'm from Rochester, New York, on Lake Ontario at the mouth of the Genesee River. Montana is the tenth state I've lived in, but we've been here for twenty years, more than double the time spent in any place since my 27 years in Upstate New York. Most of you probably know that I'm married, but you may not know that we have one son and one grandson, who live in Arcata, California. I taught in the English Department at MSUB for 18 years, following previous teaching jobs at Northwest College (Powell, WY), the University of Maine at Fort Kent, and Florida Southern College. A highlight was having the opportunity to teach study-abroad programs in Europe and the Peruvian Amazon. I retired from MSUB in 2024. I think of myself as primarily a writer.

What bird hooked you into birding?

Probably the Canada goose. They migrated through Upstate New York every spring and fall, before becoming the beloved year-round golf-course nuisance they seem to be today. When I was a kid, we'd take an annual pilgrimage of sorts to the Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, where they gathered each April. I wrote an essay about them that was mentioned on *Living on Earth*, which was kind of a kick, though it didn't result in enduring riches and fame, performances at celebrity weddings, angry tweets from politicians, and the like. I've always liked nighthawks also, since one spent a day resting on a neighbor's roof right outside my childhood bedroom window.

What is your favorite Montana bird species?

Who can have a favorite? But burrowing owls are always good, and I spent some time watching them yesterday at a prairie dog town. And golden eagles are sublime (one was checking out those owls and prairie dogs). And what about lark buntings. And upland sandpipers.

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

Excited good or excited bad? There are so many bad things to get worked up about, like the federal government "re-interpreting" the Endangered Species Act or the Yellowstone County Commission's insistence that they, and only they, have a right to determine whether we need giant data centers. But on a more upbeat note, for the last two years I've been covering a route for the North American Breeding Bird Survey. It's kind of an ordeal, especially since I have to be at the beginning of the route a half hour before sunrise and the beginning of the route is in Silesia. But it's nice to contribute to such a long-running program—2026 is year 60.

What is your favorite/funniest/most interesting piece of Wildlife Trivia?

There are so many. But it's pretty cool that American white pelicans "sing" when soaring at high altitudes, a sound pretty much heard only by mountain climbers. And, of course, other pelicans and the occasional eagle or pika.

What do you like best about YVAS?

During these troubled times, a lot of environmental organizations seem to be resuscitating the old "either/or" that you can't be concerned about environmental issues without being an elitist, or at least indifferent to "human concerns." I don't think Audubon sees these as mutually exclusive or unrelated.

Where is your favorite place to go birding in Montana?

Probably the prairie lands northwest of town. So much to see out there! Big Lake can be particularly dynamic.

Submitted by Sue Weinreis

Trip report 8 June 2026, 6 AM-9 AM

Lake Helena WMA

Lewis and Clark County, Montana

Jeff Dunham and David Lechner

46 Species/8 with Photos



Jeff Dunham at Lake Helena WMA Photo by David Lechner

Lake Helena is a 2,000 + acre reservoir located 7 miles north of Helena in the Helena Valley. It is a shallow water western extension of Hauser Reservoir and connected directly via the Causeway Arm. The lake is primarily fed by Prickly Pear, Tenmile and Silver Bow creeks on the western edge where the Lake Helena WMA state access site is located. Shallow bays and wetlands draw many shore birds and waterfowl throughout the year, and they provide an important stopping place for migrant birds heading north in the spring. The lake is motor restricted year-round for habitat and wildlife preservation and lends itself to kayak and canoe exploration through the walk-in access point maintained by Fish Wildlife and Parks.

This area is a well-known and popular birding site for Lewis and Clark Audubon Society, and most mornings can find someone loading their canoe/kayaks onto the lake. The habitat and the mode of transportation provide a unique opportunity to observe shorebirds up close--sometimes only feet away from the boat-- as they are relatively undisturbed in this sheltered habitat. Waterfowl, however, are a bit more suspicious, and shy away from you.

This morning's exploration provided an intimate experience with Wilson's Phalaropes, American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Wilson Snipes, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpipers as well as a prolonged observation of a Sora openly exploring a shoreline just in front of us. In addition, Forester terns, American White Pelicans, Ring-billed, California and American Herring gulls all got into the picture in amongst these shorebirds for our trip. Trip reports from LCAS members include most of the common shorebirds of Montana that habitat in MT and commonly will include rare migrants over the course of the season.

The morning ended with the wind coming up and ushering us off the lake in whitecaps. This is a special trip that is a bit more work than the average birding day but well worth it for the intimate experience it provides with the resident shorebirds.

