

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.

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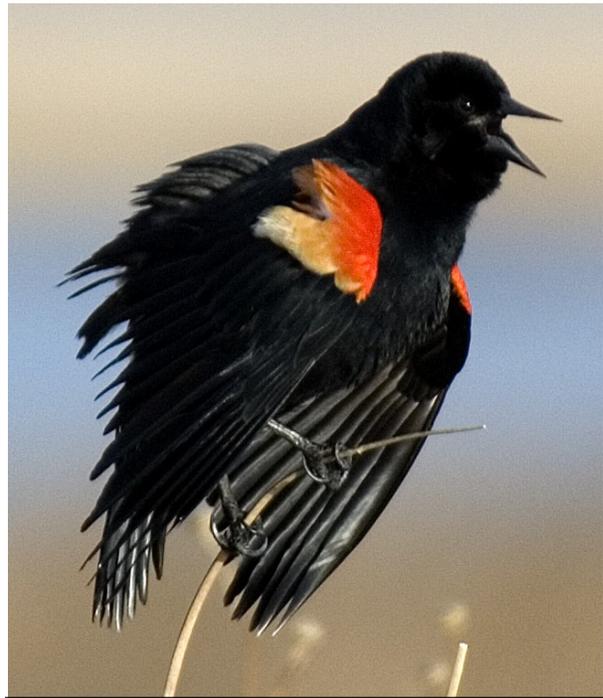
Leaping into Spring

Spring has come fast to the Helena Valley this year. Bluebirds and Red-winged Blackbirds are back, the Western Meadowlarks are singing, and the first Sandhill Cranes have arrived. Small groups of Snow Geese and Tundra Swans have been stopping at the Helena Regulating Reservoir to rest, while to our north, observers counted over 60,000 Snow Geese at Freezout Lake on March 26.

Besides these reliable signs of spring, Helena birders have been spotting a few more-unusual birds as well. On March 15, several observers watched a Short-eared Owl hunting the grassland on the edges of Lake Helena. At the Regulating Reservoir, sharp-eyed observers have been finding the occasional Eurasian Wigeon and Greater White-fronted Goose among the large waterfowl flocks. As spring migration continues to build to its May crescendo, what birds are you seeing, in your own yard and farther afield?

Last Chance Audubon has been busy this spring: building new nest boxes and cleaning out old ones, planning summer bird walks, and continuing our rich tradition of field observation.

Meanwhile, we have also received the exciting news that, as covid case numbers have fallen, Montana WILD has re-opened their space for public gatherings! We are still



Red-winged Blackbird by Bob Martinka.

figuring out appropriate precautions so that we can meet again without jeopardizing the health of those among us who are especially vulnerable to illness – but we expect, at long last, that we will be able to hold a membership meeting again in May. Thank you for your patience! Please pencil in the evening of **May 10** for our membership meeting – and check the May newsletter for full details.



Spring Cleaning

This spring, we are focused on helping our cavity-nesting birds: making, installing, repairing, and cleaning bird boxes. On Saturday, March 12, we worked together with people from Boy Scout Troop #214, Montana WILD, and AmeriCorps to clean out the bird boxes located at Spring Meadow Lake State Park (see a short video [here](#)). Last year, the Boy Scouts counted and mapped a whopping 50 boxes on the property. On this day, AmeriCorps volunteer Tessa Hurley welcomed everyone and divided us into five groups, and we set out to clean houses.

My team consisted of a new LCAS member, Shaun, whose expertise in using a wireless drill was essential in opening the boxes; two brothers, ages nine and four; and their dad Robert. We all wore gloves and were curious what we might find inside the boxes. Shaun would open a bird box, one of the boys would reach in and pull out the nest material, and then we would gawk: a lot of grasses, pine needles, feathers, dirt – even rocks. We found a few tiny white eggshells left from the Tree Swallow family that Shaun had witnessed here last spring. We took a moment to inspect the shells with amazement – they were so little! Later we found a wasp nest in one of the boxes. (Can you imagine a bluebird pair, looking for a home and finding that wasps were already nesting there?) All of the boxes had nest material all the way up to the bottom of the entry hole, layered and pressed firmly down. There was literally no room at the inn – or in the box – for a new nest this year. Often, the whole dusty, feathery mass came out of the box in one lump.

