



February 2022 "Flyer" Cheyenne - High Plains Audubon Society

Chartered by the National Audubon Society since 1974

Serving southeastern Wyoming Audubon members

Mission Statement: *The Cheyenne-High Plains Audubon Society promotes the conservation and appreciation of birds and wildlife through education, science, advocacy, and habitat stewardship in Southeast Wyoming.*

Vision Statement: *The Cheyenne-High Plains Audubon Society envisions a community where birds, wildlife, and their habitats are valued, protected, and enjoyed by the general public.*

Officers and Committee Chairs 2021-2022

Wanda Manley, President

Dennis Saville, Vice president

Lorie Chesnut, Secretary

Chuck Seniawski, Treasurer

Pete Arnold, Audubon Rockies Board

Jack Palma, Audubon Rockies Board

Conservation, open

Education, open

Donna Kassel, Historian

Grant Frost, Field Trips, Bird Compiler

Mark Gorges, Newsletter, Habitat Hero

Art Anderson, Important Bird Areas

Elaine Grings, Social Media

Barb Gorges, Programs, Publicity

Lorie Chesnut, Website

Advocacy, open

Terry Harper, Past president

The CHPAS Flyer is published online monthly. Submissions are welcome. The current issue is available online at www.CheyenneAudubon.org.

Contact Us at cheyenneaudubon@gmail.com

Please become a CHPAS member

Send \$12 plus any optional donation and your name, email address and mailing address to Cheyenne-High Plains Audubon Society, P.O. Box 2502, Cheyenne, WY 82003.

All chapter memberships expire Sept. 1. Any membership dues sent in after May 1 will pertain to the remainder of the current membership year and the following year.

Join the National Audubon Society

Send \$20 to Cheyenne - High Plains Audubon Society to join the National Audubon Society and you will receive NAS membership and NAS will return the \$20 to CHPAS.

"Wyoming Bird" chat group

Subscribe, post and/or read about interesting sightings on this Facebook public group site:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/403337446664409/>

Calendar

February 15, 7:00 p.m. – Program: Ben Robb – Pronghorn Migrations and Barriers – Predicting Corridors across Wyoming's Interstate 80 to Restore Movement

Cottonwood Room at the Laramie County Library, 2200 Pioneer Ave. It can also be accessed virtually by using this Zoom link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89432326739?pwd=SmZzZ043NUxWNzRkaUpDttVSSVNhdz09>



Critical habitat for Pronghorn is bisected by I-80. Photo courtesy Ben Robb.

Speaker Ben Robb, currently a research ecologist for the U.S. Geological Survey's Fort Collins Science Center, studied the impacts of Interstate 80 on pronghorn migration and crucial habitat for his master's degree at the University of Wyoming. His study predicts the best corridors to restore pronghorn movement.

Robb's research was supported by the Wyoming Migration Initiative at the Wyoming Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit at UW. His research focuses on wildlife found along the periphery of human development, and how this research can be applied to try and improve access to habitats.

February 18-21 – The 25th Great Backyard Bird Count

Each February, for four days, the world comes together for the love of birds. Over these four days people are invited to spend time in their favorite places watching and counting as many birds as they can find and reporting them to us. These observations help scientists better understand global bird populations before one of their annual migrations.

Launched in 1998 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society, the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) was the first online citizen-science project (also referred to as community science) to collect data on wild birds and to display results in near real time. Birds Canada joined the project in 2009 to provide an expanded capacity to support participation in Canada. In 2013, we became a global project when we began entering data into eBird, the world's largest biodiversity-related citizen science project.

You can start entering bird lists at midnight local time on the first day of the count, anywhere in the world. Data entry remains open until March 1, but the information you enter should only be from the four days of the Great Backyard Bird Count.

For additional information about GBBC go to: birdcount.org.

February 19, 8:00 a.m. – Raptor Road Trip to Weld County, CO

We will leave from the Lions Park parking lot at the Children's Village at 8 a.m. Carpooling may be available based on Covid guidelines. We will drive south on US-85 (South Greeley Highway) to Nunn, CO, about 32 miles. We will be joined there by Gary Lefko who will guide us through the back roads.

