

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.*

## Where do the birds go? Avian research and the MOTUS Network in western Montana

**TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17TH, 2026 –  
PROGRAM BEGINS 7:00 PM**

**MONTANA WILD, 2668  
BROADWATER AVE.**

**FREE - ALL ARE WELCOME**

Have you ever wondered how Common Nighthawks get to South America for the winter? Or when Flammulated Owls return to breeding territories in the spring? Or where Lewis’s Woodpeckers spend the winter? Enter the Motus Wildlife Tracking System, a collaborative tool that enables the study of wildlife movements across landscapes, regions, and even continents. Answers to long-pondered questions about avian migration routes, timing, and destinations are beginning to emerge with thanks to the Motus system. As the collaborative network expands, even more research applications are possible, including small-scale movements on breeding grounds or habitat use on stopovers.

What can we learn about some understudied avian species in Montana with the use of the



*A Flammulated Owl roosting in a Douglas Fir tree squinting down at the photographer.*

Motus network? How can citizens contribute to intercontinental research efforts simply by hosting a station? Join us to find out!

Presenter Mary Scofield is an Avian Biologist at MPG Ranch, a private conservation property in Florence, MT. She received a B.S. in Biology from Pacific Lutheran University and soon began her career with birds at the California Condor Recovery Program with the US Fish and Wildlife Service. In 2015, Mary moved to Montana to work at Raptor View Research Institute as a raptor banding technician. While she started at MPG as a seasonal technician on the Avian Science team, Mary transitioned to full-time in 2023 and now focuses on the breeding and migration ecology of nocturnal insectivores, woodpeckers, and several owl species.



**February’s program is on the 3rd Tuesday of the month - Feb 17.**



## PRESIDENT'S PERCH

Leslie Smith,  
LCAS Board President  
406-431-4995 or  
[leslie\\_smi@yahoo.com](mailto:leslie_smi@yahoo.com)

Greetings! I thought you'd like to hear about a few people who have been working behind the scenes for several years to make sure that bluebirds and others are housed. We have a team of people, headed by Berta and Rita Nason, who make bluebird, swallow, kestrel, and sometimes other birdhouses. They are diligent, careful, quick to respond to a need, and just the kind of volunteers we especially appreciate.

As needed, they are joined by other Last Chance Audubon members. Stephen Turner keeps an eye on the various areas where we have bluebird trails. Stephen and Bob Martinka have been eyeing the duck boxes at K-Mart Wetlands, which are still being used, even though they are in need of repair (I guess ducks are not that particular!). Getting them spruced up is an upcoming project for a time when the ponds are solid.

Others who should be recognized for their help with this project are Greg and Joyce Bateman, Sue Jackson, Grant Hokit, Nan and Ray Breuninger, Montana FWP, and Bryan Flynn. Their

contributions range from box building, to bird box maintenance, wood storage, and data compilation.

We frequently get requests for more boxes, of various kinds, and that's when we call Berta and Rita. What a fabulous resource they are! The more requests we get, the more volunteers we need. If you'd like to be involved, contact Pete Strazdas at [petestrazdas@gmail.com](mailto:petestrazdas@gmail.com).

Additionally, FenceCrafters has been providing suitable wood for box building at no cost. A big thank you to all the folks involved in bird boxes and to FenceCrafters for their continued support!

Our board has been talking about becoming more aware of the desires of our membership, so we are currently asking you to tell us what you want. Are there activities, events, specific walks or other things you'd like to see? Do you have ideas for us? If so, please send an email or a text to me. We will be most happy to hear from you!



*Mountain Bluebird.*  
Photo by Bob Martinka

# LCAS BOARD MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

· LCAS raised nearly \$4,000 from the 2025 Fall Fundraiser, an amount that will be doubled due to the board's earlier decision to provide matching funds up to a \$5,000 cap. These funds will be devoted to the MOTUS project, likely commencing during summer 2026 to establish one or more Helena-area monitoring stations for data collection on birds and other small wildlife wearing micro-transmitters.

· Several efforts are underway to place new nesting boxes and repair/replace existing boxes this winter (ahead of 2026 nesting season), with western screech-owls, kestrels, bluebirds, chickadees and nuthatches as the target species. The board will create a route map identifying box locations and who is maintaining them.



· The board welcomed Grant Hokit to serve as LCAS's Conservation and Habitat project coordinator, whose activities will include tracking and promoting citizen science opportunities and assisting the Education Committee. Grant will continue LCAS's long term local monitoring and data collection on long-billed curlews and western screech owls and welcomes volunteers in these efforts.

