

## Local area Christmas Bird Counts:

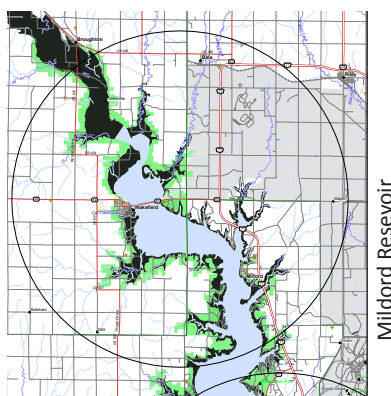
SAVE THE DATES!

Saturday, December 18, 2021 Manhattan  
Mark Mayfield - markherb@ksu.edu  
785.410.3073

Sunday, Dec. 19, 2021 Wakefield  
Chuck Otte cotte@ksu.edu  
785.238.4161

Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021 Olsburg  
Cindy Jeffrey cinraney@ksu.edu  
785.565.3326

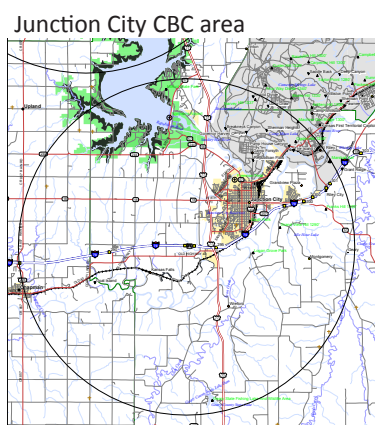
Monday, Dec. 27, 2021 Junction City  
Chuck Otte cotte@ksu.edu  
785.238.4161



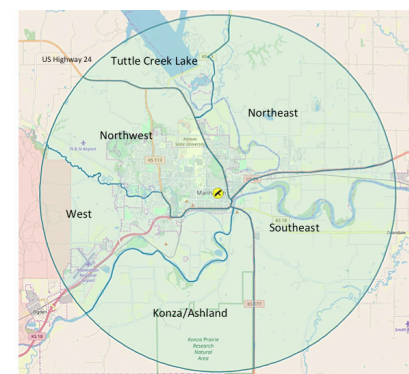
Wakefield CBC area



Olsburg CBC area



Junction City CBC area



Manhattan CBC area

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society,  
P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan, KS 66505-1932



## prairie falcon

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Newsletter

Vol. 50, No. 4 December 2021

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### Upcoming Events

DEC. 5 - 50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION LAKE ELBO CLUBHOUSE

CBC Save the Dates: See above and on page 5

Jan. 4 - Board Meeting - 5:30 pm  
Manhattan Public Library

January - Eagle Days - due to Covid restrictions this will again be a virtual event. Watch the Corps of Engineers Facebook page and website for mor information.



## Skylight plus

Pete Cohen

Since 1894 a named passenger train has traveled a route that originally had one end among stations in Florida, and modernly only as far east as New Orleans, with the other end at Los Angeles. The name is “The Sunset Limited” (as if its passengers all traveled westward).

Two lines from a 1935 Gene Autry film, “Tumbling Tumbleweeds”, go:  
Ridin’ down the canyon just see the sun go down,  
A picture that no artist ere could paint.

In 1952 Jon Cleary published a novel, “The Sundowners”, that became a best seller plus movie, and I feel its title did not limit its success. It seems to me that the concept of ‘sunset’ evokes some variety of emotional response in many people. And December holds most of the earliest sunsets of the year. At the latitude of the northern Flint Hills they occur around the 10th. *StarDate* tells me that far enough to the south they can happen even in late November; more northward, closer to the winter solstice.

This results partly because the tilt of the Earth on its axis has it receiving sunlight from continually varying angles, and partly because in December the Earth on its orbit is closer to the Sun than average and therefore is spinning a little faster than average, so solar noon comes a few seconds earlier day to day, as do the sundowns after, and seconds add up to minutes. (The date of the latest sunrise varies similarly after the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year.)

Sunsets can go on hidden by clouds or be a bland sequence of darkening colors, yet so many range from the picturesque to effulgent that I thought there’d be a cornucopia of pithy comments and verse about them. But in searching the usual sources I’ve found very few expressions aimed directly at them. In most references that I could find the sunsets mentioned are undescribed and just incidental background to themes of love or some particular philosophical offering. Such as Emerson’s “Every sunset brings the promise of a new dawn.” Or Longfellow’s “Days stretch into sunset, meeting the distant horizon and leaving only memories.” Surely they evoke more responses than those.

