

Last
Chance
Audubon
Society



Last Chance Chat

Last Chance Audubon Society promotes understanding, respect and enjoyment of birds and the natural world through education, habitat protection and environmental advocacy.

Published September to May

Helena, MT

May 2020

Charles van Hook Wetlands

Have you ever had the opportunity to sit quietly in the middle of a wetland? To watch and listen to all that happens there? Perhaps sitting at sunrise or sunset, when owls hoot and might fly silently by hunting, when you witness a fox on the prowl?

Now there's a local place to have that experience and, perhaps, share this quiet thrill with a child. At the tiny "pocket park" called *Charles van Hook Wetlands*, just east of the Fairgrounds Ponds, the City of Helena has recently installed a viewing platform with interpretive signs and a bench. Over 111 species of birds have been counted there over the years, including Belted Kingfishers, waxwings, a Northern Goshawk, Bald Eagles, and Sandhill Cranes.

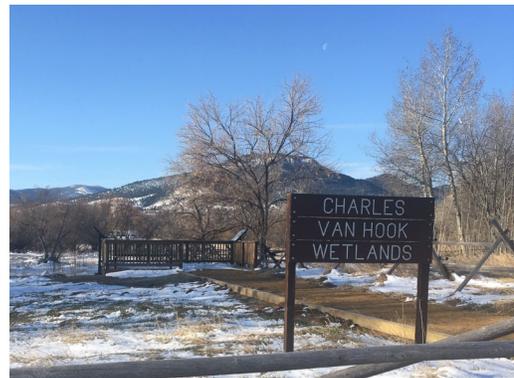


Sandhill Crane by Bob Martinka.

Charles van Hook was a local environmental scientist who recognized the value of wetlands and identified this one as significant in the Helena Valley. He understood (and educated others to understand) that as the water – in this case, Crystal Creek – moves slowly through a wetland, soaking into the soil, the wetland soil and vegetation filters out pollutants. The water is cleaner when it merges with a bigger stream – in this case, Tenmile Creek.

Credit for saving this vital wetland goes to Charles' wife, Kathy, and a group called Wetland Conservation Committee, who had the vision and the energy to overcome many obstacles along the way. LCAS, MT Audubon, PPLT, and other groups have supported the creation of the park over the years. It's been a park since 2001, and now has a viewing platform for visitors. Take Green Meadow Drive north from Custer and make a left turn at Silsbee Ave. The park is on your left just before the gate to the Fairgrounds.

-- Janice Miller



Charles van Hook Wetlands by Janice Miller.

May 12 Meeting Cancelled

Due to ongoing concerns for everyone's health and safety related to the COVID-19 virus, LCAS is cancelling the May 12 meeting at Montana WILD. Most field trips and other summer events are still "on the calendar" and leaders will make their final decisions on an individual basis, as this situation continues to change. See inside this issue for details.



President's Perch

Changes at the K-Mart Ponds

April 21, 2020

If you've been to the K-Mart Ponds lately, you're probably wondering why Pond 2 is empty and dry and the other three ponds have incredibly low water levels.

Within city limits, these ponds are in a handy location to spy many species of songbirds, waterfowl, and raptors – 171 bird species, to be exact, according to eBird. This is a favorite birding site among local birders.

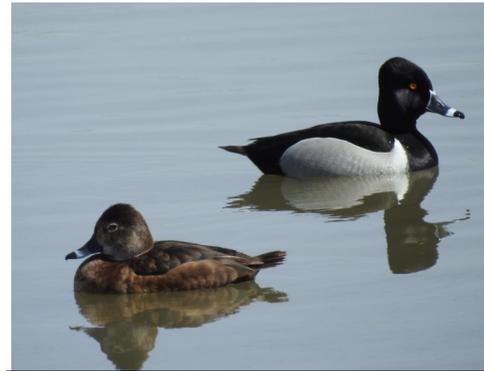
If you're a frequent visitor to the Ponds, you will recall that the culvert between Ponds 1 and 2 blew out in spring of 2019 due to the enormous amount of storm water runoff that Helena experienced. Crews were able to patch it together temporarily at that time. The City is now in the planning stages of re-designing the ponds for better flow and installing new structures to maintain constant water depth in order to prevent future floods and wash-outs.

LCAS has a long history of working in cooperation with the City of Helena – removing burdock and garbage, eliminating transients' camps, installing bird boxes, and more. The City is communicating with us about their plans going forward, and doing what they can to mitigate the impact on the birds and wildlife. They do not anticipate that the work will require closing the site to birders, until such time as they bring in the big machinery to do the "dirty work." The timing for this will depend, in part, on the budget, and it is unknown exactly when this work will take place. Watch the LCAS website and Facebook page for updates as we learn more.

