

It's Christmas Bird Count Time in The Bitterroot

By Larry Barnes, BAS President

Perhaps the first citizen science project began in 1900 when Frank Chapman organized a bird count that was conducted by volunteers on Christmas day. Birds were counted in 25 places by 27 people and a tradition was born. Now, 125 years later, there are ~2,500 counts in all states and 20 foreign countries, mostly in the Western Hemisphere.



Photo by Larry Barnes

A cooperative Northern Pygmy-owl on last year's Rock Creek CBC.

There are two ways to participate. Each count circle is 15-miles in diameter and contains 177 square miles. Observers move about this circle, keeping track of their effort (distance covered, hours in the field) while recording the numbers of each species seen. Or, there is a feeder watch option for those who live within a count circle and prefer to keep a pane of glass between them and the birds. Either way, the day's observations are sent to the count compiler who combines the data and submits it to the National Audubon Society.

All ages and skill levels are welcome. If a beginner, you will be paired with a more experienced birder or birders. The groups gather at about 7:30 am with the intent of getting to the field by daylight about 8:00 am. The Hamilton group honors a 38-year-old tradition by returning to the Teller Barn for a lunch break featuring homemade chili and Oreos, and



sometimes other Christmas treats. We aim to enjoy our common interest in nature together while searching for birds in the dead of winter. If this sounds like fun, call us for details.



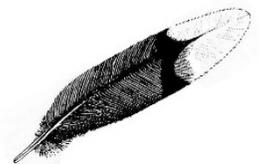
Photo by Larry Barnes

Juvenile Sharp-shinned Hawk.

Letter from the President

By Larry Barnes, BAS President

If you have bird feeders, perhaps you've recently noticed an uptick in bird numbers around your house as temperatures fall,



snow begins to accumulate, and wild food becomes less abundant. Now as we approach the shortest day of the year, almost no birds are expending energy flying long distances, maintaining territories, competing for mates, or raising young. They are pretty much stationary. This fact has increased the scientific value of the century-old annual Audubon Christmas Count tradition. Winter bird population trends for many species are fairly well understood thanks to decades of volunteers who bundle up in December and count birds. Look for details for our local Christmas Counts in this Newsletter.

There is a slim chance that someone in this year's count will see a Great Gray Owl, which would be only the third time this species has been seen on the Hamilton Christmas Count since John Ormiston started it in 1987. John recently spotted two Great Gray Owls near his home at 366 Blodgett Camp Rd and has invited interested people to have a look in the fields around his house. I struck out twice, but in my explorations I found plenty of similar habitat (fields edged in ponderosa pines) 2-4 miles south of John's location, as the great gray flies from John's house.



Photo by Larry Barnes

Ferruginous Hawk.

While wandering around recently after the failed Great Gray Owl excursion I found two other species seldom seen on the Hamilton Christmas count (5 times each since 1987). At [Red Rock Family Farm](#) (948 Sleeping Child Rd) there was a Ferruginous Hawk, North America's largest *Buteo*. The Farm practices "management-intensive grazing" where their cattle graze intensively on a very small pasture for a day, and then are moved to an adjacent small pasture, thus mimicking the American bison style of grazing. There were several Red-tailed and Rough-

legged Hawks foraging on the property too, and I wondered if this approach to grazing (and other organic practices) resulted in higher concentrations of raptors.



Photo by Larry Barnes

Wood duck wooing behavior.

The other species was a garish male Wood Duck, which may be found here regularly in warmer months, but only rarely in the winter. It was along Golf Course Road east of Hamilton at Rudy Kratofil's Duck Pond in the company of lots of "barnyard" ducks and geese that had long since abandoned their wild roots.

Bundle up and join us in the dead of winter and maybe we'll re-find these treasures and who knows what else.

Wild Skies Raptor Center Update

By Kate Stone

Since the beginning of 2025, Wild Skies Raptor Center has performed 45 raptor rescues in Ravalli County, with their staff and volunteers making the trek to and from their facility in Potomac on a routine basis. Bitterroot Bird Alliance just sent \$500 to Wild Skies to support their rehab and education efforts; this small non-profit relies on donations and does not receive funds from the state or federal government to perform this important work.

