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President's Message

Dear Friends,

We love our natural world, don't we? What can we do to conserve it? We can become active in land use planning (and other things). Sounds so boring, but really it is fascinating. It takes a lot of effort to make meaningful change, but sometimes all it takes is a little communication. My experience is that public participation is what is most needed and effective to inform elected officials and government agencies of the people's will. How else can they be responsive to our conservation issues if none are exposed to them? Public lands are integral to viability of all western bird species and is a good place to begin to conserve our natural world.

Right now, two federal agencies are working on Resource Management Plans that will affect land-use planning and conservation in our region for many years to come. The Bureau of Land Management is seeking public comment on its Resource Management Plan Revision through September 7. You may submit comments using the following methods:

- Website: www.blm.gov/wy/st/en/programs/Planning/rmps/bighorn.html
- Email: BBRMP.WYMail@blm.gov
- Mail: Attention RMP Project Manager, Worland Field Office, 101 South 23rd Street, Worland, WY 82401

The U.S. Forest Service has begun revising its Shoshone National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. It will begin holding public meetings in February and March 2012. You can email the planners for more information at shoshone_forestplan@fs.fed.us.

I encourage you all to attend these meetings and submit comments where appropriate. It is important to provide balance to the discussion and buffer the tendency to lean one direction. There are many interests that have paid staff dedicated to represent their concerns. You will have to volunteer your time to make sure your concerns are addressed.

Also, please let your county commissioners know right now about your concerns as they will be given "cooperating" status, or, in other words, "an early seat at the table." I hope they will remember to try and represent *all* people in the Bighorn Basin.

The Meadowlark Audubon Society Board discussed whether or not we should take a position and advocate during these planning efforts. After some reflection we decided that what is appropriate for our organization is to lead and set an example of a society with a naturalist ethic through education, projects, and public outreach. We do not want to pretend to be able to represent every member's position or issues. We felt it was better left to the members to express their unique and individualized comments, which is more meaningful to the process. Instead, we will try to stay current with the topics and maintain a presence that is not adversarial but welcoming. Through education and learned experience we will find sustainability and a path to reaching our conservation goals that we hold dear, which include our beautiful feathered friends and the landscape they call home.

There are still burrowing owls and osprey nesting to satisfy your birding needs, and be sure to attend the general meetings which start again in September.

See you then,

— Destin Harrell

Meadowlark in the News

Editor's Note: For the benefit of Meadowlark Audubon members who may not have seen them before, we are reprinting some recent news releases and articles that relate to the Society's work and especially to ongoing research being undertaken by MAS President Destin Harrell. We are grateful to the Cody Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management, and to the Billings Gazette, for letting us reprint these materials.

Partnership Improves Fence to Benefit Wildlife



Meadowlark Audubon members John Ross, John Osgood and Rose Hughes cut wires to make fences more wildlife-friendly. Photo courtesy Cody Field Office, Bureau of Land Management

On Saturday, May 7, Meadowlark Audubon Society partnered with the BLM's Cody Field Office and Friends of a Legacy (FOAL) on a fence modification project to benefit sage-grouse, pronghorn and wild horses in the Bridger Butte area inside the McCullough Peaks Wild Horse Herd Management Area east of Cody.

During the workday, volunteers removed approximately six miles of barbed wire on six- and sometimes eight-wire fence, leaving a three-wire fence, and tightened-up loose wires to make two miles of fence friendlier to local wildlife. BLM Wildlife Biologist Destin Harrell, who organized the workday, explained to the group that fences should be no higher than 42 inches to protect sage-grouse in flight, and no lower than 16 inches off the ground to let pronghorn pass easily under them.

FOAL President Marshall Dominick thought that the McCullough Peaks wild horses would also benefit

from the improved fence. “Horses try to cross fences where wires are down and foals can get tangled-up,” Dominick said. “Three tight wires will discourage horses from trying to cross, and securing loose ends and staples further reduces hazards to the horses.”