We will drive county roads in northeastern Colorado's "Raptor Alley" looking for winter raptors such as hawks, eagles and other winter residents. We should return by noon or 1 p.m., but if you drive, you can leave whenever you need to. The round trip will be about 100 miles. Bring water and dress for the weather and snow on the ground.

If you are interested in going, contact Mark Gorges, 307-287-4953, so that he has a list of those expected and can let you know if the plans change for any reason.



American Kestrel photo by Mark Gorges

February 22, 6:30 p.m. – Board Meeting, Sage Room, Laramie County Public Library, 2200 Pioneer Ave.

Contact Wanda Manley, cheyenneaudubon@gmail.com, if you would like to participate in helping to plan chapter activities.

February 25, 8:00 a.m. – Country Club Bird Survey

Contact Chuck Seniawski to take part or to be on his email notice list: 307-638-6519 or chuckski@aol.com. The count will start in the County Clubhouse's main parking lot.

March 15, 7:00 p.m. – Program: Salamanders, with Mason Lee from the University of Wyoming Biodiversity Institute

Laramie County Library, Cottonwood Room

April 30 – Spring Bird Identification: A class for adults and kids 12 and up at the Children's Village at the Cheyenne Botanic Gardens. Watch for additional information next month.

June 10-12 – 2022 Wyoming BioBlitz: at Guernsey State Park

More information in the next months.

Chapter News

Chapter President's message



Welcome to February Everyone,

Time does roll on and by now we're looking forward to more spring like weather. I like the month of February; it's a short month and the days are noticeably longer now. My paint horse is starting to shed already and that's great news!

In January, I received an invitation to attend the Conservation Workgroup sponsored by the NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) and the LCCD (Laramie County Conservation District). The workgroup was designed to identify the burning issues relating to air, water, soil, plants, energy, & animals in Laramie County. There were about 40 people in attendance; probably 10 agency people, about 5 agriculture producers, and the rest were residents of the county, with a significant number of those living on small acreages.

After breaking into groups of 3-4, each group rotated through each primary topic and listed problems associated with that particular resource. Then the major themes were identified and further

narrowed down. No surprises on the results; weeds, ground water depletion, degradation of soil and rangeland health, and lack of education for people moving onto small acreages.

Typically, NRCS provides cost sharing programs for agriculture producers, and prefers to deal with land parcels greater than 50 acres. Most small acreages in this county are 40 acres or less, and many are in the 5-10-acre range. The LCCD works with both agriculture producers and small acreage owners, with increasing numbers of small acreage projects as more property is subdivided in the county.

It will be interesting to see if activities can be found to address the issues identified for both sizes of property. For example, it won't be particularly productive if cost sharing for cheatgrass is available for agriculture producers, but nothing is available to the small acreage owners. At any rate, the discussion about the issues was robust and there were some novel tactics suggested for some of the problems. This group is supposed to meet again soon; I'll keep you posted on any forward motion.

Additionally, Don Day (meteorologist) gave a nice presentation on the two factors he believes that most affect our weather, solar minimums and maximums and sea surface temperatures in the Pacific Ocean. If you have an opportunity to hear him speak, make the effort to go. The upshot of the presentation was probably no severe drought for the next 10 years. So, get out there and take this time to establish lots of native forbs and shrubs!!

Wanda
CHPAS President

Cheyenne - High Plains Audubon Society logo, Mountain Plover, drawn by Michelle LaGory.

January Program Recap

By Barb Gorges

The title of Tanner Hoffman's January talk for us was "Recovery of Below and Aboveground Biodiversity Following the Mullen Fire." Tanner is a University of Wyoming master's degree candidate in the UW Soil Microbial Ecology Lab.

In the 60,000 acres where the September 2020, 176,000-acre fire west of Laramie was severe, the seedbank for native plants was devastated and the proximity of non-native plants, such as cheatgrass, is a worry. Plus, soil microbes, the majority being beneficial bacteria and fungi, were affected by the fire in those areas.