Our LCAS mission statement reminds us that we promote “...understanding, respect, and enjoyment of birds and the natural world...” Working with this group, especially the naturally curious children, gave me and the others a lot of understanding and enjoyment of our natural world. And no doubt the other groups had similar experiences on this day. I just wish I could be there to watch the bluebirds and swallows inspect a potential breeding box and come out with a big smile! I’m looking forward to seeing a LOT of young birds at Spring Meadow later this spring. How about you?

Happy Spring Birding!

-- Janice Miller, President, LCAS



*Spring nest box cleaning!
Photos by Janice Miller.*

Summer Walk Series: Mark Your Calendars!

This summer, LCAS is offering a series of one-hour evening walks as part of the Summer Walk series coordinated by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. All of these walks begin at 6:00 pm. You can see the full slate of evening walks here: <https://www.register-ed.com/programs/montana/241-summer-walk-series>. To sign up for a walk, register at the link provided (registration opens 14 days before the date of each walk). We will also be offering our usual longer field trips, as in past years: watch for details about these in the May newsletter.

June 28: Survey Protocols Using eBird Mobile

Leaders: Peter Dudley (Montana Audubon) and Stephen Turner (Last Chance Audubon)

Where can I find the best birding spots? What's an easy way to keep track of my "life list?" How can the public contribute through citizen science? During this walk, Peter Dudley and Stephen Turner will answer all of these questions and more. They will introduce participants to the powerful crowdsourced database, **eBird**, and cover survey techniques you can use in your backyard or out in the field! This event is intended for people who enjoy birding, have some knowledge of local bird species, and are looking to expand their repertoire. For this field trip you will need:

- Binoculars and a hardcopy or mobile app field guide (Sibley, iBird Pro, etc.) – individuals may also download the [Merlin app](#) and install the US: Rocky Mountain pack or the US and Canada pack.
- An eBird account with log in credentials ([Create Cornell Lab account](#)).
- The eBird mobile app downloaded to your smartphone.

The field trip will take place at Spring Meadow Lake State Park: please meet in the Montana WILD parking lot at 2668 Broadwater Ave.

August 9: Birds at the Edge Between Summer and Fall

Leader: Shane Sater

As the heat of August kicks in, many of our local birds are wrapping up their nesting season and stocking up on food for migration, while the first few fall migrants (such as Solitary Sandpipers) may already be passing through. Bring binoculars, sturdy hiking shoes, and your sharp eyes and ears for this evening bird walk on Prickly Pear Land Trust's incredible stream restoration site along Sevenmile Creek. Currently there is not a trail, so expect uneven but relatively level terrain. We will be crossing a plank bridge along the creek and exploring evening birds on the restoration site – keep your eyes peeled for swallows, nighthawks, shorebirds, and more.

We will meet at the Sevenmile Creek restoration site; those who register will receive detailed directions.

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August 16: August Insect Diversity

Leader: Shane Sater

How many insects can we find on an August evening along a recently-restored stream? As the day fades and temperatures cool, we will be checking patches of flowering goldenrod, other plants, and various microhabitats along Prickly Pear Land Trust's Sevenmile Creek restoration site to see what insects are active and to try to gain some understanding of their relationships.



House Wren by Dan Ellison.



Solitary Sandpiper by Bob Martinka.

Currently there is not a trail, so expect uneven but relatively level terrain. We may be crossing a plank bridge across the creek. Bring sturdy hiking shoes and your curiosity – binoculars and a magnifying glass are optional, but may be helpful as well.

We will meet at the Sevenmile Creek restoration site.

Thank you to our nest box builders!