Susan Richards and Rex Myers of Audubon spool wires removed from fences. Photo courtesy of Cody Field Office, Bureau of Land Management

Fence modification projects will be ongoing as the Cody Field Office attempts to improve BLM fences throughout the field office area to meet wildlife specifications. “There are miles and miles of five- and six-wire fences in the area,” Harrell said. “Sage-grouse collide with fences and pronghorn need space to crawl under fences. This fence is within one of the longest pronghorn migration routes in Wyoming and within a hundred yards of a sage-grouse lek.

Volunteer groups like Meadowlark Audubon Society and FOAL are helping us realize our goal of making BLM fences more wildlife-friendly.”

Meadowlark Audubon Society members enjoyed a little bird watching as they worked to protect sage-grouse and other wildlife. The songs of Sage Thrashers, Horned Larks and Vesper Sparrows were the perfect accompaniment to the day.

In addition to the volunteers improving the fence that day, Bow Hunters of Wyoming donated funds to help make the project a success.

— Courtesy Sarah Beckwith, Public Affairs Specialist, Wind River/Bighorn Basin District Bureau of Land Management

Partners Plant Shrubs for Wildlife

On Saturday, May 14, members of Meadowlark Audubon Society joined forces with the BLM’s Cody Field Office, Marathon Oil Corporation, and National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) to plant 650 shrubs on public land along the Shoshone River east of Lovell, Wyoming.

More than 30 volunteers planted the shrubs to replace invasive Russian olive, which the BLM mechanically and chemically removed from this area two years ago. Russian olive can take control of river bottoms and out-compete native vegetation in the cottonwood understory. Deer, waterfowl, turkey, pheasant and other wildlife species benefit when Russian olive is removed and space is made for native vegetation to flourish.

NWTF’s *Energy for Wildlife* program provided the funds to purchase the hundreds of shrubs. “Silver buffalo berry is the native shrub-of-choice because it produces a fruit similar to the Russian olive’s but doesn’t out-compete other native vegetation,” said BLM Wildlife Biologist (and Meadowlark Audubon president) Destin Harrell. “This results in a diversity of flora for wildlife.” Skunkbush sumac, golden currant and cottonwood trees were also planted.



BLM Wildlife Biologist (and Meadowlark Audubon president) Destin Harrell tells volunteers why silver buffalo berry is the best shrub to replace Russian olive that has been removed. Photo courtesy of Cody Field Office, Bureau of Land Management

Mike Williams, environmental supervisor for Marathon’s Wyoming Asset Team, anticipates that this project will help Marathon plan future habitat improvements. “We’ll be able to learn from our collaborative success on this project and then apply those lessons to other riparian habitat projects on private property elsewhere in Wyoming,” he said.

The 300-acre river tract where the workday took place is part of the greater Yellowtail Wildlife Habitat Management Area. The Yellowtail Coordinated Resource Management (CRM) group has worked for the past several years to improve riparian habitat in this area and on adjacent private lands. The CRM is truly a collaborative effort, with funding primarily from the Wyoming Natural Resource Trust Board, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, BLM, Wyoming Game and Fish Department Trust Fund, National Park Service, and NWTF. The BLM’s Cody and Worland field offices have provided much of the labor with staff from fire, fuels and range programs. The recent volunteer shrub-planting day continues the riparian habitat improvement work of the CRM.

“This is public land. It belongs to all of us so we’re chipping in to make it better,” said Williams. “It will feel good to come back here in the future and see the improvements we made today.”

— Courtesy Sarah Beckwith, Public Affairs Specialist, Wind River/Bighorn Basin District Bureau of Land Management

Mating Call: Biologists Monitor Grouse during Seasonal Dance

POWELL, Wyoming: The Pole Cat Bench spreads dark and dusty toward the horizon, a giant slab of land scoured by the wind, the badlands gnawing at its base.

You won't find the bench on many maps, and the roads crossing the sea of sagebrush aren't marked by the Bureau of Land Management, the states of Wyoming or Montana, or the nearby oil fields.

But it's here along the Montana border before sunrise that Destin Harrell turns the lights of his truck down one of those empty desert roads.

Before long, enough light has crept into the sky to mark the Absaroka Mountains to the west and the Pryor Mountains to the east. Other than the snowy peaks, the landscape is flat, and landmarks are hard to come by.