Plant growth, in your garden, on farms, and in nature, is aided by these soil microbes. This is why gardeners and farmers are learning to disturb the soil less and aid the microbes more.

Cheatgrass, an invasive here in North America, plays by different rules. It germinates earlier than other grassland plants, grows quickly and dries out in the heat of summer where it makes great tinder. It also doesn't need fungi microbes in the soil to help it grow so it has that advantage over the natives too.

To control cheatgrass, the Forest Service will be spraying Indaziflam. Compared to other herbicides, it should have less of an effect on native plants.

Tanner is studying the post fire recovery of the soil microbial community and the plant community and how cheatgrass and the herbicide application affects it.

How you can volunteer

Tanner has established a community science project through the UW Biodiversity Institute. Volunteers, known as community scientists, adopt a study plot on the fire scar on the Medicine Bow National Forest and take samples of grasses and cheatgrass for analysis in the lab. Some plots can be driven to, and others have to be hiked into.

See <http://wyomingbiodiversity.org/index.php/community-science> for details.

Education and Conservation

Science Fair Winners

This year the chapter was pleased to present three Audubon Awards to students at the Laramie County School District #1 Science Fair.

Marques Adekale, a 6th grader in Mr. Anderson's class at Baggs was a winner with a project titled "Deadly Rain".

Eli Schultze, a 5th grader in Mrs. Bonds class at St. Mary's, was a winner with a project titled "Soil Erosion".

Makaila Merriam won with a project titled "Cheatgrass"; she is in Mr. Skinner's 7th grade class at Carey.

Cheatgrass features in studies at 7th grade and grad school levels

By Vicki Herren, CHPAS member

After last month's CHPAS program on the microorganisms in soils that support cheatgrass by University of Wyoming grad student Tanner Hoffman, Barb Gorges and I were surprised to find ourselves judging a poster a few days later at the Laramie County School District #1 science fair that was also about cheatgrass.

Only this time, a 7th grader was comparing the nutrients in the soil in areas of cheatgrass to soils under trees and to soils in areas without cheatgrass. What we learned from Makaila Merriam is that the soils in areas of cheatgrass are lower in nitrogen, a major component of chlorophyll that supports photosynthesis and a major component of amino acids that build proteins that allows plants to grow.

The soils were also low in phosphorous, a vital component of DNA and part of the process that begins the growth of seedling plants. No wonder when cheatgrass invades, native plants disappear.

While we all know of the ecological threats at a landscape level because of the way cheatgrass feeds the increased fire return interval—wildfires happen with increasing frequency—and subsequent loss of functioning sagebrush ecosystems, these two investigations into the mechanism and interactions in the soils get to the "root" of some of the problem with cheatgrass.

Chapter Grants

For information on our chapter education and conservation grants, see our chapter website at: www.cheyenneaudubon.org.

Habitat Hero



Prairie plants can be part of low-water town landscapes

By Barb Gorges

The Cheyenne Board of Public Utilities is looking for examples of low-water yards. I can point to several in my neighborhood that received no irrigation last summer, but they aren't pretty. Either they filled with thistles or they developed bare patches where the topsoil was blowing away and leaving grit behind.

Sarah Bargsten, BOPU's water conservation specialist, is looking for examples of low-water residential and commercial landscapes that are inspiring and informative and that would be identified on a map available on the BOPU website. If you think your landscape would be a good candidate for this project, send her an email at sbargsten@cheyennebopu.org.

Low-water landscaping is one aspect of the series of annual Habitat Hero workshops put on in Cheyenne since 2015. Last month, Jeff Geyer, water specialist for the Laramie County Conservation District, took the audience through his experience converting his lawn from non-native bluegrass to native buffalograss.

It struck him as expensive insanity to spend money on irrigating his large yard, anywhere from \$400 to \$600 per month during the growing season, plus fertilizer and herbicides, just to grow a "crop" of bluegrass that cost him and his wife even more time and money to mow just so they could pay the city compost facility to pick up the clippings.

