



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.

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Birds of the Storm

After months of mild, dry weather, early February's arctic storm brought intense cold and a blanket of snow to the Helena Valley. The storm arrived on February 6 and temperatures continued to drop over the next week, freezing the occasional waterpipe and challenging home heating systems. And while people could stay inside, the birds had no choice but to weather the storm. As the frigid temperatures hit Helena, Bob Martinka observed a Cassin's Finch at his house in town for the first time in almost three months. He continued to see this typically montane species regularly over the next two weeks, even as the Helena airport clocked a low of -22°F on February 13.

The Cassin's Finch was not the only bird to appear in response to the harsh conditions. On February 12, Margaret Amundson found a Varied Thrush at her feeders – the first sighting of the species in the Helena Valley in seven years. The bird, a male, remained around her shelter belt for the next several days. Meanwhile, a Hermit Thrush that had been frequenting Liza Frazer's yard since December continued to visit her heated bird bath during the subzero weather.

At all times of year, during sunny weather and storms, our yards can serve as essential refuges for birds. Our feeders, shrubs, and bird baths can help many of our feathered friends endure harsh winter conditions. As warm weather approaches, native plants such as chokecherries and goldenrod become



Cassin's Finch by Bob Martinka.



Pine Siskins at bird bath by Nancy Ewer.

increasingly important, supporting the diversity of caterpillars that so many of our breeding songbirds depend on. (Check out the [NWF Native Plant Finder](#) to find some of the best.) What birds are you seeing in your yard? Did the cold snap bring changes? Are there ways you could create even better bird habitat around your house? If you have ideas or success stories to share, we'd love to hear from you! Please contact Shane Sater to submit notes or photos for consideration in the *Last Chance Chat*.



Put a Little Love in Your Heart – Birding in Springtime

March is here, bringing a bit of cheer from our feathered friends as they return from their winter getaways to breed in the northern climes.

Have you heard the “hoo-hoo-hoo” of the Great Horned Owls around Helena yet? They’ve already begun singing at dusk, indicating that breeding season has arrived in spite of the cold and snowy weather.

If you’re like me, you’ll smile when you hear the loud, whistled notes and gurgling warbles of the Western Meadowlarks as they perch on sagebrush, signs, and fenceposts; the “konk-a-ree” of the Red-winged Blackbirds, often from marshes among the cattails, and the Marsh Wren belting out his loud, gurgling song. Oh, to sing with such gusto!

When traveling up one of our gulches, listen for the “chup-chup-zeee” of the Spotted Towhee along the forest edges and shrubby areas, where they scratch through the leaf litter looking for insects, seeds, and spiders.

The Great Blue Heron (a few of which overwinter in the Helena Valley) is thrilling to spy, flying with its six-foot wingspan and its head folded back over its neck. It may land along a ditch bank or wade the edges of a reservoir looking for frogs or fish. And then, awkwardly, it lands in the tops of cottonwood trees to nest with its colony. Nearby, witness the Tree Swallows’ joyous flight near and over the water, feeding on flying insects. It lightens the heart.

Occasionally, when you’re out in the valley, you’ll hear a winnowing sound coming from somewhere above your head, but you will have a difficult time finding the culprit. It’s the Wilson’s Snipe rising and diving as part of his courtship display, causing his outer tail feathers to vibrate in the wind and make the sound. Ain’t love grand?

And by the end of March, there is the phenomenal spectacle of thousands of Snow Geese refueling at Freezout WMA near Fairfield, north of Helena. The wondrous sight will lift your heart.

When our spirits need rejuvenation, all we have to do is notice nature.

Welcome SPRING!

-- Janice Miller, President, LCAS



Spotted Towhee by Bob Martinka.



Nesting Great Blue Herons by Janice Miller.

LCAS Board Meeting Highlights: February 2021 Meeting

- **Membership:** less than half of our members have renewed their membership dues for 2021. If you have not renewed yet, please remember to do so!
- Letter sent in support of a planned new Raptor House at MT WILD with a projected 2022 opening.
- **Sevenmile Creek:** Planting of native species seeds planned in cooperation with Prickly Pear Land Trust; LCAS volunteers to help with plantings (stay tuned).
- **Annual Chapter Report** submitted to National Audubon Society.
- Purchase (\$150) approved of a forthcoming **concert video that explores different bird flight patterns alongside performances of classical music** for LCAS members and schools in the Helena region.
- **Birding 101 at Montana WILD** scheduled for early June, but dependent on COVID-19 status.
- **Christmas bird count results submitted** to Montana CBC Compiler in Missoula.
- **LCAS 50th Anniversary Ideas Brainstormed - Dependent on COVID-19 status**
 - Family-friendly, outdoor celebration event discussed for late summer/fall; if not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions, possibly an indoor event in January 2022.
 - We will be inquiring about a LCAS 50th Anniversary beer.
 - Offer special field trips, e.g., aquatic insects.
- **Chapter Goals for 2021 Brainstormed**
 - Support habitat conservation, restoration, and access projects around Helena.
 - Work towards educating Helena area homeowners about landscaping for butterflies, moths, etc. with native plants, benefiting migrating birds.
 - Possibly support an intern to assist MT Audubon's conservation efforts.
 - Consider placing a bench at the Regulating Reservoir.