"That knob over there, that's Montana," Harrell says, turning his eyes this way and that as he drives slowly down the rutted road. Then, as if skipping to

another thought, he says, "I know they're out here somewhere."

Harrell, a biologist with the BLM based out of Cody, is out on a morning sage grouse count, and there isn't time to waste. The birds gather in leks, or display areas, in the morning darkness before dispersing shortly after sunrise.

One of the prairie's most famous dances, the males' strutting performance at the lek, runs from early March to mid-May. In that time, and within a few groggy hours each morning, biologists like Harrell work to determine the health of the bird population.

"What you're really looking at, aside from the population estimates, is a trend," Harrell says. "I think they've shown to be pretty stable here -- the trend hasn't been up or down. But this year, we're not seeing a whole lot. We'll have to wait for the results to come in."

As if on cue, at 5:47 a.m. Harrell spots the first lek in a clearing of sagebrush. He stops the truck and lifts his binoculars, focusing the birds into view. Three females peck at the ground while nearly 25 males strut around them, flashing their tail feathers in hopes of becoming the chosen one. The rhythmic drumming of their chest plays across the plain, and Harrell grins.

"Right now, I see at least three females," Harrell says. "It's surprising, actually, to see females this late in the season. Maybe a few of them lost their nest this year, so they're trying again."

For a bird that biologists think deserves protection under the Endangered Species Act, Harrell agrees that it's best if these females do try again. A lot is riding on their success, and mating dances like this can go far in returning the bird's population to health.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently concluded that the sage grouse does warrant protection. But as Harrell notes, the agency also determined that other species face a more immediate and severe threat of extinction.

With the grouse no longer a candidate for protection due to politics, workload and funding, the Department of the Interior announced an initiative last March to expand efforts to map those lands that are vital to the bird's survival.

In that announcement, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar also said that the agency would work to guide and manage energy projects to reduce effects on the species.

Such discussions take place well over Harrell's head, and he doesn't talk much about the politics of energy development and land use in places such as Montana and Wyoming. But he does talk about the grouse and its preferences, which don't include tall structures such as trees, power poles, wells and gas derricks. Noise, Harrell says, makes it hard for the birds to hear the mating call.

"There's a point where development becomes too much, and the grouse decide that's not a good place

to be," Harrell says. "There are two or three leks I know of that are pretty close to an oil field, probably within a mile or so.

"But the grouse don't like to get too much closer than that. There's been some research out there showing that grouse start to feel a negative effect after one oil well per 640 acres, or a square mile."

In the distance, white oil tanks shimmer in the morning light. Over the horizon, pumps nod up and down, drawing crude from the earth. The development is far enough away not to bother the birds.

With the sun rising and the shadows emerging, Harrell races to the next lek, fearing the birds will have dispersed by the time he arrives. It's a 15-mile drive across rutted roads and high desert. But he makes it, and his count reaches roughly 60 birds. Most of them are males, their white chests stark against the green expanse of sagebrush and grass.

Despite the increasing fragmentation of the bird's habitat, which U.S. Fish and Wildlife identifies as the leading threat to the grouse's future, the animal still occupies about 56 percent of its historic range across the Western United States and Canada.

Harrell has seen grouse living as high as 9,000 feet elevation on nearby mountains that offer the right habitat. But there are still many questions that he would like to see answered, including distribution data, which isn't easy to get.

"We know where their leks are, but we don't know if the birds are migrating into Montana for the summer and fall or if they're going down to the hay fields," Harrell said. "Once we know where they're going, we can manage their habitat better."

Caught between America's need for energy and its will for conservation, the BLM has made efforts to preserve and improve sage grouse habitat. Not far from this lek, the agency mowed and burned patches into the desert where the sage had grown so thick that it hindered the bird's movement.

As Harrell says, grouse prefer to walk rather than fly, where they're more susceptible to the raptors above. They've adapted to life on the ground using sage as cover and the open pockets between as a place to dance.

"We had a real thick sagebrush patch like this, so we went in and opened it up, mowing and burning in a mosaic pattern," Harrell said. "We removed about 10 percent of the area and burned another 10 percent."

While such efforts appear on the surface to be working, Harrell says it's too soon to know if they'll make a long-term difference. He'll continue working with biologists across Wyoming and Montana to observe any trends, good or bad, in the bird's population.