Meanwhile there are the so-called crepuscular (Latin for twilight-like) creatures that become part of the sunset scenes: those prey species such as rabbits that stir at sunset, seeking to graze or browse when the skylight is not at the best for daytime or nighttime predators.

Also part of the scene can be the so-named nyctinastic plants that close up shop (their leaves or flowers) at sunset, (to re-open at morn). They include daisies, magnolia, lotus, most legumes, and more.

The brightest stars and planets begin to show when a sunset enters ‘civil twilight’. A designation that’s part of another story.

As for planets, there’ll be a lot of Venus in the western evening skies in December, brightest for her current run on the 4th (with no competition from the Moon at new). A crescent Moon, Jupiter, and a dim Saturn will join her the 6th-9th with the Moon passing beneath the others.

Jupiter will be moving into the constellation Aquarius around mid-month, and Mercury will show up to join Venus during the last week of the month, shifting from below to westward. Mars will be glimmering lower left of the Moon in the dawn of the 31st.

Among the stars, Virgo’s Spica will be upper right of the Moon in the dawn of the first. She can also be found through the season by arcing backward off the handle of the Big Dipper to the bright Arcturus in Boötes then bending the arc southward. Spica and Arcturus are the only bright spots on that imaginary path.

Taurus’ red Aldebaran migrates from below to the right of the Moon the 16th-17th. Leo’s Regulus comes up below right of the Moon late on the 23rd and is still there early on the 24th. Spica repeats with the Moon in dawn of the 28th. In the dawn of the 31st Scorpius’ red Antares will be about as far to the right of the Moon as Mars will be to the left.

The Moon is new the 4th at 1a43, full the 18th at 10p35; the winter solstice occurs at 9p59 CST the 21st.

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## Who Knew?

Dru Clarke



Hope Jahren, in her book “Lab Girl,” reveals that she discovered that the inner lattice work of the stone-hard hackberry seed is, indeed, opal. Opal, a silica distillate selected by the tree from a myriad of other dissolved minerals, is a favorite of mine, pearly in its iridescence, changing color as it turns in the light. Its hidden and surprising inclusion is molecules of water, lending it its fluid property but also increasing its fragility. I own a mud opal, a not very flattering name, but whenever I wear it (it is fashioned to be a pendant), it generates a host of compliments. It rests in the hollow of my neck, where the collarbones meet, a smooth oval opal whose origin was most likely a silt-laden river eddy, cut off from the main channel, smothered in time by slowly descending particles of mineral-rich earth.

Once, a student brought me a pink slab of rock – a glacial erratic of Sioux quartzite – encrusted with pyramidal crystals of calcite. He had discovered it on the banks of the Kansas river. Mystified by its origin, he thought I would be able to tell him more and I shared what I could discern from its appearance. But therein the story remains untold and undecipherable: how did it get there? What was its journey like? What conditions led to the accretion of those milky crystals studding the surface?

On top of Mount Mitchell, a remnant rise of tall grass prairie (protected now by the Prairie Guards), a few miles south of Wamego on route 99, are scattered blocks of Sioux quartzite. Originating in the Dakotas and Minnesota, the mechanism by which they traveled to their final resting place was by a glacier. Whether a tongue of that glacier licked, with those rocks on its tip, across the present Kansas river valley OR a dam broke and released the meltwater from the receding glacier and washed the boulders onto that hill are two explanations for their placement. Whatever the truth, the story of their journey has to be amazing.

In a canoe float down the Kansas river from Manhattan to St. George, just upstream from the present takeout point at the latter village, I passed a weird configuration of huge boulders in the river channel. Some speculate that it is an ancient weir, used to funnel fish into a trap, but more likely they were deposited by glaciation, like the rock on top of Mt. Mitchell. Geologists have not identified the existence of any part of the last glaciation being that far upstream but their existence bears further examination.

On our bookshelf is an assortment of artifacts found or gifted to us through the years: one prize is a partial mammoth tooth, a molar where one third has been lost. It was picked out of a gravel bar on the Blue river, just east of Manhattan, and it is not fossilized but very much as it was when the animal died.

Our land holds few remarkable geological features: caliche, formed on a dry, upland pasture, resembles incipient broken geodes. More intriguing is the pale green clay exposed at a meander of our south creek. It lies three feet below the bank's surface and is both slimy and gritty to the touch. Our grandsons liked to form tiny pinch pots from it, though we never fired them. Could the clay have been formed from an ancient volcanic ashfall, like the one that buried the array of fauna miraculously preserved in Nebraska? There, horses and rhinos and an assortment of other beasts, peacefully drinking at a waterhole, succumbed to the asphyxiating ash. One heartbreaking find was of a mother rhino whose baby was still in her womb. We've found no fossils in our clay.

