

Birdathon 2018 – *Brother Can You Sparrow Dime?*

Our Birdathon this year was so good. We postponed for weather and still found ourselves driving into black skies near Great Falls. So we veered west to Freezeout Lake where the clouds lifted and the sun came out. We counted fifty-one species at Freezeout Wildlife Management Area, including Trumpeter swan, two American coots in mortal combat, Western grebes, Eastern & Western kingbirds, and an American pipit. We were beginning to have fun. We back-tracked to Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge where the sky was blue, the grass was green, and the birds were numerous. At one point we found ourselves ‘pursuing’ a family of Canada geese, who couldn’t get themselves off of the road. They were speed walking along until one of the adults dropped into the water and the rest followed. We found Northern pintail, Canvasback, plentiful White-faced ibis, a Short-eared owl, and a pair of Great-horned owls handing off a ground squirrel. Again, the bluest sky, dramatic clouds, and the very lush grasslands made the day special—not to mention an American bittern casually standing in the tall grass alongside the ditch. One only hopes for such a sight!

We made our way to Giant Springs State Park in Great Falls, where a Bullocks oriole sang variations on a theme, an American kestrel dove into a cavity high in a tree, and a Red-tailed hawk called repeatedly overhead. In order to avoid road work on I-15 on the way home, we spent a little time on the Recreation Road. While I was distracted by a group of Bighorn sheep high on a rock wall above the Missouri River, everyone else noticed a Bald eagle flying upstream. We returned home in the dark, exhausted.

Early Saturday morning we hit the road for Prickly Pear Canyon, north of Helena. There were lots of Yellow warblers, a Belted kingfisher, and a Ruffed grouse drumming in the Aspens. When we reached Duffy Lane in the north Helena Valley, we were greeted by a plethora, no, a bevy, of Wilson’s snipe. We saw our first Sandhill crane near the road and Bobolinks with their wondrous song. We found many locations around the Helena Valley to be rather “silent spring” like, largely due to high water, I guess. We counted some welcome additions at Mount Helena City Park, including Calliope hummingbird and White-crowned sparrow. Sunderland Park in Montana City yielded a lone Cedar waxwing, a pair of Mountain chickadees, and a Red-naped sapsucker. So we covered a lot of ground, put in some quality time, and ended up with 114 species in 24 hours. A good time was had by all.

We thank you for pledging to our Birdathon, our twenty-fifth annual count. If you send a check, please make it to *Last Chance Audubon*. We are most grateful for your support, as are the birds! Have a great summer!

The team – Jo Lace, Brian Shovers, and Don & Andrea Stierle