

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 2023*

## **Sharp-tailed Grouse Restoration in Western Montana**

**Tues, Sept 12, 2023 – 7:00PM**

**Montana Wild, 2668 Broadwater Ave.**

**Free – All Are Welcome**

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) and partners are working to re-establish Sharp-tailed Grouse (STGR) populations west of the Continental Divide through reintroductions to suitable habitat in the Blackfoot, Bitterroot, and Drummond areas. Over a decade of planning, including developing a Restoration Plan with Montana State University and an Environmental Assessment, the FWP Commission approved the project in April 2019. Spring 2023 was the first full season of capturing and translocating Sharp-tailed Grouse from eastern Montana to restoration sites in western Montana. Despite a prolonged winter/late spring, the team of grouse wranglers managed to capture 144 grouse that were transported by volunteers and released in the Bitterroot and Blackfoot Valleys. Monitoring of their survival and reproduction is ongoing, but field staff confirmed at least 22 nests, half of which successfully fledged young. Details about the restoration project, plans for maximizing success moving forward, and how folks can help, will be discussed.



*Sharp-tailed Grouse — Photo by Bob Martinka*

Ty Smucker is an avid birder and Wildlife Mitigation Biologist with Montana FWP, based in Helena. Ty has lived in Montana for over 25 years, completing his Master's in Wildlife Biology at the University of Montana in 2007 and has since worked in seasonal and permanent positions with FWP. He has worked on various wildlife research, monitoring, and restoration projects including studies of introduced predators and their effects on native birds in the Hawaiian Islands, Canada lynx and their prey in the Seeley-Swan Valley of Montana, spectacled bears in the Ecuadorian Andes, and wolves in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Yellowstone National Park, and Montana. Ty is most interested in wildlife conservation and management, understanding predator-prey interactions and resolving human-wildlife conflicts.

Please join us for this free LCAS presentation on Tuesday, September 13th!



# President's Perch

**It's going to be a BIRDY-Good Year!**

September 1, 2023

It's SEPTEMBER, and LCAS is on-track, offering opportunities to learn more about birds and the natural world through many varied ways. For starters, plan to attend – in person only – our outstanding *membership programs* on the second Tuesday of each month. Expect to be taken on adventures near and far to discover what's happening in this beautiful world we call home.

You might enjoy subscribing to LCAS's Shane Sater's monthly blog, "*Wild With Nature - Wonder, Connection, and the stories around us*" at: <https://wildwithnature.com>. Our *Christmas Bird Count* (CBC) is a chance to find beautiful birds in a winter wonderland. We'll share our success stories over a delicious potluck that evening. Look for the mid-December date in an upcoming newsletter.

**SAVE THE DATE!** LCAS will co-host *Montana Audubon's - Wings Across the Big Sky Bird Festival*, May 31-June 2, 2024. We'll be offering many great field trips, including 'family-friendly', so younger people can experience the thrill of birding. PLUS, we have secured a dynamic keynote speaker. You won't want to miss Bird Festival this year!

PLEASE renew your Membership, become a NEW Member, or make a DONATION, as these funds go towards our education projects, such as scholarships for High School Grads and grants for Carroll College research students, among many other programs.

Visit our website for more information: <https://www.lastchanceaudubon.org/>

Enjoy fall migration!

Janice Miller, President



*Semipalmated Sandpiper*  
— Photo by Bob Martinka

## Rainey Webcam — Update

The Bill and Marianne Rainey Memorial Webcam was installed at the Osprey nest platform near Spring Meadow Lake in April and gave us fun viewing of five Canada Geese goslings hatching, growing, and fledging. When the nest was empty, the Osprey pair checked out the nest - even bringing new nesting material to it - but decided to relocate to a nearby cell tower. When that happened, the camera was turned off.

Unfortunately, the story did not end there. Both the nest pole and an easement to the small plot of land where it is located (next to The Wreck Room auto repair shop) was claimed as privately owned. Concerns about the structure supporting the camera were voiced including the reason the Osprey did not use the nest and how it blocked a view. In July, the structure and camera were removed without contacting LCAS, despite meetings in March where the plan for the structure was explained (based on guidelines provided by three different organizations with successful Osprey webcam projects). The camera was subsequently remounted without communication with LCAS. The LCAS Board decided the location was too controversial and the situation too difficult to resolve. The wiring and other equipment have been taken down to prevent any future conflicts. The Board remains committed to having a viable webcam project and will be exploring other potential nest sites and possible viewing venues.