Landscapes all have their own stories. Other tales are locked in rocks and the stony seeds of flora, like the heart of the hackberry fruit. Taste the purplish skin, thin but tangy and sweet, then look at the naked seed, imagining a luminous lace within. Opal. Who knew?

Mammoth tooth

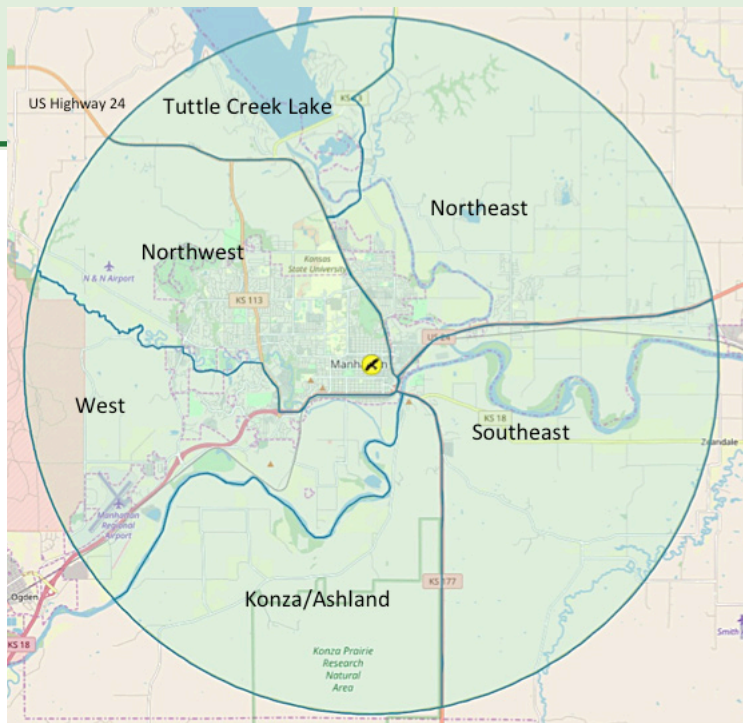


Glacial erratic of Sioux quartzite



© 2021 Dru Clarke, DEC.





December 18th is the 73rd annual Manhattan Christmas Bird Count (CBC). The Christmas Bird Count has been an ongoing effort by the National Audubon Society to census winter birds for the last 120 years. The Manhattan CBC, like all count circles (see map above), is 15 miles in diameter and we will count all birds seen within a 24 hour period on the day of the count. New participants are always welcomed and expert birding skills are not required! If you would like to participate in the count, please contact Mark Mayfield (markherb@ksu.edu, or 785-410-3073) so that he can get your name in the participants contact list and put you in touch with a sector leader.

The count will be held rain or shine (even snow and ice) Arrangements can be made if you can

only participate for part of the day. If you would like to count birds at your feeders on December 18th as part of the surveys, contact Mark for instructions and a checklist. Please note that counting birds at feeders by field parties is not considered as feeder counting unless it is a separate effort.

Count numbers and number of species will be compiled at the end of the day. Your sector leader will make arrangements to pick up your totals if you are unable to attend the evening get-together.. In order to contribute your data, each birding party is required (by National Audubon Society) to report their field effort in addition to the species totals. This means that, in addition to the birds your party sees and hears on your route, one person in each party will also need to keep track of the start and end times (to the nearest 1/4 hour) and the distance you travelled (separated by the distance on foot and by car, or other method--boat, for example). If you have questions about how to submit data, please contact me, Mark Mayfield, ahead of time. Also note that all parties must be in contact with a sector leader in order to participate.

### Manhattan Christmas Bird Count - Compilation and Chili Supper

Join the NFHAS and fellow birders after the day of birding for a potluck supper at 6 p.m. on December 18<sup>th</sup>, at the Seniors Service Center, 412 Leavenworth, Manhattan, KS. A few volunteers will prepare chili but please feel free to bring a side dish to share. Free-will donations to NFHAS are also welcome. We encourage you to bring your own tableware to help us reduce the amount of trash. Enjoy good food, good companionship, and find out how this year's count compares to previous years! If you have any questions on what to bring for the supper or can help with setup, please contact **Patricia Yeager by phone 776-9593 or email [pyeagerbirder@gmail.com](mailto:pyeagerbirder@gmail.com).**

(Masks required except when eating, there is room to spread out)



## IN MEMORY OF DR. CHRIS SMITH

I hold fond memories of the late Dr. Chris Smith, as I know many others do. I took classes from Dr. Smith both as an undergraduate and a decade later while pursuing a PhD. I'm 53, Chris was 53 when I graduated with my B.S. from KSU in 1991. Chris and I hiked McDowell Creek during one of my earliest CBCs, and later we traveled to other CBCs in the state during KSU Christmas breaks. Those exclusive experiences with him were/are priceless; I realize that more now. He appreciated and admired my bird-finding eyes, and much of his mentorship was as a friend and not as a teacher – although he did experience narcoleptic episodes and having me as backup driver probably garnered some of his friendship.