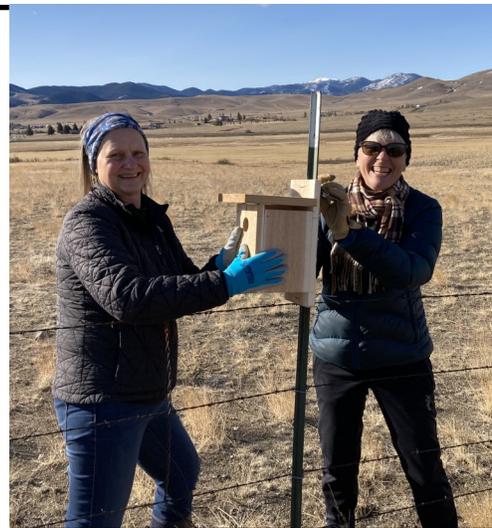
We would like to thank the many folks who helped out with our spring nest box building project. In just a few short days, we built 16 bluebird/swallow nest boxes, and most of those boxes have now been set up at Sevenmile Creek along the north fence line. Kudos to Gary Grzebielski for helping to prepare the box “packs” with his power tools and know-how! Thanks to our box builders who assembled the boxes in record time: Joyce Bateman, Marlys Forbes, Sue Jackson, Shane Sater, Berta Nason, Carol Bischoff, Coburn Currier, and Gregg & Wendy Wheeler. Nice job! Thanks to Bob Martinka for donating a 1x8 at the last minute. Thanks also to Sue Jackson for agreeing to survey and maintain the Sevenmile Creek bluebird trail.



Mountain Bluebird by Dan Ellison.

Sevenmile Creek Nesting Boxes

On a beautiful and warm St. Patrick’s Day morning, a small crew of LCAS members made short work of installing 11 bluebird/swallow boxes on the north fence line of the Sevenmile Creek property. The cedar boxes were built by the competent hands of various volunteers (see above). Blake Sexton, Community Conservation Coordinator for Prickly Pear Land Trust (PPLT), led the crew over the hilly grassland of the Sevenmile Creek site. The boxes were placed on fence posts that stretch to the western edge of the property. An additional three boxes will be placed on an interior fence line that will be constructed in June, and PPLT is erecting two boxes along the south fence line. During the work party, we heard and saw Horned Larks and Western Meadowlarks nearby – spring was already right around the corner! We did not see any bluebirds or swallows, so it seems likely that we got the boxes up just in time, before they arrived.



Patty Turner and Marlys Forbes installing a nest box. Photo by Stephen Turner.

Our work crew included Blake Sexton, Marlys Forbes, Berta Nason, and Patty and Stephen Turner. Thanks to all for a lovely morning, and for helping to prepare for a season of nesting! LCAS would also like to extend its heartfelt thanks to PPLT for their dedication to conservation and collaboration during this project. Watch for a fall opportunity to help install Wood Duck/Hooded Merganser boxes near the ponds at Sevenmile Creek!

May Election

LCAS's bylaws call for an election to be held annually at the chapter's May meeting. At this time we are putting together a slate of candidates for 3 officers (President, Secretary and Treasurer) and three Board positions. If you would like to nominate someone or if you would be interested in serving the chapter in one of these positions, please contact the Nominating Committee. Nominations can be made up to the time of the election.

Sue Jackson, Nominating Committee, suejacksonmt@gmail.com

News from the Board

First, we would like to welcome Don Skaar to the LCAS Board; Don has been appointed to fill a vacant position and will serve until June 2023 when the remaining term for that position is completed. Don worked for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) in the Fisheries Division from 1989-2021. He has been a birdwatcher since the age of nine and a member of Last Chance Audubon since the mid-1990s. He previously served on the Board from about 2000 to 2015 and at different times helped organize field trips and a month-long Natural History Lecture Series. Don retired from FWP at the end of 2021. It's great to have him back on the Board!



Canada Geese with goslings by Liz Hiltunen.

Second, we owe an enormous thank you to Jo Lace, who has served on the LCAS Board for many years. We have long looked to Jo for ideas and inspiration and have benefited from her energy and thoughtful input. Jo is a 'connector' and always knows who to call for advice or expertise. Through the years she has worked on many chapter projects, including serving as co-chair of the Helena bird festival (designing the poetry and photo contests for that event), coordinating numerous fundraising efforts (fall auctions and Birdathons), and leading annual field trips to Warm Springs and Benton Lake. For years, Jo has been writing personal "thank you" notes to everyone who makes a donation to our conservation and education committees. Jo has decided to leave the Board, but will remain active with the chapter – and that's great news, since LCAS would not be the same without her! Thank you, Jo, for all you've done for us.

Finally, our next Board meeting is scheduled for April 5 at 7:00 pm, via Zoom. LCAS members are always welcome to attend; contact any Board member (see page 8) for details.

The View from Sevenmile Creek: March

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.