## 2023 World Shorebirds Day Field Trip

LCAS will join the world birding community for **World Shorebirds Day** by surveying shorebirds and other bird species at Canyon Ferry WMA on September 3, 2023. Several shorebird ID experts will be on hand. The field trip will meet at the northeast end of the Helena Costco parking lot at 7:00 a.m. Please plan to arrive a few minutes early. The trip will return from the WMA no later than 1:00 p.m. This field trip is free to current LCAS members and has **limited space availability**. Members are encouraged to register for the field trip as soon as possible. Non-members are also welcome. The cost of the field trip for non-members is \$15, which includes a one-year membership to LCAS ([Join here](#)). To register, contact Stephen Turner at [turnstonest@gmail.com](mailto:turnstonest@gmail.com). The survey requires an approximately 1.5-mile round-trip walk on dirt roads. Participants are reminded to wear sturdy foot wear and to dress for any type of weather.



*Mike Vashro, Coburn Currier and Bob Martinka surveying Helena Regulating Reservoir for shorebirds - Photo by Stephen Turner*

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## Spring Meadow Lake State Park Bird Banding



*FWP Nongame Bureau Chief, Kristina Smucker with a banded Cedar Waxwing - Photo by Stephen Turner*

This summer Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) conducted a second season of surveying breeding bird populations at Spring Meadow Lake State Park. The effort is an ongoing program that contributes to a continent-wide effort to study bird populations, administered by the Institute for Bird Populations (IBP) and is supported nationally by both public agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The program, known as MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship), held seven sessions at the Park, and banded around 40-60 birds each session. Several Last Chance Audubon members with banding training and/or previous bird banding experience volunteered in this year's effort. Some LCAS volunteers helped with "runs" to the mist nets and extracting birds, while others assisted with education regarding the MAPS program. Our deepest thanks go out to all of the volunteers who helped with this important program.

MAPS banding stations typically run during the bird breeding season – mostly in June and July. The process of banding birds involves capturing birds in mist nets and returning them to the banding station, where they are fitted with a small numbered leg ring. Recaptured birds (either at the Spring Meadow MAPS station or another station) can provide important data regarding migration, habitat, and breeding success.

If you would like to visit the banding station in the future, please contact Montana WILD for a schedule of banding sessions. You can also watch the embedded video (MoSI: Birds Connecting the Americas) produced by IBP, which gives an insider's look at banding and discusses the importance of the MAPS project. Additionally, FWP Nongame Bureau Chief, Kristina Smucker will be giving the LCAS February 2024 presentation on the Spring Meadow MAPS station.



## Spring Meadow Lake Nesting Osprey Reveals Secrets

By Kurt Cunningham

Osprey have been nesting at Spring Meadow Lake State Park on Helena's westside longer than Montana WILD has been in operation.

Questions have always accompanied the arrival of the birds each spring, which mostly remained unanswered until a recent photograph I took revealed that one of the adults was banded.



*Osprey with fish at Spring Meadow Lake State Park - Photo by Kurt Cunningham*

It was an exciting discovery, but even though the photograph clearly showed a silver band attached to the raptor's right leg, the image wasn't clear enough to read the identifying band numbers.

Because this Osprey is nesting high up on a nearby cell tower, Ryan Schmaltz, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' education specialist at Montana WILD, suggested giving cell tower workers binoculars to see if someone could read the band. However, before that plan could be initiated, the Osprey thankfully cooperated by perching on an electric pole in a more easily photographed spot.

The new photos provided enough detail to see most of the numbers on the band. Corie Bowditch, the director of Montana WILD, worked to piece several images together to reveal eight of the nine band numbers. With the help of Kristina Smucker, chief of FWP's Nongame Bureau, the revealed band numbers were sent to Robert Domenech, executive director of the Raptor View Research Institute in Missoula.

And Eureka! Robert confirmed the band belonged to Osprey #1088-07323, a nestling he banded eight years ago, on July 14, 2015, in Drummond. Robert was excited about the discovery. "My guess," he said, "is this is the first year it's nested – which makes sense given what we have observed over the years."

Robert's study area includes the Clark Fork River, which has historically contained elevated levels of mercury. Additionally, Osprey in the Drummond area show the highest mercury levels of birds in his study. The heavy metal toxin is likely responsible for the shortage of breeding Ospreys in his research. "It takes a lot to become a breeder in our study population," Robert explained. "This is one of fewer than 10 records of nearly 600 banded Ospreys to actually nest."