· The board created a new Philanthropy Development Director position and appointed John Hansen to lead an exploratory effort toward expanding the reach of LCAS' conservation, citizen-science, and habitat projects. The initial focus will be on the MOTUS monitoring system and enhanced access to local birding hotspots.

· The next LCAS Board meeting is February 3, 2026.

## Volunteers Needed!

We are looking for another person or two to help the Education Committee with its projects. Here are some of the things we are already involved with: we offer scholarships to graduating high school students; we offer grants to Carroll College students whose studies are in line with our Mission Statement; we provide birding kits to Lewis & Clark and Jefferson County libraries for check-out; we provide education materials, including owl pellets, to elementary schools for study...and if you are interested and have ideas, you could be a part of this, too! This is especially important work because it is involving a younger and more diverse demographic and this is one of our board's goals. If you are interested in being on the Education Committee, please contact our Volunteer Coordinator, Pete Strazdas: [petestrazdas@gmail.com](mailto:petestrazdas@gmail.com)

# CITIZEN SCIENCE UPDATE: WHY BIRD IN THE HINTERLANDS

GRANT HOKIT



*Male Spruce Grouse on Jericho Mountain.  
Photo by Grant Hokit*

If you use eBird, you are participating in one of the largest citizen science projects in the world. The researchers at Cornell Lab of Ornithology designed eBird, a free digital app connected to a database that archives hundreds of millions of bird observations each year. Easy to use on most digital devices, eBird allows birders to store and organize bird lists, find locations to go birding, and to connect with other birders. Notifications from eBird allow you to track rare bird sightings, to receive a ‘needs’ list of species you haven’t seen, and to participate in events like Global Big Day.

For researchers, the enormous quantity of data supplied by birders, sometimes with data integrity issues (a topic for a different article), can be filtered and used to create scientifically important products like bird distribution maps, seasonal bar charts, migration models, and conservation assessments. By incentivising the use of eBird, researchers created a database that would be impossible to replicate on their own.

On my more curmudgeonly days, I use eBird to plan excursions to avoid people, traffic, dogs, even other birders. I will use eBird’s distribution maps to locate areas that are lacking in bird observations. By filtering distribution maps for the most common species (American Robin, Canada Goose, Northern Flicker), I then look for gaps as defined by eBird’s spatial resolution thresholds: 27 km or greater for large gaps, 9-27 km for moderate gaps, and 3-9 km for smaller gaps.

An example would be my recent visits to Jericho Mountain south of MacDonald Pass. Many of us likely observed the Jericho Mountain fire that occurred in June of 2025. After the fire was terminated and the area was reopened to the public in late July, I started visiting, interested in when burn-associated species might arrive. By 9 August, American Three-toed Woodpeckers as well as 13 other species were using the burned habitat. Hairy Woodpeckers, Dark-eyed Juncos, Mountain Bluebirds, and Western Tanagers were actively feeding in and below the scorched canopy. By 18 November, Black-backed Woodpeckers were present along with Pine Grosbeaks and, surprise, a male Spruce Grouse. With only 54 eBird records in Lewis and Clark County, this is not a frequently encountered local species.

If you prefer to not share your secret birding locations on eBird, you can set up your profile to submit observations anonymously and to hide your data from public outputs. Researchers at Cornell Ornithology Lab will still have access to your data but the general public will not. However, letting

## CITIZEN SCIENCE (CON'T)

fellow birders know about your observations can enhance the citizen science effort. Not long after posting my Jericho Mountain observations, fellow birders made multiple trips to the area further documenting the presence of the burn-associated woodpecker species and adding a female Spruce Grouse to the area list. Prior to these lists, the closest documented observations in eBird were 6 km away for the American Three-toed Woodpecker, 10 km for the Spruce Grouse, and 16 km for the Black-backed Woodpecker. By birding in areas not frequented by birders and in months with fewer records, we can help researchers build a more complete understanding of where and when bird species exist across a landscape.

If you would like to try eBird, consider participating in the free [eBird Essentials in Five Lessons](#). Also, join our eBird workshop with Stephen Turner at Montana Wild, April 25th at 8:00 am.

Other active citizen science projects:

[Climate Watch](#) is a birding project sponsored by Audubon that allows participants to 'claim' an area to survey for climate sensitive target species such as nuthatches in the winter months and bluebirds in the early summer. Winter nuthatch surveys are now occurring between January 15 and February 15. Select the link to learn more.

