

April Activities

Earth Day **Wednesday April 22.** Alsop bird sanctuary garden planting and maintenance care, 4-6pm Join us for the entire time or drop in for a while. Cookies and water provided.

Alsop Bird Sanctuary gardeners meet on Weds. mornings starting in April. The time varies according to the weather but generally we start at 8 a.m. and work until 10 a.m. When it gets very hot in the summer we start and end an hour earlier. Enjoy a pleasant morning with friends and plants while keeping an urban green space in Manhattan. The Alsop Bird Sanctuary is located at the corner of Laramie and Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

May Activities

Cheyenne Bottoms / Quivira Field Trip: May 2-3.

Join other birders for an overnight trip to Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira on **May 2 and May 3.** We will leave Manhattan on May 2 starting off at 9:00 a.m. and carpool to Cheyenne Bottoms. Meet at the Mall parking lot on the south side near the building. A picnic lunch will be provided at Cheyenne Bottoms campground. Those who are hearty enough and have camping gear can set up at the grounds. The rest of us will stay at historic Ellinwood at Wolf Manor. This is a former rectory that has been restored to a guest house. Bedrooms sleep two and have their own bathroom. (Although you do not have to share a room.) There is a shared parlor, kitchen and dinning room. We will drive around Quivira wetlands Saturday afternoon and return to Cheyenne Bottoms in the evening. On Sunday morning we will start out in time to get to Cheyenne Bottoms at dawn. Then we will start back to Manhattan around noon, stop for lunch, and return to Manhattan by 4:00 p.m.

You **MUST RSVP by April 23** to be included on this trip. Call Patricia 785-776-9593 or cell 785-317-1558 with questions and to RSVP. **MORE INFORMATION ON PAGE 3**

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



prairie falcon

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Newsletter

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Upcoming Events

Apr. 7 - Board Meeting 5:30
Manhattan Public Library Study room #1

Apr. 23 - RSVP for field trip

Apr. 26 - Bird walk at Annenberg Park
1:00- 2:30 pm Meet at shelter near the pond

May 2-3 - Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira Field Trip
Overnight at Wolf Manor in Elinwood



Feel the Burn

Dru Clarke

The wind had been more of intermittent breezes as we began our burn, but, suddenly it quickened and began to blow from the southwest.

The fire grew quickly, fed by the thick thatch that had accumulated under the greening up tall grasses. We were in the midst of a headfire, one moving quickly with the wind, and beginning to generate a lot of smoke and high flames. We spread out across the encroaching line of flames, backing up, overwhelmed by its intensity, until I was at the edge of our south pond. The rest of the crew was nowhere to be seen. All I had in my hands was a leaf rake, useless against the hungry flames. The heat was scorching: my only escape was into the pond. When it was all over, I had survived, soaking wet but grateful for water.

Why do we burn prairie? Folks who live on the eastern seaboard don't understand, much less appreciate, our need to practice this seemingly destructive act. The protocol involves careful planning: mowing strips along the periphery of the potential burn (to protect desirable woodland and structures and to prevent runaway fire onto neighbors' land); tanks of water to spray errant fiery fingers and douse smoldering cowpies or bison droppings; rakes and shovels; a large enough crew to monitor the fire's progress and eventual demise. Prolonged dry spells delay burning: danger of wildfires is heightened during those times, witnessed by the recent megafires in Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska. The time of year folks decide to burn varies, with contrasting theories as to the optimum window, but it seems to depend more on what the desired end result is than any one season. The composition of prairie species is altered by the time of year burning occurs. But most landowners burn at the beginning of spring, April being the primary month. Those who value grassland bird populations have their preferences, especially in avoiding nesting times. But why we burn needs explaining for the edification of those who don't understand its benefits.

New grass, especially the warm season grasses – big bluestem, little bluestem, switch grass, and Indian grass, the Big Four – readily use the nutrients released from the burned thatch, the accumulated dead grass changed into blackened dust by the fire. If you feel the soil of a charred patch of prairie, and then compare it to an unburned patch, the temperature difference is remarkable: the burned is considerably warmer than the unburned. Watch eyes of a child as he or she feels this difference: one doesn't need a thermometer to measure the effect. And warm season grasses love this (as well as the broth of nutrients created when a spring rain waters the burn).

There is also added room to grow, gather sunlight, and spread new sprouts, known as tillering. Fire rids most prairie of unwanted woody growth, shrubs such as dogwood, coralberry or buckbrush, sumac, eastern red cedar (juniper) – species that form 'islands' of impenetrable growth and limit the expanse of palatable grasses for herbivores. Certain trees, like bur oak, have thick fire-resistant bark that prevent their immolation. But this tree, along with a few other species, provide shady oases, for these same herbivores during torrid summer weather, on an otherwise open prairie.