Grasshopper Sparrow by Dan Ellison.

Ideas are welcome on 50th Anniversary celebration event and/or other initiatives!

Next Board Meeting: Tuesday, March 9 at 7:00 pm. Contact Sue Jackson (suejacksonmt@gmail.com or 443-4486) for details about how to join the meeting.

Nominations Open

Nominations are now open for positions on the LCAS Board. If you'd like to submit a nomination, please contact Sue Jackson (suejacksonmt@gmail.com or 443-4486). Board members serve two-year terms. Nominations are open until April 20.



Canada Geese by Mike Chapman.

The View from Sevenmile Creek: February

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.

February 20, 2021. The west wind makes our eyes tear up and our noses run as we flounder through white powder. Winter has brought snow to Sevenmile Creek at last, and even in this charred landscape the sun and wind have yet to melt it. A fat vole watches us before disappearing into the subnivean zone, but our expectations for birds are low today. I am projecting we'll see between five and seven species on this survey, while Stephen Turner is hoping for eight.

The ponds are entirely frozen, but four Mallards flush from a shallow stretch of open, flowing water between them. Even the creek is hidden, covered with ice except for a few of the riffles and bends. It is hard to believe that this same place, in just a matter of months, will be overflowing with meadowlark songs, displaying Red-winged Blackbirds, and foraging swallows.

I find myself holding my breath slightly as I wait for this growing season. In part, this is the usual anticipation for the exuberance of spring. I am waiting for the insects and spiders to wake up as the snow melts, the land turns a soggy gray-brown, and the first meadowlarks arrive. I await the magic of palpable change as the grasses start growing, the shrubs break their buds, and each day and week brings new birds back to us.

But this year, there is more to think about than just the arrival of spring. There is also the immediate aftermath of the fire and the restoration work. For a time, so many of the chokecherry and alder thickets are gone:

thickets that held such a variety of warblers, flycatchers, and sparrows in past springs. How will this year leave its mark on the seasonal dance of arrival and growth? How soon will the chokecherries resprout from their roots? Will some birds benefit from the greater openness of this landscape, or will we only be mourning the loss for a time?

Today's survey ends fuller than I had expected. A mottled gray shadow flushes from a patch of lightly burned alders: a Great Horned Owl, our eighth species for the day. Stephen wins our friendly guessing game. And as we wait for the meadowlarks to return, it is worth remembering that this is not the first time Sevenmile Creek has proven fuller than expected. Although we have only known this place in a degraded state – impacted by years of overgrazing, soil disturbance, and channelization – we have already found 156 species of birds here. Among them have been notable breeding species like Grasshopper Sparrows and Clay-colored Sparrows, as well as rarities such as Eastern Phoebe and Palm Warbler. And this winter's stream restoration promises more wetlands, more floodplain habitat, and eventually more shrub thickets. So will this place astound our imaginations again?

Whether we will see it this year or will have to wait several, I believe it is only a matter of time.

-- Shane Sater



Spring at Sevenmile Creek by Shane Sater.

Membership Report

Please welcome **Last Chance Audubon Society new members:** Carol Shope, Jeff & Sue Miller, and Donna & Glen Gleaves.

Sincere thanks to **Last Chance renewing members:** Kurt Olofson, John Moore, Bill & Vicki Fitzgerald, William Bucher, Richard & Gretchen Edelen, Gregg & Wendy Wheeler, Candida Quinn, Bill Rainey, Sandy Shull, and Ginnie Talley.

Please also welcome **National Audubon Society new members:** Jeff Dorrington, Mikki Goodhart, Bradley Heil, Kathleen Kern-Wells, Mary MacGregor, Carole Massman, and Marlene Mickey.

Sincere thanks to **National Audubon Society renewing members:** Barbara Bayer, Tim Speyer, Kimberly Dale, Jerry Matthews, Jennifer Frazer, Andea Rankin, Curtis Larsen, Pete Strazdas, Bill Cook, Twila Costigan, Susan Near, Mary Arnold, Wade Wilkison, Mikal Kellner, Cathy Wright, Loretta Carter, Robin Le Neve, Robert Shepard, Linda Weber, Rich Wirak, Glenda Bradshaw, and Sue & Bruce Newell.

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 are 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

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Membership

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