

The ***Watershed Duo*** Birdathon

May 29, 2020

Limitations Inspire Creativity

*“The prickly pear is now in full blume,” said Meriwether Lewis,
“And forms one of the beauties as well as the greatest pests of the plains.”*

Prickly Pear Creek is a significant feature of our Helena geography. It originates in Tizer Basin, high in the Elkhorn Mountains, just north of Elkhorn Peak, flows west to the valley below, where Interstate-15 follows alongside it, going north most of the way to East Helena. As the interstate angles northwest to Helena, Prickly Pear Ck continues north to East Helena, through JF Kennedy Park, and past Helena Sand & Gravel to cross Canyon Ferry Road. There’s a bridge over the creek on York Road as it flows north through the Upper Prickly Pear Fishing Access, before merging with Ten Mile Creek and flowing into Lake Helena. All of the local tributaries along that route flow into Prickly Pear Creek, which creates and defines the “watershed”.

This year, my Birdathon team, ***The Watershed Duo***, Shane Sater and myself, decided to see what birds we could find in and along the Prickly Pear Creek watershed. To our knowledge this has not been done before, so we didn’t know what to expect. Could we find 100-species of birds? We weren’t sure, but we are optimists... and so we set out, on Friday, May 29th, planning to stay as close to the Creek as we were able, first following Grizzly Gulch up to Brooklyn Bridge Divide, then down Travis Creek and Lump Gulch into Clancy, and all the way down to Lake Helena Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

Thus, we stayed very close to home – a round-trip of 60-miles from Helena to Clancy to Lake Helena and home, again - and were delighted to find 109 species of birds, along with a bobcat, several deer, turtle, fox and chipmunk. We also found Prickly Pear Cactus, *opuntia polyantha*, preparing to bloom. We were giddy with the thrill of finding so many birds and animals, so much so that we were grinning and laughing as we returned home, even as exhausted as we were after 15-hours of listening, looking, finding, photographing, and documenting birds, and walking a good deal.

At every stop, Shane documented ALL species of birds – and how many of each – for entry in eBird – a public, scientific database for anyone to refer to for various purposes. (eBird.org) We at Last Chance Audubon Society (LCAS) can utilize that data as we work together with various agencies, such as MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks, US Forest Service, BLM, and also the City of Helena, regarding land-use. The database gives us an idea of just how many birds use the land we care about: we documented over 1,800 individual birds. Our day-in-the-field provides a snapshot of the different conditions and use of the public lands: forests, wetlands, cottonwoods and willow thickets, and just who is using and relying on those important areas. We now have an idea of how many birds might use the riparian areas in our watershed – close to home, and including our home.

Being on a Birdathon Team is giving yourself a day-in-the-field – i.e. a GIFT. It is also a fun way to raise funds needed for our LCAS Chapter to accomplish our mission, particularly the “*education and habitat protection*” aspects. And, we are learning, not only about the birds, but about habitat and why it’s important to maintain and appreciate natural areas in and around our watershed. Learning is the first step.

I've learned a LOT about our home watershed through this year's Birdathon. You might say, it was a *watershed moment*.

If you'd like to support LCAS and our team, you can pledge an amount "Per Species", or donate a "Flat Rate". Please send your donation **check**, made payable to **L.C.A.S.**, to: Janice Miller, at: 815 11th Ave, Helena, MT 59601. OR, you can pay by **credit card** by visiting our LCAS website, <https://www.lastchanceaudubon.org/> and hitting "DONATE".

The BIRDS, LCAS, SHANE and I say, **THANK YOU!** *Janice Miller* May 2020