While nitrogen – a vital ingredient for plant growth – is lost through burning, phosphorus and potassium remain in the ash, the nitrogen is returned to the soil by grazers, like bison and cattle, through their urine and feces.* So, burning alone does not restore the prairie grasses; it requires large herbivores, a symbiotic relationship that ensures the integrity and longevity of the grassland biome.

If you have a chance to visit Konza Prairie, try to watch the bison as they graze. They tend to move to newly burned areas, drawn by the newly sprouted blades of grass. We will burn late this year, into May, but we will enjoy watching our cows as they discover the new growth. Already they are finding the cool season areas of brome growing in places where we mowed spent plants last fall. But the warm season, native grasses await the fires and will feel the burn in time to dominate their appointed place. And we will be ready to assist.

© 2026 March Dru Clarke

*KPBS website



© Chad Hedinger

Cheyenne Bottoms / Quivira Field Trip:

Cheyenne Bottoms / Quivira Field Trip:

Cost is \$140.00 for nonmembers who are staying at Wolf Manor

Cost is \$120.00 for NFHAS members who are staying at Wolf Manor

Cost for campers is \$20.00 You will need to plan for your own meals other than lunch. Please pay with check or cash at beginning of trip. These prices cover transportation, a room for two and a picnic lunch. You will need to pay for other meals and extras. There is an underground tour at Ellinwood that is interesting I'm told.

We will go rain or shine unless the weather is extremely severe. You **MUST RSVP by April 23** to be included on this trip. Call Patricia 785-776-9593 or cell 785-317-1558 with questions and to RSVP.



Our last trip to Quivira and Cheyenne Bottoms

Of note:

DarkSky: <https://darksky.org/>

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Where can you still see the Milky Way?



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2026 Birda-

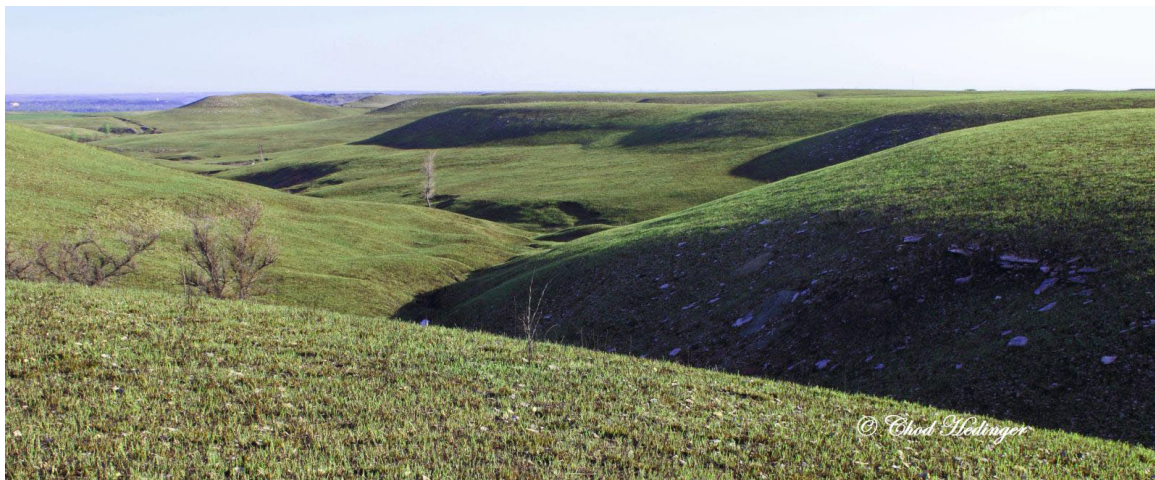
41st Annual Birdathon, April 25-26 and My "Swan Song"
Every year since 1985 when Clyde Ferguson and Cecil Best started this important annual fundraiser for the Chapter, it has been the main way for us to raise support for it.

I was glad to join those guys in about 1991 to learn more about birds and to assist them with the process to help with their report of species found and prepare the copies of letters to their supporters. As time marches on I, too, have come to the end of my own journey of about 35 years of managing this important effort to solicit funds and take care of the process.

But, I have had several parties help me with the birding effort and hopefully that will continue so that we get a good snapshot of the species in the area. For this final year, I ask your cooperation one more time. Please contact me, koellik@sbcglobal.net, or 785-776-4915 and I will send you a sheet with the species checklist for you to use AND a form to use with your supporters to obtain pledges of support for the chapter and to report your effort back to me. Recall, this is a 24-hour period of a time of your choosing during the 25-26 period. I plan to make mine from about 10 a.m. on Saturday until 10 a.m. on Sunday. I'll be happy to share my vehicle with others as I scramble to find as many species as possible.