I help out as a volunteer with rescues and releases, and one highlight for me was picking up what I first described as a "weird immature Red-tailed Hawk" in the late summer east of Stevensville. Jesse of Wild Skies instantly recognized the bird for what it was- a recently fledged Swainson's Hawk. This species is rarely seen in the Bitterroot Valley and breeding records are few and far between. How awesome it was to release the bird just a few short weeks later and see it fly straight to an adult Swainson's Hawk.

And now with the leaves off of the trees, I can see the stick nest they likely used. I can't wait to observe them next year.



Photo by Kate Stone

As much as I wanted to keep these cuties in my pocket, they were appropriately released back into the wild.

My second memorable release was a trio of unrelated young Northern Pygmy-owls that for various reasons needed to be released away from their pick-up locations. I study this species, so I worked with Wild Skies to release them together on a private property NW of Florence where these teeny owls are commonly seen and we know hunting is good. The pygmy-owls easily flew from their crate into nearby pine trees, causing a chorus of worried alarm calls from nuthatches and chickadees.



Photo by Jesse Varnado of Wild Skies Raptor Center
Northern Pygmy-owls are smaller than a ponderosa pine cone!

The work of Wild Skies Raptor Center takes efforts of all kinds, and one of the easiest ways you can

participate is by making a donation. If you'd like to support their work in the Bitterroot and beyond, please visit their website: www.wildskies.org. You'll also find a "wish list" of items like gas cards that are always appreciated.

The Fall 2025 Montana Audubon Newsletter is here!

Inside this issue, you'll find stories from across Montana, including: a feature article on the power of citizen science and the volunteers helping track birds across the state; updates on our Black Swift research; news from the Audubon Conservation Ranching program; a celebration of 10 years of Fledgling Preschool at the Montana Audubon Center; and much more!

Read the full issue online on the Montana Audubon website: <https://mtaudubon.org/publications/>

An advertisement for the Fall 2025 Montana Audubon Newsletter. It features a blue header with the text "Our Fall 2025 Newsletter is here!". Below the header is a collage of three newsletter covers. The first cover is titled "SCIENCE" and features a close-up of an owl's face. The second cover is titled "CONNECTING PEOPLE AND CONSERVATION" and features a bird in flight. The third cover is titled "MONTANA AUDUBON" and features a group of people. Below the collage is a blue footer with the text "Read it on our website: www.mtaudubon.org/publications".

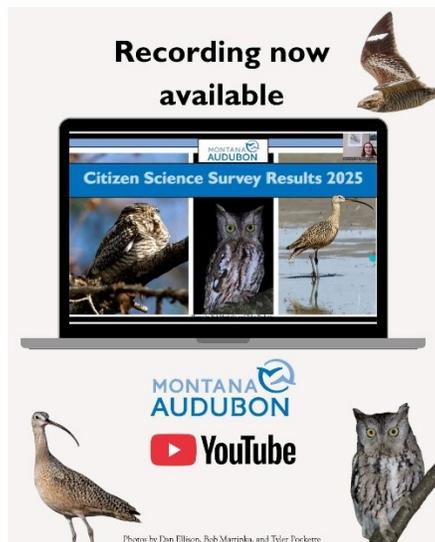
2025 Citizen Science season wrap-up recording now available

For those who missed it back in October, the recording of our Citizen Science season wrap-up presentation is now available on YouTube. In the presentation we reviewed each of our 2025 citizen science projects, surveying for screech-owls; Long-billed Curlews; and nightjars. Make sure to watch through to the end for a preview of next year's citizen science projects.

Thank you again to all of our amazing volunteers-you make all this work possible! Thank you also to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Tracy Aviary, the L.E.A.W Family Foundation, Blackfoot Challenge, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and the Montana Natural Heritage Program for their support.

Watch the recording on Montana Audubon's YouTube channel:

<https://youtu.be/tOvghbSjmg?si=9-O->



Natural Selections: Magpie Magnificence

By Larry Barnes, BAS President

After a former colleague assigned a bird observation study to his students a girl arrived with some exciting news.

“Mr. Miller, I saw an amazing bird! It was fairly big, with a really long tail. It was bold, black and white and the black parts even shined blue and green. It was beautiful. What was it!?”

“Have you ever seen this bird before?” asked Mr. Miller.

“Oh, no, never.”