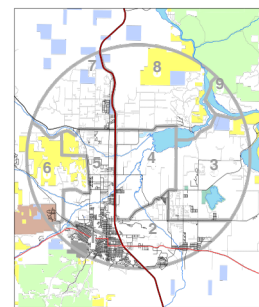
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## LCAS CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT SUMMARY

The 71<sup>st</sup> Last Chance Audubon Christmas Bird Count was completed by 44 dedicated birders on December 20, 2025. The final tally was 71 species, which was above our average of 65. A total of 10,661 birds were counted, which was a little below our yearly average of 11,249. We had a total of 5 all-time high counts, including Trumpeter Swan (53 - up from 40), Dusky Grouse (5 - up from 1), Black-billed Magpie (484 - up from 453), and European Starling (760 - up from 722). Ruddy Duck (3), Northern Harrier (28), and Spotted Towhee (1) were all matching high counts from previous years.

A single Pileated Woodpecker was seen and photographed during Count Week. This species has only been on the Christmas Bird Count one other time - a single bird reported in 2009! Also, Black-billed Magpie, American Tree Sparrow, and House Sparrow were successfully counted for the 71<sup>st</sup> consecutive year, making them the only birds seen on every single count LCAS has conducted! Hooray!

The Christmas Bird Count area is broken into 9 sections covering the entire Helena Valley. In 2025, two sections matched their all-time high counts. Section 4 reported 39 species and Section 8 had 42 species (See count circle map). Great work!



Helena Christmas Bird Count Circle

# MT WILD AVIAN BUILDING AND BIRD UPDATE

SUE JACKSON

If you've been to Spring Meadow Lake recently you may have noticed new construction near the WILD building. Golden Eagle Construction is making great progress on the new avian building with the walls framed and the roof nearly completed. This photo shows the ambassador bird enclosures which features a weathering/viewing area for the public. The facility also includes enclosures for rehabilitation birds which are on the other side of a hallway running down the middle of the building. The rehab enclosures are shielded from public view.

Sara Meloy, FWP Education Bureau Chief, announced "we had enough in the budget to also build a new flight barn as part of this project. It will be accessible only to FWP staff and volunteers and will be located behind (east of) the new building and north of the bear enclosures. This will give us more space for testing rehabilitation patients' flight capabilities before release."

When asked about the birds currently in holding, Ali Pons, MT WILD Wildlife Center

Program Manager, reports that "both ambassador and rehabilitation birds are extremely resilient and have not acted stressed or disturbed by the commotion. The biggest adjustment for the birds was moving them to different enclosures that were farther away from the construction site. We have changed the time we walk the ambassador birds to coincide with the construction crews lunch hour. That way there isn't noise and disturbance while they are being walked by the volunteers and when interacting with the public. We will not be able to place any birds in the new building until construction is fully complete. The risk and stress to the birds, staff and construction crew would not allow for that. However, we will be able to utilize the new building while the new flight barn is being constructed."

The scheduled completion date for the avian building is the end of April or beginning of May and will be followed by an official opening celebration with the Montana Outdoor Legacy Foundation (MOLF), donors and volunteers.



*New construction of MT Wild Avian Building. Photo by Sue Jackson*

# MONTANA AUDUBON NEWS

## SAVE THE DATE FOR THE 25TH ANNUAL WINGS ACROSS THE BIG SKY FESTIVAL



Mark your calendars and join us this summer in Kalispell, June 12 -14, 2026, for the Wings Across the Big Sky Festival! Both Montana Audubon and Flathead Audubon Society are celebrating 50 years, so we've been hard at work putting together a birding festival to commemorate the incredible history of both organizations.