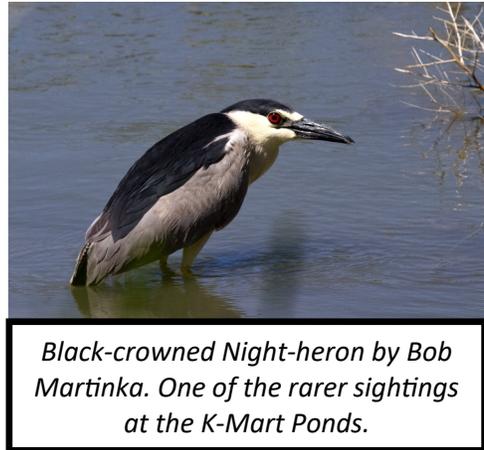
This work is similar to the Sevenmile Creek project, in which PPLT is restoring the floodplain: two major upheavals in order to create a more diverse and healthier landscape that may benefit birds and wildlife for decades to come. At the K-Mart Ponds, this disruption should better serve birds and wildlife in the long-run, as it will protect against flooding. The City is interested in doing what they can to maintain habitat for wildlife and birds at the K-Mart Ponds, almost as much as we are at LCAS.

Happy Birding!

-- Janice Miller, President, LCAS



*K-Mart Ponds host a diversity of ducks.
Ring-necked Duck by Shane Sater.*



Black-crowned Night-heron by Bob Martinka. One of the rarer sightings at the K-Mart Ponds.

Voting Reminder

LCAS member Ruth Swenson would like to remind members to register and vote in the upcoming elections. Go to app.mt.gov/voterinfo for more information about registering, voting, and mail-in ballots.

Mark Your Calendar: 2020 Last Chance Audubon Society Field Trips

Please call or email leaders to make reservations. Bring binoculars, scope if appropriate, field guide, snacks, and water. Dress for the weather.

**NOTE: Except for the May 10 trip, all of our summer field trips are still planned - so go ahead and sign up! Leaders will continue to communicate about individual field trips as they approach.*

May 10, Sunday - Warm Springs Ponds: CANCELLED DUE TO COVID-19

May 23, Saturday: Canyon Ferry WMA

Leader: Bob Martinka

Meet at Albertson's Parking lot on Prospect Ave at 6:30 am for carpooling. We should arrive back in Helena shortly after noon, so bring lunch and drinks if you wish. Species we will likely see include a good variety of waterfowl, gulls, pelicans, warblers, and other small birds. We may make several other stops to view grassland birds and riparian-associated species. Possible species list of 65+. Contact Bob by email or phone: rmartink@aol.com or 406-449-3313.



Mallard with ducklings by Janice Miller.

June 20, Saturday: Sevenmile Creek at the Solstice

Leader: Shane Sater

On the longest day of the year, what are birds up to on Prickly Pear Land Trust's stream restoration property? Just miles from downtown Helena, this patchwork of grassland, riparian thickets, and small ponds is rich with summer birds. We regularly spot 40 to 50 species on June surveys. Look for Yellow Warblers, Gray Catbirds, Lazuli Buntings, Spotted Sandpipers, and up to six species of swallows. Meet at 5:30 am at the west end of the Lundy Center. Bring snacks, water, optics, and layers. Back by 12:30 pm. RSVP with Shane: shsater@gmail.com.

June 21, Sunday: Rice Ridge Burned Forest area, near Seeley Lake

Leader: Megan Fyelling, UM Bird Ecology Lab

We will meet in Seeley Lake at 7:45 am and travel to Rice Ridge from there, which is another ~15 minutes. We will have chances for Black-backed Woodpecker, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Cassin's Finch, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Townsend's Solitaire, Mountain Bluebird, and more. Participants can expect to walk around a mile off-road to look for species, but it is possible to stay on the road if you are uncomfortable walking off trail. Please wear sturdy hiking shoes and bring sunscreen, lunch, and water. We will conclude the trip around 11:00 am or when bird activity starts to die down. Meet Janice Miller (406-439-5762) at the west end of the Lundy Center at 5:45 am for carpooling. Return to Helena mid-afternoon.