He experimented with establishing buffalograss, which is native to our naturally low-water prairie. It takes a lot less water to green up once established. It doesn't need fertilizer. After a year or two of hand weeding, it will be thick enough to shade out any further weeds. It's only 4 to 5 inches tall so you can get away without mowing and the seed heads look ornamental.

However, one drawback is that it doesn't grow well in shady yards. And its season of green is shorter than bluegrass, a small thing when you consider how water will become a costly commodity in the dry West.

Everyone's favorite part of the Habitat Hero workshop is talking about the plants. The other prong of the Habitat Hero program is encouraging people to plant for pollinators—but plants that need less water than traditional flower gardens. Guess what? The plants native to the grassland surrounding Cheyenne are perfect. And popular.

Showy prairie flowers like blanketflower (*Gaillardia*), black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*) and coneflower (*Echinacea*), have been very popular for years with conventional horticulturists wanting to develop cultivated varieties that are showier, taller, shorter, prettier and maybe even hardier.

There's a variety of purple coneflower that was introduced in 2012 called "Cheyenne Spirit." Any given seed packet will give you a combination of white, pink, purple, orange and red flowers. It was developed by a plant breeder in Holland who apparently equates the name of our city and the tribe with this flower native to the Great Plains.

Some coneflower cultivars however, get so showy that the daisy-like center disk flowers become more like the ray flowers, or petals, and they don't produce pollen and nectar. Steer clear of those if you are trying to attract bees, butterflies and hummingbirds.

Also steer clear of stores where the clerks can't tell you if the plants and seeds were grown without neonicotinoids. Neonics are a group of powerful systemic (internal) insecticides. Any insect that chomps on leaf, stem or flower will die. Not good if you are encouraging caterpillars that feed baby birds or that you want to have become butterflies. Neonics also get into pollen and nectar and kill the bees and butterflies that way.

So, if the clerk doesn't know what you are talking about or can't show you some documentation, go somewhere else. Or grow your own. It's not too late for winter sowing—search for the topic at my website: <https://cheyennegardengossip.wordpress.com>.



Purple Coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*, is a prairie native that attracts bees and grows well in gardens. Photo by Barb Gorges.

A terrific resource for learning about native plants for our area and finding sources for them is the new document by Jane and Robert Dorn, "The Cheyenne Plant Selector." Find it and other resources at <https://cheyenneaudubon.org/habitat-hero-resources>.

To remove bluegrass lawn to plant buffalograss or native flowers and other grasses, there are choices: smothering with sheets of cardboard, solarization by covering with sheets of clear plastic (cooking the existing vegetation), poisoning with an herbicide (get recommendations from the Conservation District) and what Mark does at

our house, remove the turf with a shovel and compost it. Don't till or the bluegrass will just pop up again.

Planting natives does not mean you have to give up all your favorite ornamentals and vegetables. Think of

it as a new aspect of gardening to explore, one that benefits many more creatures and by extension, people.

Barb Gorges, author of the book, "Cheyenne Garden Gossip," and the blog <http://cheyennegardengossip.wordpress.com>, writes a monthly column about the joys and challenges of gardening on the High Plains. Contact her at bgorges4@msn.com.

8th Annual Cheyenne Habitat Hero Workshop a success

The Cheyenne Habitat Hero Committee, made up of CHPAS members and Laramie County Master Gardeners and other interested people, pulled together a hybrid workshop this year. There were 65 people attending in person and up to 115 virtually. The video recording is available at https://audubon.zoom.us/rec/share/5Yft8DztdCv6U53vRwc2phGnmolJ6uYWxgX5vutYGuYJledKX_wspUof7tTRBqqA.9mFAiUeezxuTy655 (Passcode: 5KL\$2x0E). The native plant list handouts are available at <https://cheyenneaudubon.org/habitat-hero-resources/>, including the "Cheyenne Plant Selector" handout by Jane and Robert Dorn.

