

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

September 2022

Upper Clark Fork Waterfowl Nesting Project

Tuesday, September 13, 2022

Program begins 7:00 PM

**Montana WILD
2668 Broadwater Ave.
Free – All Are Welcome**

The Upper Clark Fork Valley, historically a vast wetlands complex, was heavily impacted by industrial-scale mining operations and urbanization. Over the past 20 years, it has undergone drastic changes related to Superfund remediation and restoration. But much of this work has overlooked the importance of waterfowl habitat.

The waterfowl hen tube project – the subject of this month's LCAS presentation – aims to address waterfowl habitat in the Upper Clark Fork area. Hen tubes installed in wetlands provide safe nesting habitat for upland nesting ducks, boosting nesting success to 40%-80%, compared to 5% for ground-nesting ducks. Mallards, scaup, redhead, goldeneye, and occasionally wood ducks may use these hen houses. From 2021-2022, ten hen houses were installed within the Superfund Operable Units. This pilot project



Installing a hen house. Photo by Mark Mariano.

seeks not only to boost waterfowl abundance but also to engage the public, and will hopefully expand in the future.

Our speaker, Mark Mariano, is a restoration ecologist with a background in aquatic ecosystems. He focuses on waterfowl ecology in the Upper Clark Fork Valley and waterfowl protection at the Berkeley Pit. He holds a BS in Wildland Restoration from the University of Montana and an MS focusing on restoration ecology from Montana Tech. Mariano is an affiliate faculty member at Montana Tech and is working with a graduate student and other scientists to develop a light goose migration forecast model to aid waterfowl protection at the Berkeley Pit.



President's Perch

Just over 50 years ago, a handful of Helena-area birders decided to work together on behalf of the birds and other wildlife. They agreed on a mission:

“To educate the public on the need to protect wild birds, animals, trees and other plants, and to promote a better public understanding of the inter-dependence of these natural resources.”

This mission, adopted in 1971, remains just as important today. Threats to birds are increasing, and time is running out to take effective action. *It’s critical that we expand efforts to protect wild birds and promote public understanding of the many interconnected parts of the natural environment, of which birds are a major part.*

As an Audubon chapter, we work with local individuals and organizations to do on-the-ground work in service of this mission. We've helped create a birding platform at the Charles van Hook Wetlands, just east of the Lewis & Clark County Fairgrounds. In coordination with Prickly Pear Land Trust, Shane Sater and other chapter members are doing cutting-edge bird, plant, and insect inventories at Sevenmile Creek. We have worked with Fish, Wildlife and Parks & MT WILD to create and dedicate the Jane Beasley Trail here at Spring Meadow Lake. The trail is a lasting tribute to Jane’s voice for birds and wildlife in the Helena area and all across Montana.



Lesser Yellowlegs by Janice Miller.

With your help, we will continue to serve the birds and their habitats through our educational efforts (like scholarships and grants), field trips, monthly programs, and habitat projects. Together, we can help the birds – and we can have fun as we do it!

I'm looking forward to actively working with YOU to continue with our fifty-year-old mission.

-- Janice Miller, President, LCAS

Birdathon Recap

Our three stellar Birdathon teams – Bigfoot and Baldy, Brother Can You Sparrow a Dime, and Watershed Duo – raised an amazing \$2,342.31 this summer. Each team spent a 24-hour period counting all of the bird species they could see or hear. Thanks to the teams for their hard work and to all of you who made pledges to support their efforts. As in past years, LCAS will donate 50% of this year’s Birdathon contributions to Montana Audubon in support of their state-wide conservation efforts.



Janice Miller on Lake Helena during Birdathon. Photo by Shane Sater.

FINALLY! Gathering of the Flock

We are thrilled to be able to meet in-person at our upcoming fall membership meetings! After two years when COVID put our monthly meetings on hold, it will be great to once again network, share bird sightings, and exchange ideas about where to view fall migration. We also have two birding opportunities coming up! World Shorebirds Day is right around the corner (see below). Also mark your calendars for our annual Christmas Bird Count, December 17, 2022. This year, we're hoping to be able to do the Christmas Bird Count as a community event once again. Look for more details as the date draws near.