June 23, Tuesday: Beck Hill Road near Garrison

Leaders: Rich Wirak & Earl McCurley

Bird the Beck Hill Road area near Garrison. Past sightings have included Wilson's Snipes, Long-billed Curlews, Bobolinks, Sandhill Cranes, Lazuli Buntings, Red-naped Sapsuckers, and various warblers and sparrows. Be prepared for some moderate uphill hiking. Meet at the Van's-Hardee's parking lot (on Euclid) at 7:00 am. Expect to return to Helena by 2:00 pm. Contact information for the trip is Rich 406-443-5189 and Earl 406-461-7352.

June 30, Tuesday: Elliot Pond-Marsh, Helena

Leaders: Earl McCurley & Rich Wirak

Rich and Earl will lead a trip to the privately-owned Elliott Pond-Marsh located off York Road

near Helena. Over 35 species of birds can be spotted on this easy walk around the pond-marsh complex, including various flycatchers, warblers, sparrows, kingbirds, Swainson's Thrush, Marsh Wrens, House Wrens, Great-horned Owls, Great-blue Herons, Bullock's Orioles, Belted Kingfishers, Blue-winged Teal, Wood Ducks, Wilson's Snipe, etc. The trip is limited to 20 people. Reserve a spot by calling Rich (406-443-5189) or Earl (406-461-7352). Meet at the Hardee's-Van's parking lot (on Euclid) at 7:00 am. Expect to be back by 2:00 pm.

August (Date TBD) – Evening Aquatic Insect Trip

Leader: Sara Owen

Sara Owen, Ecologist for MT Natural Heritage Program, will guide us alongside a stream near Helena to find aquatic insects as day fades to night. She will help us understand their importance to the stream itself, and also to birds and bats. Bring flashlight and/or headlamp, warm clothes, and (optionally) shoes that can get wet. Contact Sara to RSVP or ask questions: sowen@mt.gov. More details will be forthcoming.

September 6, Sunday: World Shorebirds Day

Leader: Stephen Turner

LCAS will once again support the World Shorebirds Day effort by surveying shorebirds and other bird species at the Canyon Ferry WMA. Several shorebird ID experts will be on hand. Meet at the northeast end of the Costco parking lot at 7:00 am. Please plan to arrive a few minutes early. The trip will return from the WMA no later than 1:00 pm. This field trip is **free to current LCAS members** and has limited space availability. Members are encouraged to register for the field trip as soon as possible. Non-members are welcome. The cost of the field trip for non-members is \$15, which includes a one-year membership to LCAS. Register by contacting Stephen Turner at turnstonest@gmail.com.



Birdathon is on...

We will conduct Birdathon as usual, with coronavirus in mind.

Teams will choose where and when to do their Birdathons—sometime between May 15 and June 15, in the Helena Valley and beyond. Teams will be asking for pledges soon. Understanding that resources are limited, we ask that you pledge what you can.

Also, Sandy Shull's matching challenge is still on. If you want to take advantage of Sandy's 50% match, please call (but do not go to) Birds and Beasley's, 449-0904, and leave a message. Sandy will get back to you and will help you out with the details.

Any other questions about pledging or doing a Birdathon? Call Jo Lace at 443-6640. **We'll make this the best Birdathon possible. Thanks for your support.**

-- Jo Lace

Update: 2020 Wings Across the Big Sky Bird Festival – Lewistown

Due to COVID-19 concerns, Montana Audubon has made the difficult decision to cancel this year's *Wings Across the Big Sky Bird Festival* in Lewistown. Though this is disappointing, the safety and health of supporters, volunteers, and staff is of utmost importance right now.

Montana Audubon is planning the same venue for next year's bird festival, June 4-6, 2021. Please mark your calendars. In spite of coronavirus, Montana Audubon continues to work for healthy birds and habitat. If you would like to make a tax-deductible contribution, please go to www.mtaudubon.org/support.

Birding 101 Class

As spring birds return to their Montana home for the season, it is an amazing gift to be able to recognize them and give them names. Last Chance Audubon Society, in cooperation with Montana WILD Education Center, is again offering an entry level birding workshop for those who want to learn the basics of bird identification. The class will explore bird identification through observation and discussion, both in the classroom and in the field. The workshop will focus on feathers and flight, bird song, migration, and conservation. The class is geared toward the adult level and only one class will be offered. Enrollment is limited. Full details are listed below. The course fills up very quickly, so don't delay, sign up today – and tell your friends! It's free! Details below.



Photo by Bob Martinka.

