UPCOMING EVENTS

April 14th at 7 pm
April Monthly Program

April 16th at 9 am
Goldeneye field trip

SPECIAL FEATURES

Sage Grouse Farm
Updates & Commentary

pg 4
pg 6
pg 7-9
Greetings!!

We’ve been waiting for it these long months, spring migration and the busy bird time of year. We just cleaned and repaired our nest boxes for the season!

I’ve been doing alot of thinking about Biodiversity lately. Cheyenne’s Audubon Society Habitat Hero’s workshop and David Attenborough’s Life on Planet Earth have both inspired me to “re-wild” the spaces I’m in. This can only have benefits for birds in our area.

As spring approaches, I challenge us all to increase native species, provide cover habitat, and give pollinators a helping hand in our yards. These small steps, when done together can make a big difference.

We so look forward to seeing you all at some of these activities. Thank you so much for educating us all!

*Jenny Edwards*

**FIELD NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT**

**APRIL BIRD CHALLENGE**

These birds are fairly rare, but make their main debut in Natrona County in April (according to the last 10 years of data collected by eBird). This list is challenging. See if you can find them during the month of April.

- Wood Duck
- Sandhill Crane
- Wilson’s Snipe
- Swainson’s Hawk
- Burrowing Owl
- Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- Marsh Wren
- Chipping Sparrow
- Vesper’s Sparrow
- Yellow-headed blackbird

Good luck! Can’t wait to see pictures and reports of your birds!

Data compiled from eBird.

**KIDS CORNER**

*Light colored turkeys?*

When learning to identify birds by sight we try to become proficient in recognizing size, coloration, and behavior patterns as key elements to differentiate between bird species. There can be, however, exceptions to these patterns in just about any given bird species. Let’s look at differences in color patterns of wild turkeys (scientific name *Meleagris gallopavo*) as an example.
Look at the turkeys in the picture below and you will notice an obvious difference in color pattern amongst them. Are they different species? Does the difference in color indicate a certain “phase” in the life of the species? The lighter color pattern of the one turkey in the picture is likely due to differences in its DNA compared to the other turkeys. The difference is heritable in that it can be passed from parent to offspring.

These color variations are often referred to as “morphs”. “Dark” and “light” morphs are among the most common and can be observed in many species, including hawks for example. Note – the light colored morphs of turkeys are not albinos – albinism has a different genetic basis. Unfortunately, in the case of the wild turkey and multiple other species, a light color morph can reduce the bird’s ability to blend in with its habitat, which in turn can increase its chances of predation.


Kelly Keenan

BOOK CLUB

Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic
by David Quammen

*** 4.5 stars

This book has been fascinating. It was written just prior to COVID-19 outbreak. It discusses other instances in which infectious disease amongst animals crossed into human populations. The author includes narrative of his travels to locations where spillover events occurred and included good descriptions of the science involved to make it understandable.

Jenny Edwards
This month we will learn about how torrent ducks (*Merganetta armata*) live at high altitudes in the Andes of South America. This presentation will help us understand these riverine specialist ducks, and the methodology used to capture them alive. We will also learn about their history: when and how torrent ducks occupied the Andes, their behaviors (diving, feeding, and reproduction), their population abundance, and their morphological and physiological adaptations to the extreme conditions that they live in, such as high elevation, low temperatures, and hypoxia.

Our guest speaker, Dr. Alza-Leon, is an ecologist, working in evolutionary biology. He works as a full-time instructor at Casper College and as an associated researcher to the Centro de Ornitología y Biodiversidad in Peru. He spent more than twenty years working in the field in Peru, and other countries in South America and in the Antarctic Peninsula. He began his career as an undergraduate in 1995, working in different research and monitoring projects. Later, in 2012, he started in the Ph.D. program at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, and finished at the University of Miami, Florida. During that time, he moved to Casper in 2017 to start his family, and worked as a zoology adjunct instructor for the University of Wyoming at Casper.

Please join us on Thursday, April 14, at 7 PM at the Izaak Walton Clubhouse, 4205 Fort Caspar Road, for this program. As always, the program is free and open to the public!