World Shorebirds Day: Sunday, September 4, 2022, 7:00 am – 1:00 pm

Last Chance Audubon continues to support World Shorebirds Day by participating in [global shorebird counts](#). These worldwide surveys are conducted each September and provide a setting for observing, appreciating and helping sustain shorebird populations. According to [shorebirdconservation.org](#), “some 50% of the world’s shorebird species are in decline, and vital habitat is being lost at a higher rate than ever. It is urgent to raise public awareness around the world of these imperiled birds’ plight, and the need for shorebird conservation and research.” Stephen Turner will lead a field trip to Canyon Ferry WMA* to survey for the shorebirds which are currently migrating south from the arctic. Several shorebird ID experts will be on hand to assist with identification of this sometimes-challenging group of birds. We will meet at the northeast end of the Costco parking lot at 7:00 am (please arrive a few minutes early). We will return no later than 1:00 pm. This trip has limited space and is nearly full. Please sign up today! It is free to current LCAS members. Non-members pay \$15, which includes a one-year membership to LCAS. Participants can expect a 1.5-mile round-trip walk on dirt roads. Contact Stephen to register: turnstonest@gmail.com.



Ruddy Turnstone by Stephen Turner (see following page!)



Semi-palmated Sandpiper by Stephen Turner.

**Note: There is some chance that we will survey at the Helena Regulating Reservoir instead of Canyon Ferry WMA. Recent water levels at the reservoir are extremely low and the influx of shorebirds to the area has been tremendous over the past several weeks. If low water levels continue at the reservoir, there will be an excellent opportunity for high numbers of shorebirds.*

A resource for Helena-area nature connection

In June 2022, Shane Sater started a freely available, weekly blog about nature in the Helena area, focusing especially on birds, plants, and insects. The hope is that it will be an educational resource for the community and an inspiration to get outside and learn more. The articles can be found at <https://whatsgoingonblog.org/>. More recently, Shane has also started recording these articles as podcasts to make them accessible to more people: <https://anchor.fm/shane-sater>. Contact Shane with any questions, shsater@gmail.com.

County Firsts!

In Helena, we only occasionally see rare birds passing through the valley. Since we aren't located on a specific flyway, rare birds seem to be, well, rare here. (Is it unfavorable weather patterns? Poor food sources? Who knows!?) However, certain unusual species, including certain warblers and shorebirds, seem more inclined to pass through our area. Spring and fall provide the best chances of finding these rarities. When something unusual shows up – *WOW!* – local birders flock to the field in hopes of catching a glimpse.

During this past spring, Helena birders added two never-before-reported birds to the Lewis and Clark County list. On May 7, 2022, David Harnden spotted a large, dark bird with a magnificent tail at Spring Meadow Lake. He was able to identify it as a Great-tailed Grackle and used [Merlin ID](#) to help support his sighting. He recorded his sighting in eBird ([eBird Checklist #S109275659](#)). Although Common Grackles are abundant in our area, the Great-tailed was a first for the county. This species is seen occasionally in other parts of the state. Great find, David!

On May 30, 2022, Dr. Kyle Strobe happened upon a small warbler at Nature Park. The bird had a soft blue-gray head, olive back, split eye-ring and sunburst breast. He quickly identified the bird as a Northern Parula and sent out a message using the *Helena Birders WhatsApp Group**. Literally within minutes, 14 birders descended on Nature Park and all were successful in adding the bird to their Helena Valley lists. (See [eBird checklist #S111747330](#).) This was another county first! Congratulations, Kyle!

Finally, fall migration recently turned up a gem of a shorebird. On August 10, 2022, Kurt Cunningham was enjoying a paddle out on the Helena Regulating Reservoir. He was moseying along the southeast shore when he spotted and photographed a Killdeer-sized bird with a heavily mottled black, a clean white underside, and orange legs! He later ran into local birder Bob Martinka and showed Bob the unusual bird he had seen. Kurt tentatively identified the bird as a Ruddy Turnstone ([eBird checklist #S116800090](#)) and Bob agreed with his identification. Two days later, Bob paddled out to the location where Kurt had spotted the turnstone, re-found the bird and cemented the ID! Several other birders were lucky enough to find the bird over several days. This sighting represented the only confirmed county record of the species in eBird. The [Montana Natural Heritage Program](#) database lists only one other record, a sighting from September 1986 with few details.

