

January Program: Bitter Root Land Trust Conservation Efforts

By Kate Stone

Are you curious about efforts to conserve open space in the Bitterroot Valley? What do networks of protected private land mean for birds and other wildlife? Do you remember voting on the Ravalli County Open Lands bond in a recent election? Or did you see newspaper articles about a new public park in Victor?

Our January program will be an in-person visit with several staff members from the Bitter Root Land Trust. Since its inception in 1997, the Bitter Root Land Trust has worked in partnership with private landowners, the local community, willing donors, and other entities to protect thousands of acres for the benefit of us all. And that includes birds and other wildlife!



Photo by Kate Stone

The Bitter Root Land Trust helps our community use available tools to preserve open space, protect habitat for wildlife, and keep family farms and ranches operational.

BRLT staff will provide an overview of the organization, what their stewardship responsibilities are for conserved land, the workings of the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program, and highlight the conservation momentum in the Victor neighborhood, including the formation of the Groff Family Park. Come with any questions you have—they'll be ready for a lively discussion.

It takes a team to make conservation happen, so we hope you look forward to meeting several members of the Land Trust team, including Stephanie Sipe (Communications Director), Melissa Odell (Lands Director) and Rhiannon Klingonsmith (Stewardship Director).



This program will take place IN PERSON at 6PM on Jan. 20th at the Neely Center located at 150 A Street South in Victor. See you there! [Note the date; this meeting is NOT taking place on the usual 3rd Monday of the month!].

Letter from the President

By Larry Barnes, BAS President

We held the Hamilton Christmas count on December 14th, the first day of the count window, and experienced calm weather, clear skies, balmy weather, and few birds. Out of 39 years, this was the third lowest count in total bird numbers at 3,840. The median value over those 39 years is 6,893. The species count, however, was on the high side at 71 (the highest number was 78 in 2013 and the median value is 65 species).

As far as the actual species we observed, there were a few surprises. Snow Geese are ordinarily long gone by December but two were here for the count (they've only been seen 5 times). Canada Geese numbers were down; the fourth lowest count. Cackling Geese were recognized as a separate species in 2004 and observed only twice since then, including this year. Bald Eagles were scarce; the third lowest



count. Seen any Steller's Jays lately? None were seen on the count for the very first time! There was a third record for a House Wren and a second record for a Spotted Towhee.



Photo by Larry Barnes

A big flock of Wild Turkeys were momentarily startled by the arrival of this juvenile American Goshawk on the Stevensville CBC.

What does it all mean? It's always hard to say without lots of hard data. The effects of chance and probability likely account for much of what we observe in one Christmas Bird Count (CBC). The weather, of course, was freakishly warm and the month freakishly wet. Those scarce Bald Eagles? Maybe the muddy floodwaters made fishing poor, as my wife Sharon observed. Low overall numbers? Bird flu maybe, but in the absence of real data we should probably blame it on chance.



Photo by Alex Kearney

Alex Kearney took this perfect photo of a Canada Goose next to a Cackling Goose during the Hamilton CBC.

The other counts from the region will soon be reported and if some of our observations are corroborated by other CBCs maybe chance and probability can be excluded and the reason(s) for actual changes can be discovered.



Photo by Larry Barnes

Not a great photo, but a great bird, especially on December 4th at Victor Crossing. Lewis' Woodpeckers should be long gone by then. I looked for it during the Dec. 27th Stevensville CBC, but no luck.

Hamilton Public Library's 2026 [Montana Birding Challenge](#)

The library will encourage community members to ramp up their bird knowledge by getting outside to see wild birds in their habitats. They have published a Bird Bingo sheet and a Montana Bird List and there is talk of "fabulous prizes."

The library's Montana Birding Challenge has inspired me to set a 2026 goal for myself. My eBird list for Montana is currently 226 and by the end of December 2026 it will be at least 251.