“And how long have you lived here in Idaho?” asked Mr. Miller.

“My whole life, all 15 years!” said the girl.

Perhaps we all saw the Black-billed Magpie this way upon first encountering one. But then magpies became part of the background; maybe they committed some sin like teasing the cat, eating the dog food, or noisily following their parents while begging for food. When we first saw them, magpies were new, but they kept showing up and lost their shine. The honeymoon period of awe and wonder that the young student shared with Mr. Miller often fades. This former student is now over 40 and probably no longer breathlessly relates the magnificence of magpies to those she meets.

In pre-Columbian times magpies *were* likely quite rare in this part of the West for they were adapted to living in association with bison, which were not locally common. Between about 1820 and 1880 we market-hunted a population of around 30-40 million

Bitterroot Bird Alliance Calendar of Events

- Audubon Christmas counts
 - ✓ Hamilton: Contact: Larry Barnes, 208-471-8297
 - 7:30 am, Sunday, December 14th, Teller Education Barn, Corvallis, MT
 - ✓ Rock Creek: Contact Chris Evavold at 406-529-4233 or chris.evavold@gmail.com
 - Saturday, December 20th
 - ✓ Stevensville: Contact: Deb Goslin 406-214-7879, lstevicbc@gmail.com. We will NOT be regrouping for lunch this year, so bring your own lunch and keep on birding! Email or call-in the day's results.
 - 7:30 am, Saturday, December 27th, Stevensville Ranger Station at 88 Main Street, Stevensville, MT.
- Bitterroot Bird Alliance Holiday Social Gathering. We'll be upstairs in the spacious Victor Station to socialize and enjoy some combination of beverage and/or appetizers and/or entrees.
 - ✓ December 15th, 6 pm. Victor Station, 2412 US 93, Victor, MT.
- Hamilton Library 2026 eBird Big Year event. The library is promoting engagement with our community through the outdoors, birds, and eBird, the world's largest citizen science project. Are you ready for a Big Year?
 - ✓ December 18th, 6 pm, Hamilton Library, Hamilton, MT.
- Bitter Root Land Trust in-person program. Come and learn the latest about all the great things the Trust has accomplished for nature and our community.
 - ✓ January 20th, 6 pm, Nazarene Church, 803 5th Avenue, Victor, MT.
- Monthly Beginner Bird Walk at Lee Metcalf NWR on the 3rd Saturday of each month, Stevensville, MT 10AM-12PM.

(or more) bison to the verge of extinction and magpies made a shift. We transformed the land with horses, cattle, sheep, and agriculture but the magpie niche was flexible enough that they could settle in amongst us, entangled within the tendrils of the expanding human horde.

Today Black-billed Magpies are a bird of the West Central Plains, the Intermountain West, and up to southern Alaska, but not the western parts of California, Oregon, and Washington. Their close cousin, the yellow-billed magpie, is restricted to Central California, which it never leaves, and the Sierra mountains keep the two species apart.

In March magpie pairs become busy with their nests, beach-ball sized domed assemblages of sticks, usually high in a tree. The female incubates her ~6 eggs for ~18 days and the nestlings grow for 3-4 weeks before flying. If you see a group of magpies foraging together in the spring that you suspect to be a family, look at their tails. If all but two have short tails, they are a family.

Humans are proud of our large brains and therefore often take particular interest in other comparatively brainy creatures. The jays, ravens, crows, and magpies belong to a bird family of fellow brainiacs and studies routinely reveal new intellectual powers among them. Magpies cache food in hiding places, but know if someone might be watching and will take measures to trick their nosy neighbors. If humans are involved in some kind of terrifying magpie study involving repeated weighing of chicks, for example, the magpies will learn to recognize these enemies by their faces, mobbing them with fury, even if far from their nest, while ignoring innocent humans. Magpies have even been known to move their precious eggs to a new, safer location.

Magpies are monogamous, and we fancy having that in common with them, too. But they evidently can be “obnoxious,” and they have egregiously become common among us. But none of this changes the awe and wonder felt by those who see them for the first time – when they see Black-billed Magpies as they truly are.



Photo by Larry Barnes

A Black-billed Magpie inspiring awe in the unjaded among us.

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Chapter Only Membership

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.

Name: _____

Address: _____

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Send this application with \$15 to:

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