*Luis Alza-Leon and Donna Walgren*
SUPERB OWL PARTY FOLLOW UP

Murie partnered with the Science Zone to promote the study of owls during one of their Stem Family Nights.

Despite a heavy snowfall, several Murie volunteers showed up to share. We even had a teen from the Teen Naturalist group help out!

The stations ranged from owl adaptations, to owl calls, and owl identification. Here are a few photos from the event!

Thanks so much to the science zone and the dedicated Murie volunteers!

Consider taking a kid to these monthly family stem nights at the Science Zone!
Luis Alza and Stacey Scott are going to teach a 4 week bird identification class starting Tuesday April 19. We will meet at 7:00 every Tuesday night for 4 weeks at the Werner Wildlife Museum, and have a field trip each Saturday after the class. We will cover the basics of how to use field guides and binoculars, then talk about the most common birds that are around here. Our objective is to teach how to identify the common birds, and how to look up any that puzzle you. Murie Audubon will have several field trips after the class is over so that you can continue what you learned in the class. This class is free and open to everyone.

**OLLII Class**: Stacey Scott is going to teach an OLLI Class on bird identification on June 1 and June 8. The first class will concentrate on birds in EKW with a field trip to EKW on June 2. The second class will concentrate on birds on Casper Mountain with a field trip to the mountain on June 9.
Wyoming legislators have proposed a new bill that would indefinitely extend the certification of the state’s only sage grouse game farm and also open the door for others to follow in its wake, reigniting a long-standing debate about how to best manage the bird’s declining populations.

North America’s largest grouse is chubby, long-tailed and the center of intense environmental debate. The greater sage grouse and the sagebrush steppe it calls home aren’t doing well: Populations have dropped by 80% range-wide since the mid-1960s due to habitat degradation caused primarily by energy development, wildfire and invasive plants. The bird is considered an indicator species of a healthy sagebrush ecosystem, but listing it under the Endangered Species Act would have major economic ramifications for energy production, construction development and grazing in Western states. In recent years, oil and gas industry tycoons, miners, politicians, ranchers and conservationists have collaborated to keep that from happening.

One of the first chicks hatched at Wyoming’s only sage grouse game farm near Powell, Wyoming.

Mark Davis

Hoping to stave off a listing, Wyoming passed legislation legalizing sage grouse game farms. No private company in the United States had ever tried to raise the birds in captivity, but supporters said the bill would help bolster sage grouse populations and prevent the bird from being listed as endangered. The original 2017 legislation had a sunset clause of 2022, giving the experiment five years to prove its viability, and certifications for the existing game farm is set to expire at the end of this year.

And so, on Feb. 18, sponsors introduced Senate File 61. It passed by a landslide. The bill made it out of the Travel, Wildlife and Cultural Resources Committee on Feb. 21 and soared through the Senate. After a third reading Friday, it heads to the House floor. Politicians introduced similar legislation last year to allow private companies to rear and release sage grouse in Idaho, but the bill never made it out of committee. Then-U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke suggested adding captive breeding to preservation efforts in 2017, and other legislative attempts to extend the trial period in Wyoming failed in 2019 and 2020.
Some state legislators say they’ll support the bill, arguing that sage grouse farms are an important conservation tool. The game farms have hit some snags, however, with high costs and an inability to find eggs hindering initial efforts. Diamond Wings Upland Game Bird was the only facility in the state to apply for, and receive, Wyoming Game and Fish approval to attempt breeding sage grouse in captivity after the 2017 legislation passed.

Then, in 2020, Diemer True, an oilman and former president of the Wyoming Senate, created the Western States Sage Grouse Recovery Foundation to raise donations for upgraded facilities and cover financial losses. It wasn’t until the spring of 2021 that Diamond Wings was able to hatch chicks from eggs gathered in the wild, a first for a U.S. commercial facility. “I believe they’re on the verge of having success,” sponsor Sen. Drew Perkins, R-Natrona, told the Casper Star-Tribune last week. “But they need a little bit more time to prove out this concept.”

