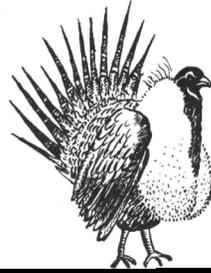


# PLAINS & PEAKS



Vol. 46 — Iss. 2 — FEBRUARY — 2012

**MURIE AUDUBON**

Casper Wyoming - Monthly Publication  
<http://www.murieaudubon.org>

## **26<sup>TH</sup> MURIE AUDUBON SOCIETY ANNUAL BANQUET AND FUNDRAISER**

**K**urt Johnson's childhood aspiration was to grow up to be a monkey. Fortunately for us he never achieved his goal, but his fascination for wildlife sparked a career as naturalist, author and photographer in such varied locales as Wyoming, Oregon, Alaska, Hawaii, Mexico and East Africa. He'll share his talents as featured speaker at the annual Murie Audubon Society Banquet on Saturday, February 11 in the Mardi Gras Room of Casper's Parkway Plaza beginning at 5:30 PM. Chicken Fran-



### CALENDAR

Feb. 11—MAS Annual Banquet and Fundraiser  
Feb. 17-20—Great Backyard Bird count  
Feb. 22—March article deadline  
Every Thursday—Brown Bag Lunch with the Birds—12:00 Noon—ACGC—101 Garden Creek Road

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cesca is on the menu.

Kurt will lead us on an armchair nature hike and photo safari as he speaks on "Aspects of the Greater Grand Teton/Yellowstone Park Ecosystem." His publications include identification guides for *Yellowstone/Grand Teton Birds and Mammals; Butterflies and Moths; Tracks and Scat; Wildflowers; Trees and Shrubs; Fish, Reptiles and Amphibians; Geysers and Thermal Features; and The Night Sky*. Kurt's photography can be found at the online gallery [www.wildthingsofwyoming.com](http://www.wildthingsofwyoming.com).

For fun again this year, numerous raffle and silent auction items will be available. Spring Creek Ranch, Jackson, Wyoming, where Kurt Johnson works as a naturalist, has donated a package for auction that will include deluxe accommodations for two for two nights, a breakfast, and half day wildlife safari for two with Kurt. Banquet tickets are \$27.50/person or a table of eight for \$200. Tickets may be obtained from the Audubon Center at Garden Creek, from

Bruce and Donna Walgren (234-7455), or Karen Anfang (472-0278).

**Banquet Chair—Karen Anfang**

(Ed's note—the article's pictures are courtesy of Kurt Johnson)



## ALONG THE PATHWAY WITH HARRY

Change continues to be a constant. Every day I read something about climate change. It's happening all around us and the latest interesting news is about a big blister

(bulge) of fresh water occurring in the arctic. The impact from that has yet to be determined, but it is an indicator of climate change that could eventually effect bird migration as it could impact water currents if it gets released into the ocean.

Change continues with my family. I wonder what impact climate change will have on my sons. We talk about such things as I want them to know how and why it happens. Even with myself, I encounter change. My current employer is looking to save money and release unnecessary personnel. I have been rather distracted lately as I have had to come to terms with the possibility of being relocated to Cheyenne. I discussed this with my family and what overall impact it would have on us. Do I really want to move? Will I have to resign from Murie Audubon Society Chapter as President? After much thought and discussion, I decide I do not wish to move to Cheyenne. I turned on my electronic resume and I start networking to find a new job.

Within two weeks, I found a new employer. I have resigned from my full time position with my current employer, and I started training for

the new position. I have mixed feelings. I'm excited and at the same time, I am mindful that I will be working for an industry that harvests fossil fuels for our never ending thirst for energy. Somewhere in there, I hope to find a balance. I will be looking to find what programs my new employer has for conservation efforts to help protect our precious wildlife. Time will tell.