For Robert, the eight-year-old nesting Osprey at Spring Meadow Lake SP is a celebratory event for a fortunate bird. He said for the Osprey to make it to Spring Meadow, reach breeding age, nest, and hatch 2 offspring, this remarkable bird survived the rigors of a difficult existence and a gauntlet of human-caused and naturally occurring risk factors. "And now she is contributing to western Montana's osprey population," Robert said with awe.

Although most of the questions about Spring Meadow Lake's nesting ospreys will never be answered, at least we're more knowledgeable about #1088-07323, thanks to wildlife researchers like Robert, who continue to provide us with scientific information about the wild creatures that share this special place with us.

## LCAS 2022-23 Scholarship Award - Grayce Wilkins

The Last Chance Audubon Society selected Grayce Mae Wilkins as its 2022-23 scholarship recipient. She will receive \$1,000. Wilkins, a Capital High School graduating senior, plans to attend the University of Montana in the fall, majoring in Forestry with an interest in Environmental Science. She was the champion of the 2022 Capital High Envirothon team and a recipient of the Capital High Bruin Educational Achievement Recognition (B.E.A.R.) Award. Her community activities include the Youth Forestry Monitoring Program and the Beaver Creek Restoration Project.



*Grayce Wilkins—Last Chance Audubon Society Scholarship Award Winner*

## Aquatic Insects get their Day in the Sun!

A gaggle of aquatic insect enthusiasts descended upon Ten Mile Creek Park on a rain-cooled Saturday evening in early August to learn about the lives of these insects from local ecologist Sara Owen. A picnic table in a small nook near the creek was covered with books, pictures, hand lenses, small dishes, spoons, ice cube trays, and a large tray that held rocks from the creek. The mission: to locate some ‘bugs’ on the rocks. The first thing Owen pointed out to the group were the small clusters of rocks on top of the larger rocks—caddisfly cases. Caddisflies belong to the insect order Trichoptera (pronounced try-KOPT-er-uh) and many members of this group produce a silk that they use to pull small stones, grains of

sand, or bits of leaves and twigs together to build a case in which they live. The caddisflies living inside these rock cases belong to the family Glossomatidae (gloss-oh-so-MAT-id-ee). Other caddisflies use their silk to build nets out of small fragments of leaves, which are attached to the rocks. These nets are used not only as a shelter, but also as a way to collect food particles floating in the current. The group saw some of these caddisflies and their nets, which are in the family Hydropsychidae (high-dro-SIGH-kid-ee).



*Glossomatidae Caddisfly - Photo by Connie Geiger*

Under the rocks were several entirely different insects: mayflies and a stonefly. Mayflies and stoneflies generally look similar to one another, but a quick way to tell the difference is by looking at the number of tails—mayflies usually, but not always, have 3 tails; stoneflies will always have 2 tails. Mayflies belong to the order Ephemeroptera (ee-fem-er-OPT-er-uh) and stoneflies belong to the order Plecoptera (play-KOPT-er-uh). Most mayflies are smaller than stoneflies. The mayflies observed on this evening



*Stonefly - Photo by Connie Geiger*

were quite small (~1/4 inch), indicating they were fairly young. The stonefly, at 1 inch, was still young, too, but was giant by comparison. Fly fishermen and women know that the large (up to 3 inch) stoneflies known as salmon flies are great for trout fishing!



*Hunting for aquatic insects—Photo by Cathy Maunu*

Owen talked her audience through the six major factors that influence aquatic insect adaptations and distributions in aquatic environments: habitat, movement, feeding, breathing, life history, and stress tolerance. Fast moving waters will have a different assemblage of aquatic insects than slower moving waters. As a result, the way those insects move, feed, and breathe will differ. The participants asked great questions about what these bugs eat, how they breathe, and what their purpose is in the stream.

Everyone was surprised to learn about the various, and sometimes unique, ways aquatic insects breathe. Some have gills—gills can line an insect's back, run down the belly, cluster at the neck or in the armpits. Some insects don't have gills and can simply breathe through their exoskeleton. Often these insects have the ability to trap an air bubble under the exoskeleton. Some taxa, especially the beetles, have short prongs at the back of their bodies where they can hold an air bubble that allows oxygen to diffuse into the air bubble that the insect breathes from. Yes, you read that correctly—these beetles breathe through their rear ends! But they aren't the only ones. Many aquatic fly larvae have features called spiracles on their rear ends that are used for air breathing. Owen gave the example of a mosquito larva in a pool of still water—it hangs with its posterior at the surface and its head hanging down in the water, like a roosting bat. While the group didn't have any live examples on which to examine these unique 'bum lungs,' Owen came prepared with a book full of diagrams showing an entire page of star-shaped fly bums that can be found on the various fly species (a diagnostic trait, no less!), which brought a chorus of chuckles from the crowd.