Others disagree. Sen. Mike Gierau, D-Teton, was one of the two lone votes against introducing it this session. “I’m against this type of bird farm,” Gierau wrote in an email to High Country News. “I would rather see a habitat enhancement approach” — a game plan focused on maintaining and restoring sage grouse ecosystems rather than hatching birds on farms. Tracy Stone-Manning, the director of the Bureau of Land Management, also prefers a more natural strategy. “If we would have to farm a species in order to keep it alive, that tells me we're failing,” she said. BLM management plans for the species don’t currently include game farms.

“If we would have to farm a species in order to keep it alive, that tells me we're failing.”

Wildlife scientists, who were against the bill five years ago, also oppose the current bill. Raising sage grouse in captivity isn’t an efficient conservation strategy, they say, and it ignores the real problem, which is habitat loss. If healthy sagebrush ecosystems exist, birds can be transplanted from one area to another without being raised on a farm. While some species on the edge of extinction might need to be raised in captivity, it makes no sense for sage grouse, said Tom Christiansen, who worked as Wyoming Game and Fish's sage grouse program coordinator for 15 years before retiring in 2019. “We’re nowhere near the level that would benefit from a captive rearing exercise.”

Because the practice is so new, there isn’t much data on how well greater sage grouse raised in captivity can survive in the wild. But similar attempts have not been encouraging: When the Colorado Division of Wildlife reared and released another sage grouse species, the Gunnison sage grouse, none of the birds survived. Another upland game bird, the pheasant, also has low survival rates: One study found that only 4%-8% of pen-reared pheasants survived past six months.

Greater sage grouse in the flight pen at Diamond Wings Upland Game Birds in Powell, Wyoming.

Mark Davis

One problem is that farm-raised birds often lack the skills to avoid predators. Christiansen expects “very low” survival rates of sage grouse if they’re ever released back into the wild. “The math doesn’t add up when you consider the number of birds you have to have in captivity to result in a few birds living on the ground,” he said.

There are also concerns about possible disease outbreaks, which could decimate farmed birds, or worse, spread into wild populations if infected birds were ever released. Captive sage grouse are susceptible to salmonella and other bacterial, fungal and viral diseases. Despite regulations designed to reduce disease transmission on private game farms, there’s no guarantee farmed birds will be disease-free, Christiansen said.

“Our commitment is to retaining wildlife the way it’s meant to be: wild.”

Other Wyomingites are worried about the conservation precedent game farms would set. “This is a blatant privatization of public native wildlife for the profit of a private company,” said Jess Johnson, government affairs director at the Wyoming Wildlife Federation. “It stands against our moral code of how we’re in relationship with the environment here in Wyoming,” said Big Wind (Northern Arapaho), a communications and organizing associate at the Indigenous Lands Alliance of Wyoming, a coalition of local tribes. “Our commitment is to retaining wildlife the way it’s meant to be: wild.”

Despite an influx of cash and an initial hatch of breeding stock this spring, farmed sage grouse are still far from returning to the sagebrush sea. It’s still not legal to release farmed birds back into the wild in Wyoming. And that’s how many scientists, and conservation groups, would like it to stay. “When it comes time (and) somebody wants to propose release, there’s going to be a whole new round of scrutiny and debate,” Christiansen said. “That’s going to open up a whole new can of worms.”

Kylie Mohr is an editorial intern for High Country News writing from Montana. Email her at kylie.mohr@hcn.org or submit a letter to the editor. See our letters to the editor policy.
SAGE-GROUSE GAME FARM

by Stacey Scott

In 2017, the state legislature provided that the State could permit Sage-Grouse Game Farms with a 5-year sunset provision. The only Game Farm permitted finally collected eggs in 2021, and has 51 chicks that survived to this point, and wants more time to raise birds and collect more eggs if necessary. The legislature passed and the Governor signed a 5-year extension of the Game Farm provisions. Many people think that raising Sage-Grouse sounds like a good way to increase the grouse numbers, but the hunting and conservation organization of this state testified that the following ideas should be considered.