More change is in the air. In case you have not been following the National Audubon news, it has a new Strategic Plan. I encourage all of our members to visit the National Audubon website to see what changes have occurred. I don't know how this will impact us. A reorganization of programs and staffing along four major continental flyways is supposed to make Audubon more effective in conservation efforts. Do the birds know this? Do they care? It remains to be seen how these changes will help birds and birders. Migration routes are changing based on climate change. Birders will remain birders, and the birds will do what they need to do to adapt to the climate change. We are located in Casper. We cannot move, but we can keep birding. We wait, we watch, and we count. My sons are becoming experts at reporting our counts to eBird.org. We enjoy being citizen scientists, and we hope our observations aid in understanding how climate change impacts bird flyways.

Change can be a good thing. Let's hope for the best and keep on birding.

**President—Harry Martin**

## AUDUBON ADVENTURES

Judi Van Rensselaer sponsored more than one classroom. Thank you Judi and all of you generous people who sponsored classes this year.

Audubon Adventures lost a loyal friend in December when Grace Jenkins died. Grace and her deceased husband, Carl, sponsored many classes through the years. Grace will be missed.

**Education Chair—Ann Hines**



## Bird-Watchers Revel in Unusual Spike in Snowy Owl Sightings

David Patton/Albany Democrat-Herald, via Associated Press

On Dec. 5, this snowy owl made an appearance in Albany, Ore., a state that rarely sees birds of this kind. The birds have been seen across the nation this winter.

By Jim Robbins

HELENA, Mont. — From coast to coast across the northern United States, a striking number of snowy owls have been swooping onto shorelines and flying over fields this winter, delighting bird-watchers and stirring speculation about the cause of the spike.

The white, two-foot-tall birds, which live in the Arctic the rest of the year, are known to fly south in large numbers every few winters in what is known as an irruption. But this year, the numbers are unusually high, said Denver Holt, director of the Owl Research Institute in Charlo, Mont.

"There are so many across the country, everywhere, by the thousands," Mr. Holt said. "It's unbelievable. They are being seen from Boston, to the Great Lakes, the Ohio River Valley, Kansas, Vancouver and Seattle."

"One showed up at the airport in Hawaii, and they shot it," he added in astonishment. "It's the first ever in Hawaii and they shot it!"

The owl was killed on Thanksgiving by federal officials who feared that the bird would interfere with landings and takeoffs.

Why so many more of the birds are show-

ing up is largely a mystery, Mr. Holt said. "We do know they had a really good breeding year, and there was plenty of food last year," he said. Instead of no chicks, or one or two, a single nest will produce five, six, seven or more fledglings in a good breeding year, he said.

The owls' Arctic diet is 90 percent lemmings, although the birds, which are powerful hunters, also eat mice, voles, ducks, hares and even fish when they migrate south. Some ornithologists speculate that lemming populations crashed recently after a boom, which could have led to the push south, but researchers have not confirmed such a decline.

The irruption started in late fall and is expected to end by March or April. In few places are people as excited as in Kansas and Missouri, where snowy owls are exceedingly rare. Ninety have shown up in Kansas this winter and 40 in Missouri. Until this year, the highest number counted in Missouri had been eight.

"It's a massive movement," said Mark Robbins, the ornithology collection manager at the University of Kansas.

When five of the birds took up residency at Smithville Lake, near Kansas City, Mo., it created an "owl jam," Mr. Robbins said. Thousands of people have driven there to see them, he said, and hundreds of owl seekers have shown up at Clinton Lake near Lawrence, Kan.

Unlike many owls, the snowy variety are diurnal, or active during the day, which accounts for some of the hubbub. Their blinding white coloring, sometimes with brown barring, and piercing yellow eyes are a magnet for birders and nonbirders alike.

Adding to the allure for children, the owls are of the same species as Hedwig, the faithful companion of the fictional wizard Harry Potter, which perished defending him in the final book of the series.