What's next? Southward migration is well underway. Shorebirds will begin tapering off soon, but raptor migration is heating up (think of the Big Belt Mountains)! In addition, warblers and sparrows will begin passing through. Nature Park and K-Mart Wetlands are well worth watching over the next month or so. Get out there and let us know what you're seeing!

-- Stephen Turner

**If you're interested in receiving rare bird alerts for the Helena area via WhatsApp, please send a text message to Stephen Turner at 406-521-0000.*



Northern Parula by Kyle Strobe.



Parula gawkers by Kyle Strobe.

Bird Seed Sale

Every fall, LCAS joins forces with [Birds & Beasleys](#) for our annual bird seed sale. So if you're stocking up for your winter birds, stop by the store and let the staff know you're purchasing seed as a part of the sale. LCAS receives a portion of your purchase and a donation from Birds & Beasleys for each bag of seed sold. The sale runs from September 15 through November 30.

This year's prices:

- 20 lbs black oil sunflower seeds: \$30
- 20 lbs sunflower chips: \$45
- 20 lbs millet: \$25
- 10 lbs thistle: \$24, 20 lbs thistle: \$42



Great-tailed Grackle by Bob Martinka. (See previous page.)

It's Fall. . .

And that means the LCAS Board is starting to plan for the chapter's annual Fall Fundraiser. In past years, money raised from this effort has been used for projects like the Beasley Trail at Spring Meadow Lake and scholarships for local high school students pursuing careers in conservation. This year the Board would like to welcome ideas from LCAS members. Do you have an idea for a project (proposed or already in the works) related to birds and conservation in the Helena area? Let us know, and we'll consider it! Just email Sue Jackson (suejacksonmt@gmail.com) to have your ideas shared with the Board.

Forest-Meadow Ecotones and Tree Growth

In 2021, LCAS granted Carroll College Environmental Science student Hannah Winn a \$1000 award in support of her research about tree growth rates along forest-meadow ecotones. Winn compared growth rates between individual trees within a northeast-facing stand of Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) near Canyon Creek. She found that the larger trees near the center of the stand were growing more slowly than the smaller, younger trees extending into the nearby meadow. This suggests that the forest in this area is expanding outwards into the meadow.



Chipping Sparrow, a common forest-edge species. Photo by Shane Sater.

(The same pattern is evident on the north slope of Mount Helena. Botanist Wayne Phillips has pointed out that the Douglas-fir forest in this area has expanded substantially over the past few decades.)

Both forest and meadow habitats are important for our local birds, so understanding forest dynamics over time has important implications for bird habitat. Read Winn's full report here: <https://www.lastchanceaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Winn-Audubon-Report.pdf>.

The View from Sevenmile Creek: August

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.

This month's *View from Sevenmile Creek* is less of a story than usual and more of an update – because a lot has happened since the spring! (For a much more detailed story of this August's birds at Sevenmile Creek, see the blog post I wrote earlier this month: <https://whatsgoingonblog.org/2022/08/12/sevenmile-creek-restoration-birds/>.)

Over the summer, the shrubs along this stream have continued to regrow since they burned in the September 2020 fire. Some of the chokecherry sprouts are already nearly head-high! I'm hoping that they'll begin fruiting heavily again next year, attracting all of the fall Cedar Waxwings and robins that used to stop here.

The 500 cottonwoods and native shrubs that Prickly Pear Land Trust volunteers planted this spring, with support from a \$1000 LCAS habitat grant, are doing well so far. The majority have made it through the summer heat in good shape. And at the beginning of August, Prickly Pear Land Trust volunteers installed browse protector cages around them, so they should be safe from deer this fall.