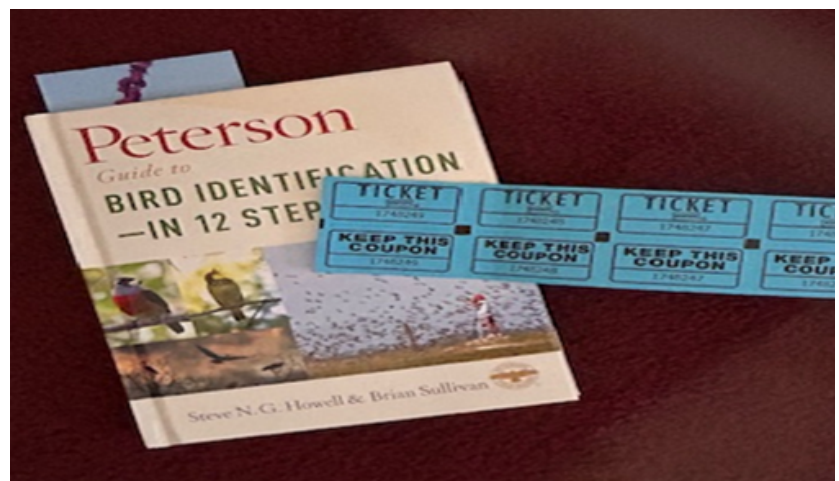
Field trips will visit locations in the greater Kalispell area, including local conservation areas, state parks, and private properties under conservation easements not normally accessible to the public. Special trips will focus on birds and native plants and bird photography, or get your exercise in as you bike and bird Going to the Sun Road in Glacier National Park!

Registration brochures will be mailed out in the coming months, and registration will open in March 2026. Keep an eye on Montana Audubon's email newsletter and social media for updates.

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## MONTHLY RAFFLE AT LAST CHANCE AUDUBON MEETINGS

We will be giving away a copy of the Peterson Guide to Bird Identification in 12 Steps, by Steve N.G. Howell and Brian Sullivan at each monthly meeting. Come to the February meeting (Tuesday, Feb. 17th) at 7 pm – MT WILD to get your free raffle ticket.



# Great Backyard Bird Count

29th Annual • February 13–16, 2026



## EXTEND THE SEASON OF LOVE TO BIRDS

COUNT BIRDS IN YOUR COMMUNITY DURING THE GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT AND SHARE THE JOY

Ithaca, NY - Love is in the air - listen closely and the sounds of chickadees, sparrows, and thrushes are beckoning you to step outside to experience the love from birds and nature. Take a moment to celebrate what birds and nature give us during the 29th annual [Great Backyard Bird Count](#) (GBBC) from February 13 through February 16, 2026.

Join the fun and spend 15 minutes watching birds and sharing what you see with the world at [birdcount.org](#).

You're also invited to tune in to a special webinar on how to participate in the GBBC. Register for one of two free events happening on Thursday, February 5, at 3 p.m. Eastern (12 p.m. Pacific) or Wednesday, February 11, 7 p.m. Eastern (4 p.m. Pacific). [Register here](#).

Bird and nature lovers everywhere unite in the effort to tally as many of the world's bird species as possible over four days in February. Combined with other bird counts, GBBC results help create a clearer picture of how birds are faring—whether individual species are declining, increasing, or holding steady in the face of habitat loss, climate change, and other threats.

“The GBBC is a great opportunity for everyone to take a moment to appreciate what birds and nature can do for us,” says David Bonter, co-director of the Center for Engagement in Science and Nature at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. “Watching birds with friends and family is also a great way to build community and show your support for the natural world.”

More than 800,000 people participated during the 2005 GBBC and collectively they found 8,078 species; 158

more than in 2024. GBBC continues to reach people around the world.

“By participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count, we can appreciate the beauty and serenity that birds bring us every day. In return, the bird observations we submit can be used to inform conservation efforts that secure a brighter future for birds and people alike,” said Ben Haywood, Audubon’s director of community science.

“The Great Backyard Bird Count invites people to slow down and truly get to know the birds that share their lives,” says Jody Allair, director of Communications at Birds Canada. “The simple act of observing, learning, and sharing can spark joy, connect us with a growing community around the world, and inspire a lifelong commitment to protecting the places birds depend on.”

To participate, each person or group counts birds for 15 minutes or more and uses the [Merlin Bird ID](#) app or [eBird](#) app to enter the birds they identify at each site they visit. A site could be the backyard, a park, a wilderness area, an apartment balcony, a neighborhood street, or anywhere. First-timers should read the instructions on the [GBBC website](#), where they will also find helpful birding tips and birding app downloads. The GBBC website also features a map of local events to help you find your flock: [birdcount.org/community-map](#)

The Great Backyard Bird Count is a joint project of the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#), [National Audubon Society](#), and [Birds Canada](#) and is made possible in part by founding sponsor [Wild Birds Unlimited](#).