Geoff LeBaron, director of the Audubon Society's Christmas bird count, said that it was hard to estimate how many snowy owls flew south

in this irruption because the latest data has not been tallied, but that the overall number was probably a few thousand. Despite the surge, the society says, snowy owls are thought to have been in decline since 1945.

There is far more data on the scope of this migration than in years past, thanks to a citizen science project based at Cornell called [eBird](#), which is run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Audubon Society. Bird-watchers around the country call in sightings, which are plotted on a map that shows precisely where the birds are wintering.

"A lot of people who have never seen one before have rushed out and seen multiples," said Marshall Iliff, an ornithologist at Cornell and the project's leader. "And photographers are having a field day."

Additional hot spots include the mouth of the Columbia River in Washington State, with 10 to 13 birds; 20 at Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge in South Dakota, and 30 in Boundary Bay, near Vancouver in British Columbia.

The owls are even showing up in urban and suburban areas, along highways, on signs and fence posts, and in other places where people can more easily spot them. It has been a good snowy owl year at Logan Airport in Boston, too. Because the airfield looks like tundra, snowy owls tend to flock there, and they must be trapped and removed.

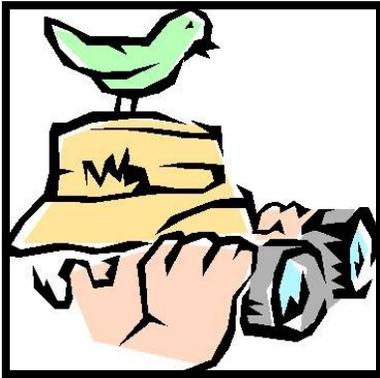
"We've removed 21 so far this year, and the average is six," said Norman Smith, who works for the Massachusetts Audubon Society and traps the birds. The most ever trapped was 43 in 1986, Mr. Smith said, "but the year's not over."

Mr. Holt, who has journeyed to the Arctic tundra to study snowy owls and their food and nesting habits for the last 20 years and is one of world's leading experts on the bird, said he had seen no evidence that the owls, most of them young, are stressed. "They are not all here starving to death," he said. "The birds appear to be in good physical condition."

But Mr. Robbins said he had seen some evidence to the contrary. Of five dead birds he examined — three hit by cars, one hit by a train and one that was electrocuted — there was "no question" that "some of these birds are starving to death," he said, probably because they have been unable to find enough food.

Whatever the causes of the irruption, owl watchers are making the most of what they suspect may be a unique opportunity.

Mr. Holt suggests that the draw of the snowy owls may be partly a fascination with the birds' coloring. "White wolves, polar bears, white whales, white buffalo — there is something about white plumage that signifies innocence or purity," he said. "People don't flock to see any other animal the way they do white ones."



## BIRD NOTES

The big birding news continues to be Snowy Owls moving down from Canada; large numbers are still being reported in Montana, the Dakotas, and Nebraska. These birds have also been reported in Idaho, Colorado, Kansas, and a few in Wyoming — the latest in the Torrington area.

For the month of December, Wayne and I received 188 reports for the Yard Bird Project. 75 species were tallied from 73 locations in 17 states plus Costa Rica and the Yukon. Lots of redpolls were still being reported, but rosy-finch, shrike and crossbill numbers were way below normal. No Cassin's Finches were reported, and

Rough-legged Hawk reports were lower than usual for this time of year. Of special note, a Eurasian Tree Sparrow was reported from Arnold, Missouri; this is an introduced species that is being sighted more frequently in the US (and actually has been in this country as long as the House Sparrow). The No. 1 species for December was Common Redpolls. Black-capped Chickadee came in second; third place was Northern Flicker (both red-shafts and yellow-shafts were reported). Fourth place species was Cedar Waxwing.