Meanwhile, LCAS Board member Sue Jackson has been monitoring the bluebird boxes that LCAS installed this spring. The results:

- Of the 13 houses along the north fence, 10 had nesting attempts. Birds explored two more and built partial nests in them.
- The majority of the nesters were Tree Swallows. Also, one Mountain Bluebird pair nested here!
- Approximately 20 Tree Swallows and 4-6 Mountain Bluebirds fledged this year.

Bird surveys along the stream have mostly taken a back seat to other priorities this summer. (If you would like to help with these bird surveys this fall by learning to record data, let me know!) Nevertheless, Stephen Turner and I did a [7-hour survey](#) on August 10 (more details in the blog post I mentioned above). Some of the most abundant species on this date were Gray Partridges (54), Mourning Doves (37), Black-billed Magpies (115!!!), Red-winged Blackbirds (50), and Vesper Sparrows (43). We also saw several rather-unusual birds, including a juvenile Grasshopper Sparrow, a Bobolink, and flyover sightings of both a Peregrine Falcon and a Prairie Falcon!



Tree Swallow by Bob Martinka.



Juvenile Grasshopper Sparrow at Sevenmile Creek by Shane Sater.

The fire in 2020 was a setback for bird habitat here – but it's exciting to see how quickly the habitat is growing back. So here's to the migrants we'll see here this fall – and to the continued regrowth of excellent riparian habitat for our local birds and other wildlife!

-- *Shane Sater*

Membership Report

Please welcome **Last Chance Audubon Society new members:** Jenny Vu and Teresa Kaiserski.

Sincere thanks to **Last Chance renewing members:** Kyle Strode.

Please also welcome **National Audubon Society new members:** Vivian Banschbach, Phylis Marshik, James Perkins, Dave Moos, Billa Pierre, Alice Anderberg, Stephen Cade, Janet Hess-Herbert, Shawn Watts, Diana Corzine, Lesley Strausbaugh, Charles Stalnaker, Lisa Upson, Patricia Ayers, Andrew Anderson, Bonnie Anderson, Ronald Herman, and Doug Sternberg.

Sincere thanks to **National Audubon Society renewing members:** Jo Thun, Tim Smith, Jean Smith, Judy Scheier, Susan Near, Carolyn Mazurek, Joel Maes, Mary Kelley, Helen Fee, Twila Costigan, Hunter Coleman, Marilyn Blakely-Hayes, Ann Bauchman, Pamela Bompert, Susan Anderson, Sally Hilander, Jeanne Perkins, Glenn Phillips, Curtis Lund, Irene Erdie, Robert Filipovich, Matt Dalton, Joe Lamson, Michael Gotteib, Dan Ellison, Meghan Stuppert, Janet Coughlin, Jeanne Perkins, Alice Hinshaw, and Ann Eldridge.

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.

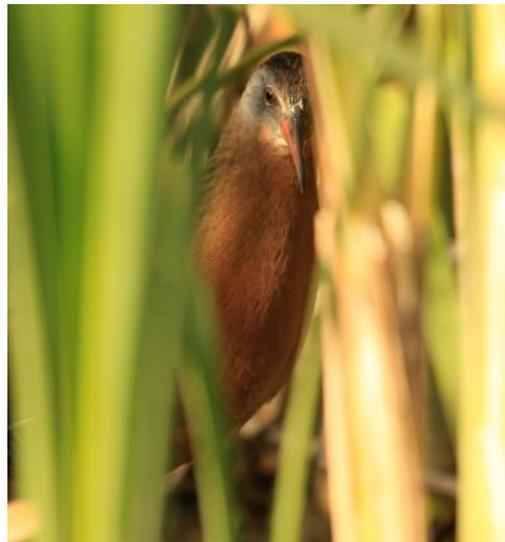
PRINTED and ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTERS: We want all our members to stay informed about chapter news and happenings. If you do not have access to email, staying current with your chapter membership to Last Chance Audubon Society guarantees that you will continue to receive a printed version of our newsletter, 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



Barrow's Goldeneyes on a pond west of Augusta. Photo by David Ewer.



Virginia Rail by Janice Miller.

Last Chance Audubon Society
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Membership

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