Reminder: This is a great birding opportunity AND an important fundraiser for the Chapter. I look forward to working with you and I hope everyone in the Chapter will find a way to support me in this effort one last time!

Please send him a *"Thank you"* (email - koellik@sbcglobal.net).



Continued from Dru
Clarke's article:

Konza Prairie after a burn

photos by Chod Hedinger

2026 Birdathon

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Birding Paddle Trips

San Juan Islands (Part 2) - Killer Whales & Kenn Kaufman

"It is 1973: psychedelically painted VW vans pump out Jefferson Airplane tunes. Drivers flash peace signs. Beside the highway stands a Jesus look-alike, thumb out. ... His ornithology fixation had already set in by his ninth birthday, when Kaufman's family moved from South Bend, Indiana, to Wichita, Kansas." — Excerpt: book review of *Kingbird Highway*, publ. 1997 by Kenn Kaufman; review in *Smithsonian Magazine*, 1998.

After Leon shouted "Whales!" and launched into a running sprint, I followed by lurching into an awkward speed-walk, being only 6 months out from knee surgery. But upon reaching the steep slope and cliffs, overlooking the massive tidal currents surging and merging together, below the light house at the tip of the island, we were treated to a whale show for the ages! Orcas, also known as Killer Whales, are often simply called Whales by locals because of severawl resident family groups (pods) that make the San Juan Islands (SJI) archipelago their home. SJI is also visited by large Humpback, Minke, and Gray Whales.

Orcas are called many other names such as Blackfish and Sea Wolves, but the longest-held names are indigenous from numerous tribes who revere the phenomenal animal for many reasons — exceptional reasons. Although pods are matrilineal (kinship and social structure based upon mothers), bull Orcas are larger, some over 30-feet long and up to 11-tons; about same size as typical school bus. Bulls also have wedge-like dorsal fins up to 6-feet tall, unlike females which have shorter curved fins similar to dolphins and many sharks.

Overlooking the island's convergence of enormous and powerful ocean currents, Orcas gave us a show that'd be envious of any boat-guided whale watching tour. Our show included: **Spyhopping** — *Raising body head-first vertically out of water and stopping like a fixed marker buoy, sometimes rotating in circular pivot; visually scanning above-water environment.* **Lobtailing** — *Lifting tail fluke out of water and horizontally slamming its bottom, repeatedly, on water's surface making loud slaps, in some cases audible for miles; flukes are 8 to 9 feet wide, tip-to-tip.* **Breaching** — *Multi-ton Orca jumps out of water up to 10-15 feet high, returning head first or landing impactfully on side or back — for a big splash!*

The show's arena, within the mixing of huge directionless currents, was about the size of a few football fields. Bulls, cows, calves, the entire pod played their part in the show. I can't imagine in my lifetime ever topping that wild and unbelievable high-energy encounter with Orcas.

Orcas are "toothed whales" and the largest dolphin species; technically not "true whales," but they're in the mammalian order that includes whales, dolphins, and porpoises. Big, phenomenal, mystical forces of nature — indeed, Orcas are THE apex predator of Earth's oceans.

SJI resident Orcas rely solely on fish for food, particularly salmon. And their hunting strategies, echolocation, and communication are specialized for that type of foraging. They differ from "transient" Orcas, known for relying almost solely on marine mammals as prey; with uncanny problem-solving hunting tactics for seals, sea lions, whales, dolphins and porpoises, and sharks, including adult Great White Sharks (targeting and exclusively eating the shark's enormous energy-rich liver) — again, Orcas are THE apex predator. Translations of Orcas' Latin name, *Orcinus orca*, vary, but tend to relate to "God of the underworld and Champion of Death."

Although menacing to prey, Orcas behold marvelous complexity: heads are specialized for exceptional echolocation used in myriad scenarios including sightless navigation, hunting, and group coordination. Clicks are part of their biosonar, whistles used for close-range pod communication, and unique pulsed Orca Calls can carry for miles.

Orca brains can weigh up to 15 pounds; larger than elephants and 5 times heavier than human brains. Brain structure is multiplexed with highly developed regions indicating advanced cognitive abilities for fast complex data-processing; high-speed sensory interpretation, communication, and navigation; and capacity for emotional functioning, social connectivity, compassion, and self-awareness.