"You've got to wait for the data to come in to make a final determination of what this season is like," Harrell says. "It seems to me like it's down, but we

go up and down all the time. Not until I get that final report can I make that statement."

—Martin Kidston, Wyoming Bureau,
Billings Gazette

Meadowlark Audubon Chapter Scholarship Essay

Editor's Note: Here is the winning essay by Benjamin Anson, selected as this year's recipient of Meadowlark Audubon's Debra Woodbridge Memorial Scholarship. Benjamin graduated from Riverside High School in Basin, where he was Student Council president, FCCLA (Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America) president, and Student Body President, and a member of the National Honor Society, FFA, and the Spanish Club. He was also the team captain of both Varsity football and wrestling. He is starting his first semester at the University of Wyoming. We congratulate Benjamin and wish him the best of luck with his studies and career plans!

Never have I been placed in a situation where I was ashamed to say that I have a love for the great outdoors and all of its wonders, including hunting and fishing. My whole life I have aspired to be involved in nature, and I have always been brought up to show great respect for the environment. That is why I have been an avid outdoorsman my entire life, and why my career path will only deepen my roots in the outdoors.

When writing this essay I first thought that it would be best to steer away from talking about all of my fondness toward hunting and fishing. However, after further consideration, I didn't find it appropriate to avoid one of the things I most love about my time spent outside. I look at hunting and fishing with an

adoration like nothing else. Not only does it bring that "thrill of the hunt" to me, but it also brings a pride of having done my share for conservation. To me hunting is not animal cruelty; animal cruelty is letting wildlife die of starvation or the elements. I have always been raised to view hunting as one of the most effective and humane forms to conserve wildlife by means of preventing over-populating and starvation. This is why I have chosen to share my love of hunting and fishing with you, rather than avoid the issue or give you a false point of view.

With my love for hunting and fishing also came my future aspirations of becoming a game warden. This fall I plan on enrolling at the University of Wyoming with hopes of majoring in wildlife and fisheries management. That is why I feel that this scholarship is very fitting for me, considering my career focuses on creating a better outdoors and maintaining those traditions that I, and many other Wyomingites, hold so dear. There is nothing that offends me more than people disrespecting the environment and not pulling their weight to maintain the vast expanse of nature surrounding us. The mission of the Audubon Society is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity. I agree with this mission wholeheartedly, and look to do my part for conservation through my career as a game warden and for the rest of my days.

In my future I always plan to have the utmost respect for nature, wildlife, and our environment. I would be tremendously honored to receive this award considering the field of study I have chosen to

pursue, and greatly appreciate any consideration I am given during your awarding process.

— Benjamin Anson

Meadowlark Audubon Spring Bird Count

Another spring bird count is in the books; now the time is nearing to think about doing the fall bird count again.

Once again this spring, just as we have done for the past several years, we counted birds at Beck and Alkali lakes, Buchanan Nature Sanctuary, and New Cody and Markham reservoirs. We had a good turnout with 10 people joining in the counting. One of the highlights of the season was seeing the return of the nesting Sandhill Cranes and Osprey, as well as the loons that were back again for a short stay.

We did see a total of 60 different bird species and 2783 birds. Those numbers fall within the high and low ranges of what we have seen in past years.

The fall count will begin in mid-September. We will meet at McDonald's at 7:45 a.m. to car pool and get coffee or breakfast. We will start counting just west of Taco John's restaurant at one hour past sunrise. Participating in the bird counts is a great way to learn to identify birds, especially waterfowl. We would like to invite anyone who is interested in viewing and identifying birds—or maybe just enjoying being out viewing nature in general—to come join us for the count, and stay for lunch

afterwards to share an enjoyable ending to an enjoyable morning!

— Donna Haman

Spring Field Trip Reports

Spring Warbler Walk



Warbler Walk participant Milly Nixon captured these images of two grebes—Western and Clark's. Can you tell which is which? In the Clark's (top), the white cheek-patch extends above the eye. Photos courtesy of Milly Nixon.