The group was fortunate to see examples of all three EPT taxa (Ephemeroptera, Plecoptera, and Trichoptera). The EPT taxa are, as a general rule, fairly intolerant to pollution. There are pollution metrics that use the proportion of EPT taxa compared to the rest of the taxa found in a stream sample to indicate stream health—more EPTs indicate a healthy system. While there was not time for a deep dive into the overall ecology of aquatic insects and why they are important inhabitants of streams, there was some discussion about how these insects are a source of food for other organisms. The first consumer of aquatic insects that came to mind were fish, and certainly fish consume a large number of aquatic insects. But for those insects that reach adulthood and leave the stream...what happens to them? Who might eat them? Birds! Absolutely. But another group of organisms that eat these insects are spiders. Some spiders specialize in building their webs above the water or in nearby adjacent vegetation to catch insects, like mayflies emerging from the water as adults. The group took to the stream bank, headlamps and flashlights in hand, to look for some spider web shine and their spider inhabitants. It didn't take long to find a few webs and their very tiny spider owners. No insects were found in any of the webs, though. Maybe next time!

Speaking of next time, there was a rumble that maybe another bug walk was in order for next spring to look for a mayfly hatch and aquatic insects at a different time of year to see their different stages of growth. Stay tuned for that possibility. A huge thanks to everyone who gave up their Saturday night to come hang out at Ten Mile Creek — you are all official aquatic bug nerds!



## Membership Report

Please welcome **Last Chance Audubon Society new members:** S. Wayne Chamberlin, Nicholas Domitrovich, Lea Frye, John Grant, Paulette Kohman, Cathy Leach, Catherine Maunu, Connor Smith, Bart Stuart, David Gans, Cindy & Bill Greiman, Alan Davis, Evana Newberry, Cathy Morris, and Kyle Barnett.

Sincere thanks to **Last Chance renewing members:** Lorna Milne & Jon Motl, Jerry Wozniak, Beverly Pickett, Mary Lou McGrath, and Ken & Gail Kailing.

Please also welcome **National Audubon Society new members:** Ian Certalic, Darlene Patzer, Anne Perkins, William Snider, Janet Speirer, Virginia Wille, Hunter Coleman, Jane Ogle, Karen Frank-Plumlee, Prudence Gildroy, Judy Gillespie, Patricia Fody, Nadine Kazimi, Nathan Phillips, and Barbara Lowe.

Sincere thanks to **National Audubon Society renewing members:** Marlyn Atkins, Sandra Barker, Beki Brandborg, Mary Clark, Maquel Goodhart, Irene Erdie, Pat Grantham, Robert Putsch, Laura Quintrell, Linda Weber, Liese Zebrun-Gero, Ann Bauchman, Diana Corzine, Paul Ferry, Marjorie Levine, Joel Maes, James Shaver, Wendy Clark, Carol Josephson, Patricia Ayers, Mary Carparelli, Sally Hilander, Phylis Marshik, Annie McElligott Hull, Meghan Stuppert, Russell Wrigg, Douglas Abbott, Terry O'Connor, James Perkins, Cindy Yarberry, Barbara Bayer, Patricia Farley, Susan Jackson, Fred Larsen, Nancy Nicholson, Samantha Sanchez, Tvelone and Cary Lund.

**LCAS MEMBERSHIP:** A new membership or renewal is \$15 per household and is current for one year, January 1<sup>st</sup> through December 31<sup>st</sup>. 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 at [www.lastchanceaudubon.org](http://www.lastchanceaudubon.org). Please send a completed registration form and your \$15 check 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:** Due to increasing costs, we will no longer be sending hardcopies. Those who have already paid for them will continue to receive them until the end of this year, 2023. The 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 [www.customerservice@audubon.org](mailto:www.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](mailto:smdewarthansen@charter.net)

### Newsletter moving to electronic-only

Please note that, due to increasing costs, we will be phasing out sending hardcopies of the *Last Chance Chat*. Those who have already paid for them will continue to receive them until the end of this year (2023). However, we will discontinue all hardcopies as of 2024.

Last Chance Audubon Society  
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membership today!**

**Membership**

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### **MEMBERSHIP FORM**

*Clip and mail to:  
PO Box 924, Helena MT  
59624 with check for \$15  
— or \$25 if you must  
receive a paper  
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*All contributions are tax  
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