If I didn't mind driving vast distances to see birds, this would be a rather straightforward goal—but I do mind. So, I will have to be strategic, learning Montana's various bioregions and figuring out when and where to go to achieve my goal with the least

amount of driving. Of course, during the effort I will have fun adventures in nature, big and little, with my wife and maybe some of you. And now that I have made my goal public, I feel motivated to achieve it!

Happy New Year,

Larry

Natural Selections: Magpie Magnificence

By Larry Barnes, BAS President

Despite the long nights, the quiet and the cold, the very first signs of spring may be heard in January when our bioregion is sleeping under winter's white blanket. A walk along a rocky stream can reveal a complex song, one crafted by evolution to pierce through the sounds of riffles and rapids. Some combination of increasing daylight and hormonal changes will cause American Dippers to take time out from foraging in icy waters to broadcast their hopes over the white noise of their ice water world.



Photo by Larry Barnes

American Dipper.

We rightly associate bird song with spring. As Earth orbits the sun, more light sets the table with all the ingredients needed for the coming banquet. Ice melts, the land warms, sunlight ignites photosynthesis, buds swell and sprout leaves, insects come alive, and it becomes worthwhile for birds to migrate north toward the land of long days. A vernal abundance of food is coming and for many birds the benefits of leaving the tropics and reproducing here exceed the costs of migration. But the American dipper is largely non-migratory and begins its breeding season while snow covers the land. Why get started so far ahead of their feathered kin?

Five species of dippers occur on Earth, two in the Old World and three here in the New World. They are the only members of their family and their genus – *Cinclus*. The dippers are members of the largest order of birds, the Passeriformes, which includes about

Bitterroot Bird Alliance Calendar of Events

- 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.
- Chapter Renewal.
 - ✓ Due 31Jan2026
- Monthly Beginner Bird Walk at Lee Metcalf NWR.
 - ✓ 3rd Saturday of each month, Stevensville, MT 10AM-12PM.

8,600 species, or 60% of all birds. All five dipper species evolved from one version, probably all sharing the same unusual characteristics. Dippers are the only full-time aquatic members of their order and it follows that they have evolved special adaptations as a result.



Photo by Larry Barnes

American Dipper nest, uncharacteristically built on top of a bridge, instead of beneath it.

Dipper bones are more solid than other bird species, most of whom have famously light-weight hollow bones. This increased density may offset their extreme buoyancy thanks to an oversized uropygial gland – the source of the oil that makes feathers waterproof. While “flying” underwater, a dipper reflects a silver sheen from a layer of air trapped against its densely feathered body. Flaps on their nostrils close when they submerge. And their blood's oxygen carrying capacity exceeds that of other Passerines.

The American Dippers' world revolves around fast moving clear streams that team with dragonfly and caddisfly nymphs, which they capture underwater like a tiny, frenetic diving duck. They build their dome-shaped nests of moss on streamside cliffs or beneath bridges. The sexes appear alike and both parents feed the young, but the female does the incubating. It takes about 38 days from egg-laying to chicks leaving the nest.

So why the rush? Why start the breeding season in January rather than in April or May, like their more sensible bird cousins? The reason probably includes the fact that a dipper's pantry is never empty. Streams that flow year round always harbor aquatic insects and tiny fish. Also, dippers often produce two clutches per season; get an early start if you want to maximize your Darwinian fitness. Finally, Dipper nests are sometimes built close to the stream, and nature would favor parents that nest early, before a June flood might wash their babies down the river.

It's time to Renew to continue supporting your local chapter!

Bitterroot Bird Alliance Renewal:

Please pay your \$15 membership renewal for 2026. Renew online through the website: www.bitterrootaudubon.org/membership and click on the "Join Now" button to pay with credit card. You can also renew through mail by sending your name, address, email, and check (made out to the Bitterroot Bird Alliance) to:

**Bitterroot Bird Alliance Supporting Member
P.O. Box 326
Hamilton, MT 59840**

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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: _____
City: _____
State: _____ Zip: _____
Email: _____

Send this application with \$15 to:

Bitterroot Bird Alliance
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Hamilton, MT 59840-0326



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