Audubon Rockies was a workshop partner, providing electronic registration and webinar technology through Habitat Hero director Jamie Weiss and staff, as well as two speakers, Aaron Maier, range ecologist, who spoke about regenerative agriculture and Audubon's Conservation Ranching Initiative, and Zach Hutchinson, community science coordinator, who spoke about grassland birds.

Catherine Wissner, Laramie County Extension horticulturist, spoke on how to take care of soils and provided hands-on experience figuring out how to site a garden. She was assisted by Wanda Manley.

Jeff Geyer, Laramie County Conservation District water specialist, provided an amusing talk on his experience converting his large lawn from bluegrass to less thirsty buffalograss. LCCD district

manager Shaun Kirkwood brought many valuable resources for free distribution to in-person participants.

Committee members Nancy Loomis and Barb Gorges talked about their favorite native plants, how to decide where to plant them and what companies offer them. Nancy had a selection of native seeds to give away.

Committee member Michelle Bohanan presented the basics of winter sowing, as she has done for the last several workshops. Picking out seeds and planting them in a milk jug that is then set outside is the most popular hands-on activity each year. Maggie McKenzie was her assistant.

Committee member Mark Gorges served as MC for the day and took care of many of the preparations.

The committee would like to thank everyone, speakers and participants, for a successful day, and also the team at Laramie County Community College: Melissa Gallant, Bernadette Espinoza and the food service staff.

Bird News

Audubon Rockies' Blog

For stories, news, birding information, activities, and more related to birds and bird conservation in Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah, go to <https://rockies.audubon.org/blog>.

Olympic Peninsula Bird Fest – April 22-24

After a two-year absence, we are delighted to announce the return of the Olympic Peninsula BirdFest! Grab your binoculars and join the celebration at the newly expanded Dungeness River Nature Center (formerly the Dungeness River Audubon Center), April 22-24, 2022.

For more information go to: olympicbirdfest.org.

January 15 – Report: Birding trip outside Buford

We had nine people participate in the trip; they ranged in age from 2 and ½ to 75. The weather was cold, a little breezy, but sunny. The roads were mostly bare, with 6 to 8 inches of snow in the trees.

We made two stops. First on a state section along the road where we saw six species. The two Black-capped Chickadees there were perfect for a winter scene, flitting around aspen which were sticking out of the snow. At the 2nd stop, Pat Diebert's house, we were treated to the flock of Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches.

12 species total:

Golden Eagle 1

Black-billed Magpie 2

Common Raven 1

Black-capped Chickadee 2

Mountain Chickadee 2

White-breasted Nuthatch 2

Hairy Woodpecker 1

Mountain Chickadee 5

White-breasted Nuthatch 3

Pygmy Nuthatch 6

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch 40

Cassin's Finch 1



Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch by Mark Gorges

January 28 – Cheyenne Country Club survey results

By Chuck Seniawski

8:00 AM - 9:57 AM

Protocol: Traveling

2.8 mile(s)

Checklist Comments: 25 degrees. Sunny. Light breeze. Snow cover near 100 %. Vicki Herren, Chuck Seniawski, Pete Sokolosky.

14 species

Canada Goose 4

Eurasian Collared-Dove 4

Red-tailed Hawk 1

Hairy Woodpecker 1 male

Northern Flicker (Red-shafted) 2 male, female

Black-billed Magpie 7

American Crow 3

Mountain Chickadee 3

Red-breasted Nuthatch 6

Brown Creeper 2

Townsend's Solitaire 1

House Sparrow 5

House Finch 1

Dark-eyed Junco 12

View this checklist online at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S101589056>

How to keep prairie birds, and us, safe

By Barb Gorges

Nurturing the prairie was the theme of this year's Cheyenne Habitat Heroes workshop held last month. For me, that includes the plants, animals and people.

Cheyenne sits in the middle of the shortgrass prairie so what we "townies" do matters as well.

Zach Hutchinson, workshop presenter and community science coordinator for Audubon Rockies, reminded us of the study showing North America has lost 2.9 billion birds, including 53 percent of grassland birds, since 1970. This means that for every 100 birds you could count along a certain distance of our county roads then, today you would only count 47.