Subgroups of Orcas, even individual pods, have specific vocalized "dialects." And these are not genetically inherited, but learned and passed on from individuals over generations. Hunting techniques and strategies are also taught, and sometimes adult behaviors are newly established via successful problem-solving — with "culture" ever-evolving. In short, Orcas are highly intelligent, dominant, social, with young being taught "language" and other taxing lessons over several years; and have families that take care of each other. Marvelous complexity.

The following morning, we repack kayaks and make a 2.5-mile trans-island open-water crossing before speeding down San Juan Island's west coast, aided by a max-speed ebb current; we make good mileage, occasionally applying corrective paddle strokes to account for quartering cross-winds. The tide is changing as we approach the island's southern region; an opposing flood current requires us to paddle near shore jumping between eddies behind offshore rocks and kelp beds amidst reflected waves (aka, "rock gardening"). Constant focus is required while paddling to navigate the river-like gauntlet and avoid being capsized or spun around downstream; linking paddle strokes smoothly and precisely, without pause, is crucial.

There are no "time-outs." We've covered over 18 miles, we're in oceanic backcountry, no place to retreat, no beaches; there's no civilization; no convenient stores, rest areas, motels, people; Coast Guard...maybe, with emergency use of a handheld VHF radio. Time only allows glimpses of close-proximity Pigeon Guillemots and Common Murres, the birds eyeing us curiously; wearing their velvety breeding plumage. But you don't forget those types of glimpses!

After rounding a bend we paddle along a long beach that faces directly to an open 25-mile expanse of Salish Sea, now looking at the bend of the vast 12 to 24-mile wide Strait of Juan de Fuca, which channels the infinite Pacific Ocean between mainland Washington state and colossal Vancouver Island, B.C. (280+ miles long, 60+ miles wide; largest island of entire western coast of Americas).

The strait, a funnel for the immense Pacific Ocean, meets the SJI as if challenged by a boulder field in a river. Yet without pause, literally like the cliché "time like tide waits for no one," the ocean water ceaselessly infiltrates SJI's submerged steep-sided mountain chain

Birding Paddle Trips

San Juan Islands (Part 2) - Killer Whales & Kenn Kaufman

in one way or another. It's this complex geo-oceanic-hydraulic morphology that creates perpetual and forceful tidal currents; and winds can add dramatically to their energetic nature, especially as distance of open water increases (aka, "fetch").

The beach we're hugging receives the incoming tide's flooding current head-on, and therefore the current splits at about the half-way point, shifting down-beach in one direction and also down-beach in the other opposite direction; two diverging currents. We continue paddling close to the beach where the opposing current is less strong...but it's still a slog. Then we pass the half-way point and feel the friendly current carrying us along — we land ashore and take a much-awaited and much-needed lunch.

While munching on food, my upper drysuit pulled down and tied at my waist, far in the distance we see Orcas jumping, "breaching," high into the air and we giddily comment on our persisting good fortune. I hear tidal rapids past the beach, where we're soon to be headed, and inquire with Leon about what to expect. "The longer we wait, the bigger it'll get. The worst that can happen is you'll come out of your boat and get flushed downstream about a mile." Leon is a worldclass expedition sea kayaker and globally respected coach. I'm no longer giddy, my face is paler.

The rapids, also known as tidal streams or tidal races, are no different than inland freshwater river rapids; except in cases like this, they have the potential to shape-shift ominously with increasing current speed and dynamic winds...and with no nearby island or mainland shore, one direction simply provides a trip to the open sea; in your kayak, or out of it — swimming. Put bluntly, offshore winds and strong challenging currents — among other things — can erase life for the ill-skilled and ill-prepared. Luck favors the prepared.

Although pale-faced, I sit on a beach in close-proximity to the location of a decades-old bird sighting by Kenn Kaufman, of a species no longer around; no longer a feathered San Juan Islander.

2026 © Jay Jeffrey

Next: Kenn Kaufman seeks birds by hitchhiking and taking a ferry to San Juan Island, and those exotic-looking, ravishing, and quirky sea birds...

To be continued...



Orca (*Orcinus orca*), adult cow hunting against tidal current in deep-water kelp bed. One long kelp blade hangs on dorsal fin as she surfaces for air. Photo © Jay Jeffrey



Skull of adult Orca. Above rostrum/upper toothed-jaw is where fatty melon lies outside skull; key to communication and biosonar/echolocation. Brain is protected within skull. Photo © Jay Jeffrey



San Juan Islands kayakers amidst bull kelp (*Nereocystis luetkeana*) growing on deep subtidal rocks. A single blade of kelp can grow 10 inches a day, some estimates claim 1-2 feet per day. Photo © Jay Jeffrey



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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.

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