Ten enthusiastic birders participated in Meadowlark Audubon's second annual "Warbler Walk" on May 13, which proved to be more of a "Waterfowl Walk," with numerous ducks but nary a warbler seen. The walk originally was scheduled for May 6 but had to be postponed a week after an inspection of the Shoshone River Trail the day before revealed that few trees or shrubs had begun leafing out, a result of

April's prolonged chilliness and wet weather. Even on the morning of the walk, little vegetation was evident. Participants observed 22 species, including Mallard, Gadwall, Redhead and Blue-winged teal, Canada Goose, Clark's Grebe, Sandhill Crane, Killdeer, Violet-winged Swallow, Red-winged and Yellow-headed blackbirds, Cedar Waxwing and American Goldfinch. Yet even though the walk yielded no warblers, everyone welcomed the opportunity it afforded to enjoy some rare (for this spring!) nice weather, with temperatures in the 50s and partly cloudy skies with ample breaks of sunshine. Here's hoping for a more productive walk next year!

— John C. Rumm

Shoshone River Trail Trip



Students and teachers from Thermopolis prepare to walk the Shoshone River Trail. Photo courtesy of Dave Buckles.

Even though it was a blustery May 19th, with 21-mph winds, 44 degrees and grey overcast skies threatening rain or snow at any moment, a group of 46 people from Thermopolis ventured with me along the Shoshone River Trail to see what birds we could

find. The group included young people from the Ralph Witters Elementary School who were enrolled in its SEEK program (Structured and Expanded Enrichment in Knowledge), and FFA (Future Farmers of America) students from Hot Springs County High School.

The interest and enthusiasm this group showed made this birding outing one of my best. The kids were eager to add each bird we saw into a journal they were keeping. We got especially good looks at Tree Swallows, Violet-green Swallows and a Barn Swallow. Using their binoculars, everyone could see the graceful forked tail of the Barn Swallow, the iridescent blue/green plumage of the Violet-green Swallow, and the Tree Swallow's dazzling blue color.



This Swainson's Thrush obligingly posed for a photograph during the Shoshone River Trail walk. Photo courtesy of Dave Buckles.

All in all, we saw 30 species, including a Swainson's Thrush and a pair of Canada Geese with seven goslings. I was pleased that the weather didn't affect the birds too much, and the interest and delight that came up on that bus from Thermopolis was truly inspiring!

— Dave Buckles

Membership Renewal Reminder

Meadowlark *Chapter-only* annual memberships expire August 31st. If you have not sent in your renewal, we would appreciate it if you would take a moment to do it now. Chapter-Only dues are still only \$12 per year. Please send your dues to Donna Haman, Meadowlark Audubon Society Membership Chair, at P.O. Box 593, Cody, WY 82414. Thank you!

“Birding Basics Workshop” Rescheduled

Due to the press of other matters, the “Birding Basics Workshop” planned for this fall must be rescheduled for the spring or summer of 2012. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause. Please check the Meadowlark website for more details about when the rescheduled workshop will take place.

Calendar of Upcoming Events

Unless otherwise noted, all events take place in the basement community room of Big Horn Federal Savings, 1701 Stampede Avenue, in Cody. Please make sure to check our website (<http://www.meadowlarkwyo.org>) for program details, announcements and updates!

September 8, 2011: Board meeting, 6-6:45; Program meeting, 7-8:15. Presenter: Eric C. Atkinson (Biology Instructor, Northwest College, Powell), “A Natural History of Shrikes, with Special Focus on Northern Shrikes.”

October 13, 2011: Board meeting, 6-6:45; Program meeting, 7-8:15. Presenter (tentative): Douglas W. Faulkner, author of *Birds of Wyoming* (Roberts & Company, 2010).

November 10, 2011: Board meeting, 6-6:45; Program meeting, 7-8:15. Presenters: Destin Harrell (Wildlife Biologist, BLM and Meadowlark Audubon president) and Ann Belleman (Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Meadowlark Audubon board member), “Sensitive Species and Endangered Species”

December 2011: No program meeting—we encourage you to take part in the annual Christmas Bird Count! (Watch for dates and details in the November 2011 *Voice of the Meadowlark*.)



Meadowlark Audubon Society of the
Big Horn Basin and Northwest Wyoming
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