# NESTING BOX SEASON IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER!

STEPHEN TURNER



Mountain Bluebirds at home in a nest box. Photo by Bob Martinka

With the arrival of the new year, many of us look forward to the return of our feathered friends, who are venturing north after their visits to warmer climes. Golden Eagles, among the earliest migrants, will be heading for Alaska starting this month. Bluebirds will begin their northbound journey, arriving in late February and into March. White geese and swans will follow quickly in March. And from then on, it's an all-out assault on the skies as waterfowl, shorebirds, and passerines move north to their breeding grounds.

During the quiet northern winter months, Last Chance Audubon Society prepares for the returning birds by building and maintaining nesting boxes for multiple species. We have a wonderful group of folks who have stepped up to help keep our nest box inventory in healthy shape! In addition, many of you have provided the elbow grease necessary to trek out on our trails and place nest boxes for our breeding bluebirds and swallows! To all of you – thank you for your continued efforts! We couldn't do it without you!

Help out by volunteering to survey a nest box route this year!

This year, we are looking for volunteers to help survey nest boxes in and around the Helena Valley. We have approximately ten routes that we will be monitoring. Each of these routes needs an individual or two to survey the boxes during the breeding season. Some routes have only a few boxes, while others have up to 35 boxes. Surveying during the nesting season lasts approximately a month. However, the timing can vary from species to species.

Not sure if you're up to the challenge? Don't sweat it! LCAS will be offering a workshop in April to provide training on conducting the surveys. It's a relatively easy process, developed by the good folks at Cornell Lab of Ornithology. If you're looking for an early primer, the survey protocol is located on the website [nestwatch.org](http://nestwatch.org).

If you would like to volunteer for the nest box surveys, please reach out as soon as possible. We will schedule a training session around the calendar of our volunteers. Stay tuned for additional details in the March newsletter.

Contact Stephen Turner at [turnstonest@gmail.com](mailto:turnstonest@gmail.com) for more information or to volunteer.

# BIRDING BOOKS

LESLIE SMITH

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This month's book is *We Should All Be Birds*, by Bruce Buckbee. It's a memoir, told by Bruce, about his debilitating illness and friendship with a pigeon. Bruce currently lives in Missoula. He was an accomplished athlete as an adult. As a child, he and his mom spent many hours in the outdoors, fishing, walking, listening to the sounds of nature and viewing the stars. His mom ran an informal animal and bird rescue in their home.

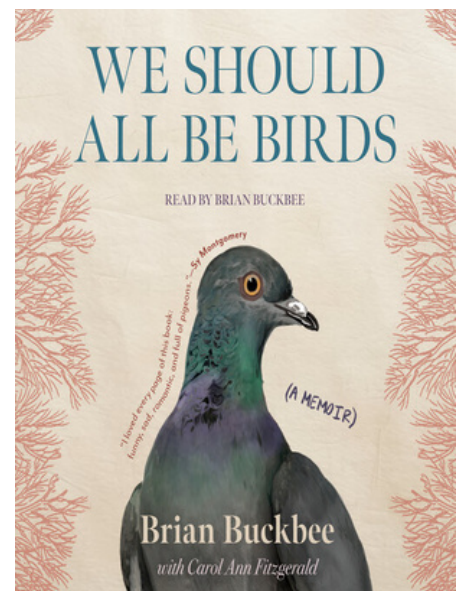
After the end of a long-term relationship, Bruce traveled to Asia to take a break from his routine and put some perspective on things. Unfortunately, while there, his illness began. And it continues until the present. He suffers from myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome, which essentially means chronic severe pain and lack of energy. That is simplifying it a lot!

On one of his evening walks, he came across a young pigeon with an injured foot. He was able to resist taking it home for a few days, but ultimately had to do it. Following the same methods his mother used, he helped bring the pigeon back to health. I say "helped" because the pigeon seemed to know what needed to be done and had its own physical therapy and stretch routine.

Over time, Bruce and the pigeon, named Two-Step because of his initial faltering gait, became close. Two-Step graced Bruce with his trust.

This is the story of a unique cross-species relationship that worked for them both. Being taken into Bruce's home likely saved the pigeon's life. He wouldn't have been able to survive "on the streets" in his injured condition.

Having another living being in his life, gave Bruce a will to live and a focus separate from his own physical condition. I won't tell you what ultimately happens, but I am recommending the book. It is heartfelt, sensitive and bittersweet.



Lewis and Clark Library has this book.

# MEMBERSHIP REPORT

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Please welcome Last Chance Audubon Society new members: David Genter and Steven Helwig.