*****Note: Currently we are still planning to go ahead with this class. Stephen Turner will communicate with participants to make a final decision based on the coronavirus situation.***

May 30, Saturday - Birding 101 8:00 am – 11:00 am Leader: Stephen Turner

Class size will be limited to 12 participants and is geared toward the adult learning level. Everyone must register in advance to attend. There is no cost for the workshop; coffee and a snack will be provided. Binoculars will be provided for those who do not have them. All registrants should have the ability to navigate a one-mile walk around Spring Meadow Lake. We will meet rain or shine; please dress for the weather. Meet at Montana WILD, 2668 Broadwater Ave. To register, please contact Stephen Turner turnstonest@gmail.com.

Registrants for this workshop are also invited to attend a follow-up field trip on Sunday, June 1. The field trip will be held at the K-Mart Wetlands beginning at 7:00 am. Additional information will be provided during Saturday's workshop.

LCAS Election Postponed

The 2020 LCAS election that was scheduled for the chapter's May meeting will be delayed until September. At that time we will be electing officers and three board members, each to serve a two-year term. The slate of candidates includes Janice Miller for President, Brian Shovers for Secretary, Sue Jackson for Treasurer, and Coburn Currier, Bob Martinka, and Sumner Sharpe for Board positions. Nominations remain open until the election. If you'd like to nominate someone to serve as an officer or LCAS Board member, just contact Sue Jackson (443-4486). All LCAS members attending the September meeting will be eligible to vote.

Drastic Songbird Decline – Here's how you can help!

The March issue of Natural Grocers magazine contained an article about the link between neonicotinoids, the most widely used insecticides in the world, and the drastic decline of songbirds. A study published last year in the journal *Science* showed that if migrating songbirds eat just a small amount of a plant grown from neonicotinoid-treated seeds, they immediately lose weight, thus delaying their normal migration and their chances of surviving and reproducing.

The organic standard prohibits any use of these insecticides – so we can all help by eating organic foods. And if you have a garden, please buy organic seeds and ask sellers if their plants are grown from organic seeds. Let's do our part.

-- Sara Toubman

The View from Sevenmile Creek: April

Note: The surveys on Sevenmile Creek are a collaboration between Last Chance Audubon Society (LCAS) and Prickly Pear Land Trust (PPLT). PPLT acquired the Sevenmile property in 2016 for open space and habitat purposes. Stream restoration activities in the area are ongoing, and public access is not permitted at this time. PPLT provides access to LCAS volunteers specifically to conduct bird surveys and restoration activities. Questions? Contact Nate Kopp, nate@pricklypearlt.org.

April 13, 2020. The sun clears the Big Belt Mountains in an almost cloudless sky, touching the heavily frosted grasses with light. 11°F this morning, and the meadowlark chorus seems a bit sluggish. The cold front two days ago brought five inches of snow to Helena and the temperatures have yet to rebound to spring “normal.” As a puff of wind wafts icy air through my thin field pants, I wish I had worn long underwear today. The high-angle sun eventually pulls temperatures above freezing and melts most of the snow. The birds here are also in the midst of this tug-of-war between winter and spring. A Red-winged Blackbird sings from his breeding territory over one of the ponds while a Northern Shrike perches a few alders over, not quite ready yet for summer at the edge of the tundra.

A Rough-legged Hawk rides a thermal and then glides on, pushing north along the Rockies under sun power. The ponds have been busy these April weeks. Today the partial covering of thin ice doesn't seem to bother the Mallard and Green-winged Teal pairs, or the lone American Wigeon who flushes with them. Sparrows quietly forage where branches touch the water: “winter” American Tree Sparrows, a “spring” migrant Lincoln's Sparrow, and a “summer” Song Sparrow. Another sort of *tip* call catches my ear catches my ear as a bird flushes from the floodplain grasses into an alder. It sounds like another tree sparrow, but something seems different. Sure enough, this bird has none of the tree sparrow's white wingbars and is streak-breasted. Photos show the bright yellow spot on the lores: a Savannah Sparrow, several weeks early.

Is this one of the Savannah Sparrows that will perch in the grasses here next month, defending breeding territories next to the meadowlarks as Northern Harriers course low for voles? Or is this bird just stopping for a meal, en route to breeding grounds farther north?

This question will remain unanswered, but one thing is clear: spring is a mystery, and a lot is going on. As I watch the habitat grow and change here and await the surprises of the seasons ahead, I am excited. Will this spring bring even more duck diversity? Will yellowlegs or other shorebirds stop over? Will the Short-eared Owls return and nest this year?