Submitted by David Lechner



Black-necked Stilt Photo by Jeff Dunham



Wilson's Phalarope Photo by Jeff Dunham



Sora Photo by Jeff Dunham

A Day on the Stillwater

May 23 - It was a bluebird day as three jolly birders set off on our annual Stillwater Field Trip. On the way to the Absaroka Fishing Access, we observed several nests of incubating Osprey and thought of our faithful colleagues who monitor those nests. As we left Absarokee, we passed fields busy with Bobolinks. They seemed to be everywhere in the fields on both sides of the road. We also saw Red-winged Blackbirds, Western Meadowlarks, Northern Yellow Warblers, and Savannah Sparrows, as well as some of the more common denizens of Montana.

At Fireman's Point, we had some of our best finds of the day as we hiked up the trail along the river. We got our first (but not last) glimpses of the Least flycatcher, Gray Catbird, and Chipping Sparrow and spotted the only Mountain Bluebird and Black-headed Grosbeak we would see that day. The Spotted Towhees seemed to be everywhere on the hillside above the trail.

On the way to Cliff Swallow Fishing Access, a Red-Tailed Hawk flew over, and we scored a Says Phoebe singing on a fence. Cliff Swallow FA lived up to its name and produced its namesake.

At Castle Rock, we picked up our first Eastern Kingbird, and got some great views of our only Bullock's Oriole of the day. Although we spent a goodly amount of time there searching for the American Dipper, alas, she eluded us.

Jeffries Landing yielded more of the same, but we managed to add an American Goldfinch to our growing list.

The Stillwater Trailhead yielded the Red-Breasted Nuthatch, a couple Yellow-Rumped Warblers, and a Great Blue Heron, as well as our first, last, and only Northern Flicker. Needless to say, the Western Warbling Vireos were everywhere, singing non-stop.

As we started for home, I counted our coup. 33 species. Our leader, Carolyn, was so disappointed. She had set a goal of 40!! We kept our eyes peeled and through sheer determination and attentiveness, we were able to add a Canada Goose with goslings swimming in a roadside ditch, ditto Mallards, a lonely Sandhill Crane outstanding in his field, and a corral of Brown-headed Cowbirds. Two Pheasants crossed in front of the car as we turned onto the road back to Columbus.

In total, we scored a total of 38 birds for a very successful outing.

Submitted by Sue Weinreis



Eastern Kingbird
Photo by Rebecca Seago

Bridger Creek Trip

June 9 - It was a beautiful time of year and day to drive through Bridger canyon in search of woodpeckers and other great birds. Nine of us started the trip with the paparazzi car trailing full of big lenses. We started the long way into the canyon in hopes of spotting Bobolink, and it worked. We saw not only singing males, but an adjacent pair of Upland Sandpiper, always a treat. The canyon did not disappoint, sharing several pairs of Lewis's Woodpecker and a couple of Red-headed too. We got a good look at a Western Tanager with a giant bug. Susan decided sometimes the best way to show what tree a bird is on is through interpretative dance; sadly, it worked.

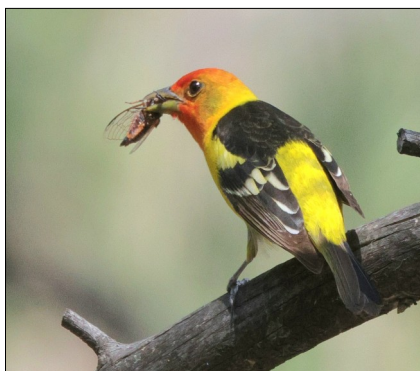
At lunch break, we celebrated fearless leader Stanley Heath's birthday with cupcakes. We wisely chose not to put all the candles on the cake, after all, it is fire season.



Stan with cake
Photo by Bridget Young

It was another great field trip. Join the next one if you can.

Submitted by Susan Hovde



Western Tanager
Photo by Susan Hovde



Be the tree! Photo by Bridget Young

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: Monday, Sep 21, 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
 Bernard Quetchenbach bqetchenbach@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

(Committees, continued)

Flyer Editor: Kristin Neva yvasflyer@gmail.com
 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



Plumbeous Vireo Photo by Susan Hovde



Red-eyed Vireo Photo by Susan Hovde



Western Warbling Vireo
Photo by Susan Hovde

Riverfront Park, May 26, 85°F at 5 PM.

We made a circuit of the brushy area behind the pavilion then walked into the main trail, turning right toward the river. Countless yellow warblers were singing everywhere and occasionally darting into view. Stan was looking for a Red-eyed Vireo and we found one by listening and looking straight up into the canopy. But a Plumbeous Vireo was also on the sound screen. Susan spotted them in tall cottonwood trees right next to the highway. We spent quite a few minutes enjoying the sight of these twitchy-tailed little birds before moving on to the bridge and curving back into the trees. Redstarts and Grosbeaks were flashing through the undergrowth in fine view. Gail and Linda counted 40 species.

Submitted by Kristin Neva

Membership Updates

June reminders: Jenny Koffler, Carol Pearson.

July reminders: Linda Wham.

August renewals: Cindy Meccage.

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