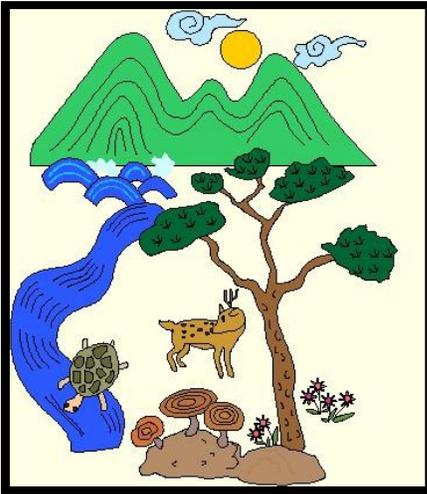
### Wyoming Yard Bird Report

**Casper:** Annette Hein - Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, Ed Reish - Eurasian Collared-Dove, Rose-Mary King - Black-capped Chickadee, Chris Michelson - Purple Finch, Lois Layton - Song Sparrow, Garden Creek Audubon Center - House Finch, Casper College Greenhouse - American Crow, Donna Walgren - Sharp-shinned Hawk, Bruce Walgren - American Crow; **Cheyenne:** Barb Gorges - Common Redpoll; **Buffalo:** Deane Bjerke - Harris's Sparrow; **Riverton:** Suzanne Hargis - Virginia Rail, Bob Hargis - Northern Goshawk; **Teton Village:** Ree van Oppen - Common Raven; **Ucross:** Ruth Salvatore - Cedar Waxwing.

Thanks to all who helped with the Yard Bird Project in December!!! Keep watching the birds in your area - we never know what might show up next!!! Send your bird info to Donna Walgren, 4311 S. Center St., Casper, WY 82601, or email to [Piranga@bresnan.net](mailto:Piranga@bresnan.net). or phone 234-7455. Good Birding!!!

Donna Walgren

Happy  
Valentine's  
Day



## THE RIPPLING WAY

What a flurry of activity at the feeders these days! House Finches, Goldfinches, Juncos, Downy Woodpeckers, Northern Flicker, and yes House Sparrows and Pigeons but they all add to the bustle. Just to keep things interesting, a Goshawk makes its appearance every now and then and I just started hearing owls hooting!

I am excited with the new Strategic Plan that National Audubon has adopted. It includes a focus on Flyways and ensuring healthy habitats for birds. There's also the chance to work on regional scale with our neighbors in Colorado and New Mexico on the Sagebrush Initiative. There is recognition of the strength in local chapters along with regional and national partners as we all work together to protect and celebrate birds and their habitats. Audubon Rockies in Wyoming is still actively taking the lead in siting issues for wind turbines and transmission lines.

On the education front, Community Naturalists Dusty, Jacelyn and myself will be working together to do outreach in the schools, connect with chapters, write grants and plan programs that connect people with the Sagebrush environ-

ment and the birds that live here.

Things are certainly taking flight at the center, with a Bird-Watching Open House, on Saturday, Feb 4 from 9:00 until 1:00. It will be a chance for all who attend to gain confidence in identifying Casper birds, explore using various field guides and get tips on using binoculars. This will hopefully get everyone geared up for the Great Backyard Bird Count over President's Day Weekend. This is a great way to make your bird-watching count. You can watch for 15 minutes or 15 hours and your data will help with bird knowledge in Wyoming! For more information give me a call here the Center or check out the website: <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/> or see pg. 9.

Hope the birds abound wherever you go and that you can marvel at the most common sparrows as well as the majestic bald eagle or elusive (to me) snowy owl!

Nature Center Supervisor—Wanda Peters

## BP'S RESPONSE TO NAS'S ARTICLE "WAKE UP BP" (Audubon Magazine Jan./Feb. 2012)

Dear Editor:

BP would like to comment on the article entitled "Wake Up BP," appearing in the January-February 2012 issue of your magazine about our decision not to re-construct a process water pipeline that runs almost five miles from our former refinery to Soda Lake.

