

Black Swifts in Montana: One of Our Most Fascinating and Mysterious Species

By Bo Crees

Montana Audubon Avian Specialist Bo Crees has studied Black Swifts in Montana and Idaho for the past 6 years. Bo will share the unique life history of this remarkable species along with interesting highlights, joys, and challenges of searching for one of Montana's most elusive and vulnerable species in remote, hard-to-access areas.



Photo by Bo Crees

Black Swift on a nest.

Did you know that some of our Black Swifts fly continuously, without EVER landing, for more than 9 months?

Or, that even though adults weigh about the same as a golf ball, their incubation period is longer than that of Red-tailed Hawks, and that Black Swift nestlings take longer to fledge than some Golden Eagles?

Please join us on November 17 to learn more about these fascinating, unusual birds!

Please register by 3 pm the day of the meeting:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/PFRETOGWTXCoS4edPxXcsw>

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.



Boaz (Bo) Crees discovered the wonders of birds and birding in his early 20s and was hired as a biological technician on his first bird research project in 2005, while studying wildlife biology at the University of Montana. Bo has been involved in many bird and wildlife research projects over the past 20 years, and has studied birds in Mexico, Canada, and all but two western U.S. states. In 2016 Bo and his wife, Alexis, moved to Helena after living in northern British Columbia for several years, and have lived in Montana ever since. Bo is an Avian Specialist for Montana Audubon and the Montana Natural Heritage Program, working in the field in spring and summer, and processing data the rest of the year. In his free time Bo enjoys birding, hiking, creating wildlife art, and collecting and processing rocks and minerals.



Photo by Bo Crees

Letter from the President

By Larry Barnes, BBA President

I arrived in Montana in September of 2023, having spent the previous 30 years in Hailey, a smallish town in south-central Idaho where I taught high school biology for 26 years. I came to love the shrub-steppe bioregion there and the country around the Big Wood River Valley north toward Sun Valley and up to the lodgepole forests and Sawtooth and White Cloud ranges near Stanley. My wife, Sharon, lived and worked in the Bitterroot Valley in the 1990s and 2000s while working as a biologist at Lee Metcalf NWR. She discovered the property we now own when we were here for a friend's wedding.



And now I have a new bioregion to explore in a land filled with novelty as I figure out where the birds are. According to eBird I've seen 201 species in Ravalli County so far, which is only 26 behind fellow BBA board member Kate Stone! If you'd like to learn more about eBird, we'll be partnering with the Hamilton Public Library to launch a "Big Year" initiative in 2026.

While in Idaho I was always on the lookout for black swifts but never saw one there. I missed seeing them in Ravalli County in 2025, but got great looks and even photos at Lee Metcalf in 2024. Our first speaker of the season is Montana Audubon's Bo Crees and he will share his research about these amazing birds with us via a Zoom presentation on November 17.

The migratory birds are largely gone now and the migration is coming to a close. The darkest days of the year are near and so too is the annual Christmas Bird Count. Watch the Newsletter for date and details.

While in Idaho I wrote a column in a local newspaper about nature and will share some of them in our BBA newsletters. The article featured here is about the notion of an "individual" in nature and what may be Earth's most massive organism, the humble aspen.

I hope to see you all virtually at the black swift talk!

Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC) season is almost upon us. The Hamilton CBC is approaching its 40th year and will be Sunday, December 14. The Stevensville CBC will probably be on Saturday, December 27th. Look for more details in the December newsletter.

Natural Selections

By Larry Barnes

The myth of the individual
We lump aspens into one species, *Populus tremuloides*, but some are clonal while others reproduce sexually. Some aspen populations are diploid, like you and me (every cell contains two sets of chromosomes, one from mom, the other from dad). But other aspens are triploid; each of their cells has *three* sets of chromosomes, not two!

In the photo shown here, two genetically distinct aspen clones are living side by side; a yellow version in the foreground, its orange cousin in the background. While aspens can produce seeds through ordinary sexual reproduction, they can happily grow in large clonal groves, functioning essentially as a single individual. The trees within the groves, seemingly free agents bearing countless little green leaves that tremble in a summer breeze, are photosynthetic factories whose products actually feed their common motherly tangle of roots beneath the soil. Collectively they are one living, breathing, genetically distinct individual.

The Pando aspen grove in Utah is one of the largest organisms on Earth, covering 108 acres (~80 football fields) and is made of thousands of trees having the same DNA. The Pando grove may collectively weigh up to 6,600 tons or more than six times the mass of the General Sherman giant sequoia in California. The Pando grove's root system has been living for 10-16 thousand years, all the while sprouting a succession of trees that usually die before reaching 100.