Sincere thanks to Last Chance renewing members: Gail Moser, Hugh and Karen Zackheim, Janice Miller, Susan Near, Deborah Massett, Pete Strazdas, Sharon Liederman, Connie Herzig, Joy Holloway, Berta Nason, Neal and Mary Ruedisili, Dave and Patti Mott, Jake Lydic, Drake Barton and Kathy Lloyd, and Mike Murray.

Please also welcome National Audubon Society new members: Patricia Balhiser, Carol Johnson and Cheryl Wilson.

Sincere thanks to National Audubon Society renewing members: Roger Bacon, Van Bass, Mary Bradbury, David Brown, Diana Corzine, Joan Daoust, Susan DeBree, S. Ericksen, Paul Ferry, Marlys Forbes, Wendy Fox, Janet Grinde, Roseva Guest, William Hall, B. Hall-Munger, Betsy Hamann, Pamela Harris, Joy Holloway, Randi Hood, Joyce Krings, Robin Le Neve, Bonnie Lovelace, Angela McDannel, Marlene Mickey, Dallas Miller, Gail Moser, Charles Nemec, Sandra Renner, Judy Scheier, David Slaughter, James Utterback, Russell Wrigg, Heather Zaluski, Lucy Zarr, John Hansen, and Ivelone Hodges.

LCAS MEMBERSHIP: A new membership or renewal is \$15 per household and is current for one year, January 1st through December 31st. 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 want to pay online, you can join or renew by filling out a registration form located at [www.lastchanceaudubon.org](http://www.lastchanceaudubon.org) or at membership meetings. 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.

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)

# LAST CHANCE AUDUBON SOCIETY

P.O. BOX 924  
HELENA, MT 59624

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SUPPORT LCAS THROUGH A DONATION OR MEMBERSHIP TODAY

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Membership

## LCAS BOARD

PRESIDENT: Leslie Smith, [leslie.smi@yahoo.com](mailto:leslie.smi@yahoo.com)  
SECRETARY: Gail Kuntz, [tdw596or@aol.com](mailto:tdw596or@aol.com)  
TREASURER: Sue Jackson, 443-4486, [suejacksonmt@gmail.com](mailto:suejacksonmt@gmail.com)  
WEBSITE/BOARD: Don Skaar, [redradon@gmail.com](mailto:redradon@gmail.com)  
EDUCATION/BOARD: Sumner Sharpe, [mtnutmeg@gmail.com](mailto:mtnutmeg@gmail.com)  
NEWSLETTER/BOARD: Coburn Currier, [clcurrier@hotmail.com](mailto:clcurrier@hotmail.com)  
MEMBERSHIP/BOARD: Sharon Dewart-Hansen,  
422-4546, [smdewarthansen@charter.net](mailto:smdewarthansen@charter.net)  
BOARD AT LARGE: Nan Breuninger, 442-2526  
BOARD AT LARGE: Bob Martinka, 449-3313, [rmartink@aol.com](mailto:rmartink@aol.com)  
BOARD AT LARGE: Glenda Bradshaw, [bradshaw@mt.net](mailto:bradshaw@mt.net)  
BOARD AT LARGE: Stephen Turner, 521-0000,  
[turnstonest@gmail.com](mailto:turnstonest@gmail.com)  
BOARD AT LARGE: Grant Hokit, 438-2938, [ghokit@carroll.edu](mailto:ghokit@carroll.edu)

Donate

## LCAS COMMITTEE CHAIRS/CONTACTS

Christmas Bird Count: Coburn Currier,  
[clcurrier@hotmail.com](mailto:clcurrier@hotmail.com)  
Conservation/Habitat: Grant Hokit,  
[ghokit@carroll.edu](mailto:ghokit@carroll.edu)  
Education: Sumner Sharpe,  
[mtnutmeg@gmail.com](mailto:mtnutmeg@gmail.com)  
Field Trips/Website: Don Skaar,  
[redradon@gmail.com](mailto:redradon@gmail.com)  
Philanthropy/Development: John Hansen,  
[johnfhansen@gmail.com](mailto:johnfhansen@gmail.com)  
Meeting Set-up: Doug Hansen,  
[mthusker@charter.net](mailto:mthusker@charter.net)  
Monthly Program: Sandy Shull, 461-2073  
Publicity: Meghan Bahn, [meghanjuly@gmail.com](mailto:meghanjuly@gmail.com)  
Volunteer Coordinator: Pete Strazdas, 406-461-2728,  
[petestrazdas@gmail.com](mailto:petestrazdas@gmail.com)

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MT Audubon State Office: 443-3949