It is important for your readers to understand that Soda Lake is not a natural, self-sustaining lake, but rather a playa or "ephemeral" lake that depends on rain and groundwater. BP's legacy operations (ca.1956) affected this natural state when we constructed a pipeline to discharge refinery process water that filled the ba-

sin. After the refinery shut down in 1991 and up until 2008, we continued to pump both clean, treated water and also artificially diverted river water to maintain levels in Soda Lake. However, due to substantial leaks in the pipeline and with the agreement of the city and county, Soda Lake is returning to its natural condition and treated, clean water is being returned to the North Platte River.

Without the benefit of additional information and context your readers may not appreciate that:

- 1) Acting under an Agreed Remedy Decision, BP is returning the basin to its pre-existing condition as a natural playa lake and assigning the water rights to the city of Casper and Natrona County.
- 2) BP made its decision after a thorough review and after discussion with representatives of the city of Casper, the City/County Joint Powers Board, the state of Wyoming, and US Fish and Wildlife Service.
- 3) Available water rights would be assigned back to local stakeholders consistent with a 1998 agreement that allows water to be used for municipal purposes as determined by Casper-area stakeholders and not BP.
- 4) Due to extensive development of northwest Casper, any repair or re-construction of the 54 year-old pipeline would mean significant land disturbance, business and traffic disruptions, and a cost of millions of dollars.
- 5) BP is planning support for other wildlife projects in the area, including one focused on prong-horn antelope or sage grouse, and would welcome an open, constructive dialogue with The Audubon Society in this regard.

We remain open to supporting efforts to further enhance the former Casper Refinery area and the Soda Lake uplands, as the basin is returned to its playa lake condition. Thank you for

an opportunity to clarify the record.  
Sincerely,  
Patricia Gallery  
Global Portfolio Manager  
Remediation Management



## GO GREEN TIPS

### SAVE ENERGY TO SAVE MONEY:

1. Set your thermostat a few degrees lower in the winter and a few degrees higher in the summer to save on heating and cooling costs.
2. Install compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) when your older incandescent bulbs burn out.
3. Unplug appliances when you're not using them. Or, use a "smart" power strip that senses when appliances are off and cuts "phantom" or "vampire" energy use.
4. Wash clothes in cold water whenever possible. As much as 85 percent of the energy used to machine wash clothes goes to heating the water.
5. Use a drying rack or clothesline to save the energy otherwise used during machine drying.

### SAVE WATER TO SAVE MONEY:

1. Take shorter showers to reduce water use. This will lower your water and heating bills too.
2. Install a low-flow showerhead. They don't cost much, and the water and energy savings can

quickly pay back your investment.

3. Make sure you have a faucet aerator on each faucet. These inexpensive appliances conserve heat and water, while keeping water pressure high.
4. Plant drought-tolerant native plants in your garden. Many plants need minimal watering. Find out which occur naturally in your area.

#### LESS GAS = MORE MONEY (AND BETTER HEALTH!):

1. Walk or bike to work. This saves on gas and parking costs while improving your cardiovascular health and reducing your risk of obesity.
2. Consider telecommuting if you live far from your work. Or move closer. Even if this means paying more rent, it could save you money in the long term.
3. Lobby your local government to increase spending on sidewalks and bike lanes. With little cost, these improvements can pay huge dividends in bettering your health and reducing traffic.

#### EAT SMART:

1. If you eat meat, add one meatless meal a week. Meat costs a lot at the store-and it's even more expensive when you consider the related environmental and health costs.
2. Buy locally raised, humane, and organic meat, eggs, and dairy whenever you can. Purchasing from local farmers keeps money in the local economy.
3. Watch videos about why local food and sustainable seafood are so great. Whatever your diet, eat low on the food chain. This is especially true for seafood.

#### SKIP THE BOTTLED WATER:

1. Use a water filter to purify tap water instead of buying bottled water. Not only is bottled water expensive, but it generates large amounts of container waste.