We tend to think of species as “members of populations that actually or potentially interbreed in nature.” This works much of the time, especially in the animals we are most familiar with. But can a diploid aspen mate with triploid aspen? How often do two trees from different clones abandon their socialist roots and branch out to actually produce their own pollen and ovules, giving sex a go in the production of bonafide seeds?



Photo by Larry Barnes

The answers to these questions may be known, but many mysteries remain. For example, we look at the aspen in our yard and refer to it as an individual. But maybe it's part of a larger clone, so is it still an “individual?” We tend to want individuals to exist; perhaps it is part of our Western reductionist mindset. But the gravitas of the individual in nature is greatly overstated. How can we understand the individual when, upon study, “we find it hitched to everything else in the universe,” as John Muir observed?

Dr. Susan Simard from the University of British Columbia has shown the world just how illusionary it is to see a forest as a collection of individuals competing with each other for light, water, and nutrients. In fact, it is more true to see the forest as a “wood wide web” of interactions mediated by fungi in the soil. The fiber optics of the soil is mycorrhizae, a Byzantine tangle of tree rootlets and fungal mycelium through which the forest communicates and shares resources.

Trees of one species feed carbon to trees of other species when there is a surplus for one and a deficit

for the other. The tables may turn later when circumstances or season reverses and the former benefactor becomes the beneficiary. Trees drop seeds that become seedlings that struggle in the shade beneath the parent. The mother trees actively help their children, shipping more carbohydrates to them via the mycorrhizae in the soil than they do to unrelated seedlings. Some of the nitrogen in tree tissue can be traced to the ocean, hundreds of miles away, finding its way inland via salmon, who are eaten by bears, who poop in the woods, whose nutrients are parsed out and transported within the mycorrhizae beneath the surface.

We are at the dawn of this new science of relationships that show what First Nations and Tribes across the globe have long intuited: we live within a connected world. There are no true individuals.

Starting January 1st, join the library for a community-wide Big Year in Birding! We're encouraging everyone to get outside and discover the wonderful diversity of birds in Montana throughout the year. Pick up a free birding packet at the library to help you get started, and visit the Bitterroot Bird Alliance website for local birding tips, events, and identification resources. Look for more details and dates in the December BBA Newsletter.



2026
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WILDLIFE FUND
GRANTS

APPLICATION PERIOD OPEN

guidelines & application form on our website:
www.mtaudubon.org/wildlifegrants

Western & Mountain Bluebird. Photos by Bob Martinka

Audubon Wildlife Fund Grants

Since 1996, Montana Audubon has awarded small grants to individuals or organizations in support of research and education projects that directly benefit wildlife in Montana. In 2025, we awarded seven grants to support research, habitat clean-up, a hawk watch station, and raptor rehabilitation centers. Visit the grant website (linked below) to see updates from each recipient.

Applications for the 2026 cycle are now available. All proposals must be received no later than Friday, January 16, 2026. Winners will be announced in March 2026.

See grant guidelines, download the application form, and read updates from 2025 recipients here:
<https://mtaudubon.org/wildlifegrants/>

Montana Audubon Citizen Science Reports

This year, Montana Audubon organized three Citizen Science surveys: a new pilot project surveying for Nightjars; the second year of surveys for Western and Eastern Screech-owls; and the continuation of the long-running Long-billed Curlew Initiative, now in its 13th year.

Across all three projects, a total of 221 citizen scientist volunteers conducted a total of 167 survey routes, covering an estimated 1,287 miles! In total, 1,713 detections of target species were made, contributing to species conservation status and conservation action plans for these species.

Calendar of Events

- Monthly:** Beginner Bird Walk at Lee Metcalf NWR, 3rd Saturday of each month, Stevensville, MT 10AM-12PM.
- Nov 17:** BBA Meeting/Program; Black Swifts in Montana: One of Our Most Fascinating and Mysterious Species, By Bo Creees, 7PM.

Thank you to everyone who was involved with our Citizen Science surveys this year! These efforts would not have been possible without the dedication of volunteers, and we are grateful that so many joined us in looking for these birds in need.

These projects would not be possible without all of our sponsors and partner organizations, including Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; Montana Natural Heritage Program; Tracy Aviary; L.E.A.W Family Foundation; Blackfoot Challenge; and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

Read the reports here:

<https://mtaudubon.org/2025-citizen-science-reports-now-available/>

2025 Citizen Science Reports now available!



Visit our website to read & download all reports



MONTANA AUDUBON



Photo by Alex Kearney

Solitary Sandpiper.



Photo by Alex Kearney

Red-tailed Hawks.



Photo by Mimi Falivene

Red Crossbill.



Photo by Mike Daniels

Lazuli Bunting.

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The Bitterroot Bird Alliance Only Membership is \$15/year. These members will be supporting local chapter activities, receive the full color e-newsletter, and enjoy Chapter benefits. To join as a Chapter Only Member, complete this form.

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