March 17, 2022. Today's forecast calls for sun, a high in the 50s, and light winds: the sort of weather that makes it hard to stay inside. This morning, Stephen Turner and several other volunteers are out at Sevenmile Creek putting up nest boxes. I had hoped to join them, but my class schedule interfered. My afternoon, however, is free. So even though I "should" still be inside working on a long list of tasks, here I find myself, out at Sevenmile Creek with binoculars, looking for signs of spring and hoping to find early bluebirds or meadowlarks.

Spring has definitely progressed since my last visit, but the changes remain subtle and quiet.

Tiny seedlings – probably goosefoot plants – are popping up across the floodplain. Two ponds are completely thawed now, while the others are still icy. Canada Geese watch me warily from among the tufts of new, green grasses, while one pair floats in the slow water of a stream bend.

The most spectacular change is with the insects. Where last month, I had to carefully search the sunniest slopes to find any at all, today I begin seeing them almost immediately as I walk across the floodplain. First a stout, coppery ground beetle dashes across the bare earth. Next I see a slender, gold and black beetle traveling in short spurts. In a small patch of open water along one of the still-icy ponds, backswimmer bugs swim busily where last month I could only see an occasional sluggish movement.

I think to check the mullein leaves, those woolly rosettes that overwintered so enduringly under the snow – and I find what appears to be a “welcome to spring” party. At least three species of small black-and-golden bugs leap away from my intrusion. Some predator has stashed a clouded sulphur butterfly from last year between the mullein leaves, now little left of it but the wings. But the stars of this party are the ladybugs. I find two individuals of two different native species: gems of spring hiding deep among the mullein, where they presumably passed the winter.

“Wait a minute,” you may be thinking, “this is supposed to be an article about birds!” And indeed it is an article about birds – and their food. The avian signs of spring remain sparse here today – but these beetles and bugs represent the early preparations for their arrival. Most, perhaps all, of today’s insects spent the winter as adults, sheltering under the ground, under bark, or perhaps under mullein leaves. They are the advance guard: the heralds of the prey base that will be emerging day by day over the months ahead, as the plants continue greening up and an uncountable diversity of these little animals emerges from the hiding places where they overwintered as eggs, larvae, or pupae. The insects are setting the stage for everything that eats them: not only the bluebirds and meadowlarks, but also the swallows, warblers, and flycatchers that will follow them.

As my afternoon approaches its end and I begin walking back to my car, I hear something from the dense grasses across the creek. The welcome sound is unmistakable: a stuttery trill ending with an emphatic *chup*. There it is, perching on a steel fencepost: my first meadowlark of the spring, surveying the awakening landscape. The insects have set the stage and the play has begun. Let’s see how it unfolds this year!

-- Shane Sater



*Canada Goose swimming in the stream.
Photo by Shane Sater.*



A native ladybug (Hippodamia quinquesignata or glacialis) on a mullein leaf. Photo by Shane Sater.

Membership Report

Please welcome **Last Chance Audubon Society**
new member: Robin Leneve.

Sincere thanks to **Last Chance renewing members:**
William Fairbank, Blake Running, Nancy & David
Ewer, David Slaughter, Estelle Shuttleworth, Sandy
Shull, John Moore, and John Mott.

Please also welcome **National Audubon Society**
new members: Mary Benefield, Jean Braun, Karen
English, Mary Lamb, Julie Reardon, Linda Stallings,
and Lucy Zarr.

Sincere thanks to **National Audubon Society**
renewing members: Chris Alke, Roger Bacon, Van
Bass, Joyce Bateman, Barbara Bayer, Glenda
Bradshaw, Kathryn Bramer, Loretta Carter, Janet
Coughlin, Diane Dean, S. Eriksen, Judy Fjell, Linda Galloway, B. Hall-Munger, Pamela Harris,
Gene Huntington, Wallace Jewell, Rory Johnson, Gerald Keck, Ann Kendall, Christopher
Korow, Robert Lengenbach, Marjorie Levine, Everett Lynn, Kathy Major, Carole Massman,
William Mede, Patricia Peterson, Tedra Skaar, Raven Smith, Tim Speyer, Pete Strazdas, Lucas
Thomi, Terry Wheeling, Victoria Wole, and Heidi Youmans.



Yellow-rumped Warbler by Dan Ellison.

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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MEMBERSHIP FORM

*Clip and mail to:
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59624 with check for \$15
– or \$25 if you must
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newsletter.
All contributions are tax
deductible.*

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