I can't help but think ten years ahead, too. Will cottonwoods germinate when the stream floods, and grow skyward? Will the golden currants and buffaloberries that I've planted in the floodplain survive? I imagine thorny buffaloberry tangles with a nesting Loggerhead Shrike pair. A young cottonwood forest hosting Tree Swallows, Western Wood-pewees, and Northern Flickers – maybe even Western Screech Owls as the trees age. I imagine willow thickets springing up and bringing the beavers in to dam the stream, raise the water table, and help more birds, turtles, and willows thrive.

Sevenmile Creek is a special place, and the partnership with Prickly Pear Land Trust allows us to do some amazing work towards restoring habitat. But this process – observe the landscape and birds, imagine ways the habitat might grow, and collaborate to help it thrive – is applicable



Northern Shrike by Janice Miller.



Green-winged Teal by Shane Sater.

everywhere.

Is there a special place you watch and care about, in your backyard, on your ranch, or farther afield? How can this place thrive even more for plants, birds, and people? How can we work together to help it? As you bird the richness of spring, I invite you to keep these questions in mind. And if we at Last Chance Audubon can **help you help habitat**, give us a call!

-- *Shane Sater*



The future at Sevenmile Creek? Fruiting silver buffaloberry. Photo by Matt Lavin, https://www.flickr.com/photos/plant_diversity.

Membership Report

Sincere thanks to **Last Chance renewing members:**

Lisa Bay, Don & Joan Bishop, Cheryl Boid & Tom Woodall, Kathryn Bramer, Ray & Nan Breuninger, Mary Alice Chester, David & Deborah Cooper, Nancy & David Ewer, Eric & Ellen Feaver, Connie Geiger, Pat Grantham, Lynne Grosfield, Joan Higgins-Smith, John Hoffland, Howard Johnson, Marilyn Kelly-Clark, Kathy Lloyd & Drake Barton, Michele Marsh, Nancy Matheson, John Mott, Berta Nason, Alan & Nancy Nicholson, Denise Pengeroth, Elizabeth Poletti, Linda Sharkey, Jean Smith, Sandra Wheeler, and Dennis & Sandra Zeiler.

Please also welcome **National Audubon Society new members:** Gabriel Furshong and Joy Kelso.

Sincere thanks to **National Audubon Society renewing members:** Sarah Bond, Randolph Bradley, Andrea Eckerson, Constance Fiske, Joseph Furshong, Gary Gingery, Marilyn Hayes, Sally Hilander, Candy Kohlstaedt, Joe Lamsom, Curtis Larsen, Susan Near, M. Pasichnyk, Jeanne Perkins, David Slaughter, and Mary VanGilder.

LCAS MEMBERSHIP: A new membership or renewal is \$15/\$25 per household (see below) and is current for one year, January 1 through December 31. You can join and/or renew by using our website's online **MEMBERSHIP** button. Please be sure we receive all your correct contact information. If you do not have access to the website you can join or renew by filling out a registration form located either in this newsletter or printed from lastchanceaudubon.org. Please send completed registration form and your \$15 check (or \$25 check if you wish to get the newsletter in hardcopy) to: LCAS, PO Box 924, Helena, MT, 59624. If you are not sure if you are up to date with your membership, please feel free to email the Membership Chair to verify.

PRINTED and ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTERS: We want all our members to stay informed about chapter news and happenings. If you do not have access to email, staying current with your chapter membership to Last Chance Audubon Society guarantees that you will continue to receive a printed version of our newsletter, but due to increased printing costs, we will be asking for an additional \$10 for processing. If you do have email access, please help us keep printing costs to a minimum and opt to receive our newsletter electronically. Those dollars we save will be spent for important bird habitat, education, and outreach. Thank you.

NAS MEMBERSHIP: If you would like National Audubon Society membership information or to renew with them, please direct an email to customerservice@audubon.org or contact them directly by phone at 1-844-428-3826. We are unable to forward memberships to National Audubon.

-- *Sharon Dewart-Hansen, Membership Chair, smdewarthansen@charter.net*

Last Chance Audubon Society
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Membership

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MEMBERSHIP FORM

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All contributions are tax
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Christmas Bird Count: Coburn Currier, clcurrier@hotmail.com
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Monthly Program: Sandy Shull & Liz Hiltunen, 449-0904 or 227-5492
Publicity: Liz Hiltunen, 227-5492, lhiltunen@q.com
Meeting Set-up: Doug Hansen, mthusker@charter.net
Field Trips: open
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MT Audubon State Office: 443-3949