One of the biggest causes is loss of habitat, including the conversion of undeveloped land into subdivisions, commercial property or cropland. Cheyenne is going through a terrific building phase. The landscaping in new high density residential neighborhoods will soon draw in birds, but not the grassland birds. It is the ring of small-acreage landowners around the city who can make a difference.

First, what shape is the acreage in? Is it full of native prairie grasses and what range managers call forbes, which the rest of us call wildflowers? Or was it overgrazed and is now full of invasive weeds like toadflax and needs renewal?

Another workshop speaker, Aaron Maier, range ecologist for Audubon Rockies, talked at length about regenerative agriculture and how farmers are changing their practices so they spend less on fertilizers and trips with the tractor yet sequester more carbon, capture more moisture and accumulate more beneficial soil microbes.

Aaron also talked about healthy grassland grazing practices benefitting wildlife as well, as laid out by the Audubon Conservation Ranching Initiative. Ranchers following Audubon's guidelines for best practices for land, wildlife and livestock management are guaranteed premium prices for their product marked as "Audubon Certified."

But the small acreage owner is probably not going to be grazing cattle. In fact, without 30-36 acres and a seasonal rotation plan, they can't even graze one horse for one year (without

supplemental feed) but must keep them much of the year in a corral to avoid making their entire property into a dust bowl.

Not to say that there aren't grassland birds that sometimes enjoy bare ground—after all, they evolved alongside the buffalo, famous for creating mosaics of bare ground in their migrations. A lot of small acreage owners don't have livestock, but they do have cats and dogs that can be very detrimental to grassland birds. It's easy to see how, once you realize grassland birds nest on the ground.

Horned larks, western meadowlarks, vesper sparrows, savannah sparrows and other grassland bird species have come up with various ruses and camouflages to avoid native predators. However, they haven't evolved yet to deal with what the American Bird Conservancy considers to be an invasive species: cats.

Cats kill more than a billion birds a year in the U.S. Zach pointed out that popular “trap, neuter and release” programs have a flaw—they allow cats to go back outside and kill more native birds and small mammals. It's a touchy subject. I admit to having been the owner of an indoor/outdoor cat up until 1990 when I started keeping my cat indoors. Four cats later, I'm a proponent of catios—screened outdoor areas—and taking leashed cats for walks.

Grassland birds nest sometime between April and July. That's a good time to keep dogs on a leash so they won't find and eat bird eggs. And it's an excellent time to abstain from mowing both the previous year's and current year's growth. If you value wildlife, mow only after consulting the professionals over at the Laramie County Conservation District.

However, you may want to forgo much vegetation around your house and outbuildings. The national Firewise program, firewise.org, has guidelines for protecting property from fire on the forest edges as well as in the grasslands.

And what can us townies do for grassland birds? Use less energy. Buy less new stuff. Every energy source I can think of has been detrimental to wildlife: harvesting whale oil, excavating peat, cutting firewood as well as producing the climate-changing fumes of coal, oil and natural gas and the toxic residue of nuclear, and building the cleaner but often habitat and migration-disrupting installments of hydro, wind and solar power.

It seems as soon as we come up with energy saving changes—like families having fewer children and more efficient appliances, someone invents something like the new energy-intensive game of cryptocurrency mining. Don't mind me, I'm a trifle depressed after watching a new movie, the very dark comedy, “Don't Look Up.”

But I plan to look up—spring bird migration will commence any day now.



The Western Meadowlark, Wyoming's state bird, builds its nest on the ground, but is shielded by dense prairie vegetation. Photo by Mark Gorges

Barb Gorges is the author of "Cheyenne Birds by the Month," www.YuccaRoadPress.com. Her previous columns written for the Wyoming Tribune Eagle are at <http://cheyennebirdbanter.wordpress.com>. Contact her at bgorges4@msn.com.

Cheyenne – High Plains Audubon Society P. O. Box 2502, Cheyenne, WY 82003