The companionship we shared during those times were wonderful moments of life, both of us done with final exams and grades, enjoying nature surrounded by the peaceful glow of the holidays. As a teacher or a friend, I recall no physical or verbal expression that was unkind; no negativity, stress, or anguish on his countenance, to me or any other student or person. He often started his lectures with some sort of lighthearted humor or leading anecdote; sometimes making fun of himself and his ever-growing bushy eyebrows that he needed to comb. He loved to walk, and on any given CBC, regardless of weather, he preferred to hike or walk gravel roads as much as possible rather than drive; which I still prefer as well. He always walked to KSU from home, and aside from CBCs I have no memories of Chris wearing any type of shoes other than sneakers – always sneakers.

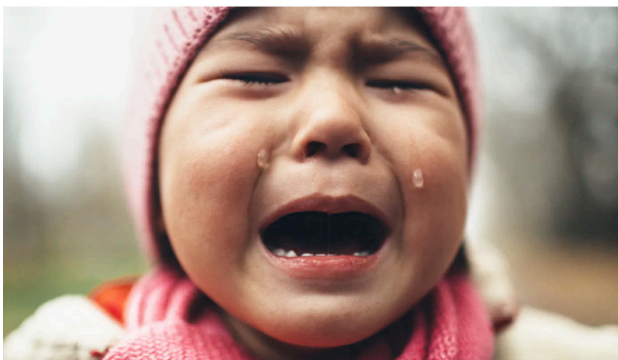
Chris taught me how to use AOU Alpha Codes and the dot tallying method with a small pocket notebook that we each carried, we could easily transfer that information to the CBC final tally sheet at the end of the day. I can remember the day's lighting and weather during many of our backroad excursions, including special birding moments: my first yellow-bellied sapsucker I found and he identified; the swarm of birds that came to us in forest or grassland after Chris encouraged me to do my screech owl call (I'm a poor imposter, and incapable if smiling); me staring at the ground while listening intently to Chris describe -- in succinct detail -- excellent specific identifying auditory diagnostics of a bird's call.

I remember Chris explain why even though orange peels were biodegradable, it was a rather inappropriate ethic to toss them on the ground because of the time it took for them and their visual impact to disappear – a Leave No Trace principle I wish was more commonly embraced today.

Time given by good people, can override your time wasted with not-so-good people. And with their shared time, those good people can influence recipients, altering – to some degree – who the recipients will become as people; enriched in some cases.

I couldn't be more grateful for Chris having enriched my life.

Jay Jeffrey



## THANK YOU PATTY!

PATTY KLINE - our treasurer is retiring, we are **sad** to report. She would like to train the next treasure before she heads south. **We wish her the best and will miss her smile, laughter, and accounting expertise!!**

Please consider joining the board as treasurer!



Northern Flint Hills  
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The purpose of the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society is to teach people to enjoy and respect birds and their habitats. NFHAS advocates preservation of prairie ecosystems and urban green spaces thus saving the lives of birds and enriching the lives of people.

Also available online at [nfhas.org](http://nfhas.org)

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Also available online at [nfhas.org](http://nfhas.org)

Membership Information: Introductory memberships - \$20/yr., then basic, renewal membership is \$35/yr. When you join the National Audubon Society, you automatically become a member of the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society. You will receive the bimonthly Audubon magazine in addition to the Prairie Falcon newsletter. New membership applications should be sent to National Audubon Society, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235. Make checks payable to the National Audubon Society. Membership renewals are also handled by the National Audubon Society. Questions about membership? Call 1-800-274-4201 or email the National Audubon Society [join@audubon.org](mailto:join@audubon.org). Website is [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org).

Subscription Information: If you do not want to receive the national magazine, but still want to be involved in NFHAS local activities, you may subscribe to the Prairie Falcon newsletter for \$15/yr. Make checks payable to the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, and mail to: Treasurer, NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan, KS, 66502-1932

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