1. Wyoming has not previously allowed native game species to become private property. Changing this philosophy is a major and fundamental change, and should not be done lightly.
2. Game raised birds do not know how to survive in the wild. Even with pheasants which have been released for hundreds of years or more, the survival rate in the wild is between 2% and half a half a percent. That means you would have to release thousands of birds in Wyoming to have a meaningful impact, and that raises other issues.
3. Sage-grouse are a leking species that cannot eat grain like quail or pheasants. The Calgary Zoo has reproduced Sage-grouse in captivity (with huge expense and effort), so it is possible to do. However, with such a different life style, will the traits that allow the bird to reproduce in captivity be transferable to the sage-brush steppe?
4. As the effort to increase the Lesser Prairie Chicken discovered, even the best game farms always have the danger of transmitting disease to wild birds. Even if there were thousands of Sage-grouse available to release, would it be safe to release the birds? Wyoming has strong grouse numbers, so the risk of a new disease is probably way too high to allow the release of farm raised birds.

Thus, the hunting and conservation organizations did not find any advantage to allowing the Sage-grouse to become private property. There are lots of ways to benefit the grouse, but raising them in a Game Farm is not one these organization could support.

LINCOLN ELEMENTARY FIELD TRIP TO EKW: VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

The First Grade classes from Lincoln Elementary are planning a field trip to Edness Kimball Wilkins State Park on May 24, 2022. They will have been studying birds for the last two quarters. The itinerary for the field trip includes arriving around 10 in the morning, about an hour or so of walking and bird identification, a sack lunch, walking over to the playground area and some continued bird identification as the students walk and play.

The students will arrive about 10 a.m. After unloading from the buses, the kids will be ready for a bird identification walk. It would be a wonderful enriching experience for the students if some experienced birders could guide them and help identify various birds. Please let me know if any of you could spare a couple morning hours to introduce some potential budding birders to the excitement and wonder of spring at Edness Kimball Wilkins State Park. You can contact me, Laurie Longtine, at ledgerpluscasper@gmail.com.
MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

This is just a friendly reminder that last fall was our annual membership and renewal drive. All memberships expire on that date each and every year, so this is our big push to renew current members and to encourage visitors and guests to join.

We would love to have you as part of our education and conservation team. Features and benefits:

- Monthly Newsletter
- Education Programs
- Guest speakers
- Guided field trips
- Community projects
- Education Grants

You can be part of our citizen scientist efforts. You do not have to be a birder to join, enjoy, or take advantage of everything this site has to offer.

So, please, take a moment to sign up. The registration link is on our home page. We have on-line payment options for electronic payment, and of course, you can mail in payments using snail mail.

As always, thank you for your continued support.

Kind regards,

Harry

Murie Audubon Society
Membership Chair
MAS VISION STATEMENT
The vision of Murie Audubon Society is to instill a passion for nature in present and future generations through awareness, enjoyment, understanding, appreciation, conservation, and advocacy.

MAS MISSION STATEMENT
The mission of Murie Audubon Society is to promote the conservation of birds and other wildlife through education and enhancement of natural habitats, understanding, appreciation, conservation, and advocacy.

OPEN POSITIONS
We have a couple of Murie Audubon Society Chapter open volunteer positions for your consideration.

- Membership Chair – This position requires some knowledge of working with spreadsheets and working with other Board Members to update our membership database, recruit new members, and other duties related to membership.
- Webmaster/IT Manager – This position requires knowledge of WordPress and cPanel, updating and managing our website.

Experience desired, but not necessary. We can train you if you are interested and have a computer with Internet access. If interested, please send an email to murie@murieaudubon.org

These are volunteer positions only.

-Harry

ABOUT MURIE AUDUBON
Please See: https://murieaudubon.org/about/
E-Mail: murie@murieaudubon.org

RENEW OR BECOME A REGULAR MEMBER OF MURIE AUDUBON
FOR ONLY $10

Today’s Date: ________________________

__ $10 One Year __ $20 Two Years __ $30 Three Years or electronic payment on our website.

Name: __________________________________________________________________________
Address: _________________________________________________________________________
City: _______________________________________ State: _______________ Zip: ____________
Phone: __________________________________________(Not shared with anyone – honest!)
Email: ___________________________________________(Again, not shared with anyone)

Please check: __ I want the Plains & Peaks newsletter delivered to the above address.

__ I want to save a tree and postage. DO NOT SEND ME SNAIL MAIL! I will download a digital copy of the Plains & Peaks Newsletter from http://MurieAudubon.org 😊

Please make checks payable to:
Murie Audubon Society, PO Box 2112, Casper, WY 82602