

# Birdathon 2020

## Team “Baywatch”

June 11 - 1:00 p.m. to June 12 - 1:00 p.m. 2020  
Bay Ranch, Rocky Mountain Front, Montana



*“Oooh, beak-ini’s!”*

For our new team’s first Birdathon, Gail Moser, Mike Bay, and Lisa Bay ventured out over the varied habitat and terrain of the 4,400-acre Bay Ranch, nestled in the foothills of the Rocky Mountain Front, north of Wolf Creek. The ranch has been in the Bay Family for six generations and has been protected with a MFWP conservation easement since the early 1990s. Next year, a 40-acre wetland restoration project will be completed with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to reclaim drained wet meadows and aspen, enhancing the habitat for bobolinks, and maybe pulling in a few more soras!

The ranch is drained by the South Fork of the Dearborn River and enjoys abundant water from Jeffries Creek, Prudem Creek, Deadman Creek, and numerous ephemeral potholes and smaller drainages. With this year’s good rains, the grass was thigh high in places and every pothole was filled.

We started our bird spying at a cabin along willow-laden Jeffries Creek, known for its nesting Bullock’s orioles, western tanagers, lazuli buntings, and common yellowthroat, not to mention the warblers. A mama elk and nursing baby rambled the hillside above us, as veerys sang in the aspens. The day before, we had photographed a large black bear combing the grass for fawns and elk calves in this area.

Our second stop was the barnyard, for house wrens, western wood peewees, evening grosbeaks, and Cassin’s finches. Oh, did I mention goldfinches? At the nearby old roadbed for Hwy 434, we stopped on a bridge overlooking the South Fork of the Dearborn to glass the riparian habitat from above, logging black-headed grosbeaks, willow flycatchers, yellow warblers, and catbirds. Just a few hundred feet further along offered our most surprising ‘catch’ of the day, a yellow-breasted chat! We haven’t seen one before at the Bay’s, but Gail’s photo documentation bore out our ID.

We then headed to the prairie for northern harriers, yellow-headed blackbirds, long-billed curlew, breeding pairs of snipes, a golden eagle, and bobolinks. Sightings of a lone, first-summer tundra swan and a badger were highlights along the road between different sections of the ranch. Our penultimate stop was along an upper section of the South Fork of the Dearborn where a belted kingfisher, common merganser, and a spotted sandpiper graced us.

Meanwhile, back for a final stop at the cabin, we spied a hairy woodpecker, red-tailed hawks, a prairie falcon, and kestrel. Subsequent to rejuvenation from Gail’s killer guacamole, we called it a day.

This land feels familiar, kindred, always beautiful. But focusing down on inches of it gave a new perspective – of its beauty and abundance, the hidden gems such as the yellow-breasted chat, and from the identification of the numerous ‘little brown jobs’ we normally see skittering out of the way of the pickup. The day lent credence to the value of ecotones, in this case, where mountains, foothills, and grasslands intersect. The 75 species we saw in 24 hours demonstrate just how rich the Rocky Mountain Front’s bird life really is—and this, only a minute section of it.

While we were enriched by this very wonderful outing, *you* can help *us* enrich our local Last Chance Audubon (LCAS) Chapter to accomplish our mission, particularly its “*education and habitat protection*” aspects.

If you’d like to support LCAS and our team, you can pledge an amount per species, or donate a chosen amount. Please send your donation **check**, made payable to **LCAS**, to: Gail Moser / 807 Hillside St. / Helena, MT 59601.

**THANK YOU!**