2. Bring a reusable water bottle, preferably aluminum rather than plastic, with you when traveling or at work.

#### THINK BEFORE YOU BUY.

1. Go online to find new or gently used secondhand products. Whether you've just moved or are looking to redecorate, consider a service like craigslist or FreeSharing to track down furniture, appliances, and other items cheaply or for free.
2. Check out garage sales, thrift stores, and consignment shops for clothing and other everyday items.
3. When making purchases, make sure you know what's "Good Stuff" and what isn't.

#### BORROW INSTEAD OF BUYING:

1. Borrow from libraries instead of buying personal books and movies. This saves money, not to mention the ink and paper that goes into printing new books.
2. Share power tools and other appliances. Get to know your neighbors while cutting down on the number of things cluttering your closet or garage.

#### BUY SMART:

1. Buy in bulk. Purchasing food from bulk bins can save money and packaging.
2. Wear clothes that don't need to be dry-cleaned. This saves money and cuts down on toxic chemical use.
3. 4. Invest in high-quality, long-lasting products. You might pay more now, but you'll be happy when you don't have to replace items as frequently (and this means less waste!).

#### KEEP ELECTRONICS OUT OF THE TRASH:

1. Keep your cell phones, computers, and other electronics as long as possible.
2. Donate or recycle them responsibly when the time comes. E-waste contains mercury and other toxics and is a growing environmental

problem.

3. Recycle your cell phone.
4. Ask your local government to set up an electronics recycling and hazardous waste collection event.

#### MAKE YOUR OWN CLEANING SUPPLIES:

1. The big secret: you can make very effective, non-toxic cleaning products whenever you need them. All you need are a few simple ingredients like baking soda, vinegar, lemon, and soap.
2. Making your own cleaning products saves money, time, and packaging—not to mention your indoor air quality.

(From <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/3915>)

## GREAT BACK YARD BIRD COUNT

**The 2012 GBBC will take place Friday, February 17, through Monday, February 20. Please join us for the 15th annual count!**

The Great Backyard Bird Count is an annual four-day event that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are across the continent. Anyone can participate, from beginning bird watchers to experts. It takes as little as 15 minutes on one day, or you can count for as long as you like each day of the event. It's free, fun, and easy—and it helps the birds.

Participants count birds anywhere for as little or as long as they wish during the four-day period. They tally the highest number of birds of each species seen together at any one time. To report their counts, they fill out an online checklist at the Great Backyard Bird Count website.

As the count progresses, anyone with Internet access can explore what is being reported from their own towns or anywhere in the United States and Canada. They can also see how this year's numbers compare with those from previous years. Participants may also send in pho-

tographs of the birds they see.

### Why Count Birds?

Scientists and bird enthusiasts can learn a lot by knowing where the birds are. Bird populations are dynamic; they are constantly in flux. No single scientist or team of scientists could hope to document the complex distribution and movements of so many species in such a short time.

We need your help. Make sure the birds from your community are well represented in the count. It doesn't matter whether you report the 5 species coming to your backyard feeder or the 75 species you see during a day's outing to a wild-life refuge.

#### Your counts can help us answer many questions:

- How will this winter's snow and cold temperatures influence bird populations?
- Where are winter finches and other "irruptive" species that appear in large numbers during some years but not others?
- How will the timing of birds' migrations compare with past years?
- How are bird diseases, such as West Nile virus, affecting birds in different regions?
- What kinds of differences in bird diversity are apparent in cities versus suburban, rural, and natural areas?
- Are any birds undergoing worrisome declines that point to the need for conservation attention?

Scientists use the counts, along with observations from other citizen-science projects, such as the Christmas Bird Count, Project FeederWatch, and eBird, to give us an immense picture of our winter birds. Each year that these data are collected makes them more meaningful and allows scientists to investigate far-reaching questions.

*The Great Backyard Bird Count is led by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society, with Canadian partner Bird Studies Canada and sponsorship from Wild Birds Unlimited.*