

## MIGRATORY BIRD DAY

The spring International Migratory Bird Day count will be held on Saturday, May 10<sup>th</sup>. We have several parts of Riley County that were not covered last year, so if anyone wants an area or wants to join an existing group, please e-mail me at [jim.throne@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jim.throne@sbcglobal.net).

In particular, the areas around Leonardville and Manhattan itself were not covered in 2007, so we'd like to recruit someone to cover them. The expectation is that you count all birds heard or seen in your assigned area, and provide a list to me with some trip information. I then compile the information for the county, and submit the list to eBird.org. Zealots like myself will be birding from dawn to dusk, and will also spend some time owling; but, others spend just part of the day birding. This is a great excuse to spend the day birding, so please consider joining us.

*Jim Throne*

NORTHERN Flint Hills Audubon Society,  
P.O. Box 1972, MANHATTAN, KS 66505-1972



## PRAIRIE FALCON

NORTHERN FLINT HILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY  
NEWSLETTER

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### Upcoming Events:

- MAY 1 NFHAS BOARD MTG  
TOM & MJ MORGAN HOME - 6 p.m.
- MAY 10 SPRING MIGRATORY BIRD COUNT  
(CONTACT JIM THRONE AT  
[jim.throne@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jim.throne@sbcglobal.net))
- JUN 8 ALL MEMBERS NEEDED TO HELP US  
PLAN THE COMING YEAR SUPPER AT  
PATRICIA YEAGER'S HOME - 3 P.M.  
(SEE PG. 5 FOR DIRECTIONS)



## SKYLIGHT PLUS PETE COHEN

Springtime contains not only the start of the main baseball season, but also the lightning ball season. Baseball in its various forms can apparently be traced to well before 1839. That was the year, according to a little-credited decision by an official commission in 1907, that a West Point cadet, Abner Doubleday, had invented the game. (It seems Doubleday himself never made the claim.)

Ball lightning has been around, sporadically, much longer, though only recently has anyone claimed to have been able to pitch one. The *Economist* for March 29<sup>th</sup> reported that in 2006 Eli Jerby and Vladimir Dikhtyar, of Tel Aviv Univ., managed to create “ball lightning-like fireballs” in their lab, but the mechanism behind the real thing remains as highly debatable as the source of baseball.

Our 19<sup>th</sup> Century Chambers Encyclopedia says the phenomenon could knockdown walls. According to *The Economist* an 18<sup>th</sup> Century Russian physicist, Georg Richmann, was not as lucky as Ben Franklin who tempted the elements with his kite-flown key. Richman had set up a rod to study lightning strikes and “a pale blue ball of fire emerged from the rod and struck him” fatally on the head (somewhat like Sam Chapman was killed at bat by a beanball in the old Yankee Stadium in the 1930s).

But Richman’s may have been a different kind of ball. Other reports are similar to my mother’s tale of harmless excitement when as a young girl she was seated with her mother in a dining room that had open windows in opposite walls. Suddenly a mixing-bowl-sized sizzle of sparkling electricity came in one window and went crackling out the other (I wish I could recall if she mentioned any screening). Orange-sized to basketball-sized have been sizes I’ve heard recounted.

Tim Herd, in *Kaleidoscope Sky* (Abrams, New York, 2007), describes a postulate that a lightning strikes create a vapor from silicon oxide and carbon in the soil that is ejected in a vortex like a smoker’s ring, which continues to oxidize briefly and visibly as

it floats about. He, too, adds that that is but one theory among others. Whatever, such spectacles offer another way of “having a ball.”

There are noticeably moving objects to look for skyward this coming month, the first being the Eta Aquarid meteor shower. Its particles, remnants of Halley’s comet, are in our pathway from late April till late May, though their appearances tend to peak on May 4<sup>th</sup>. Aquarius extends quite a ways laterally across the southern sky, a little more than the widths of two extended fists, i.e. a little more than 20 degrees. It’s fifth brightest star, Eta, is its leading light and should appear in the southeast, a little above the basin-shaped Capricorn about 3 a.m. Apparently there’ve been known to be 60 meteors/hour though 20 is the usual. However, if clouds hold off conditions should be optimum for the Moon will be absent. Jeff Kanipe, in *A Skymatcher’s Year* (Cambridge U. Press, 1999) adds that these flares often have a notable yellowish color, and trail some smoke.

Kanipe also tells that during the last week of May peaks another shower, one rarely mentioned: the Scorpoid/Sagitariid. These neighboring constellations will be at their highest, in the south, around midnight but their sparkles are very faint. The trade-off being that occasionally they produce an exceptionally bright fireball (of a different sort than the one that transited my grandparents’ dining room).

Four of our five naked-eye slower-moving but longer-lasting planets will also be on the scene. Venus will be missing but Jupiter will brighten the wee hours, rising by midnight by month’s end. Saturn, keeping company with Leo the Lion, will be high in the evening and set in the wee hours. The *Old Farmer’s Almanac* notes that Mars, halfway up the western sky at dark and crossing into Cancer the Crab, passes from the 22<sup>nd</sup>- 24<sup>th</sup> in front of the Beehive Cluster, a target for binoculars.

As to Mercury, he’ll be best visible on his errands in the western twilight about a half hour after sundown, near the new waxing Moon. The Moon gets brighter for a while and the planet becomes steadily less visible to month’s end.

New Moon the 5<sup>th</sup>, 7a18; full 19<sup>th</sup>, 9p11.

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As usual we met at Sojourner Truth Park on the second Saturday. The weather forecast included rain, wind, and snow but those who look at the weather maps and frontal boundaries knew that the precipitation had already moved to the east so they were amused about mention of cancellation. One seventy-degree day and suddenly forty-five degrees seems unbearable.

Having decided that we could bear it we decided to go to the Michel-Ross Wildlife Refuge, an area along Stag Hill Road that the NFHAS oversees. This was exciting because it was another first for me. The area is a very wooded ravine between two areas of housing development. We parked and walked in. The paths go along the upper area of the ravine and one can look down into the upper areas of trees and watch for birds without craning one's neck (craning one's neck I say).

Despite the cold and wind it was clear that spring is arriving and the foliage was beginning to turn green and grow thicker. It was a nice walk in the mostly open paths but I think when it gets warm and the brush grown and the insects are out it will not be so pleasant. Can you say "poison ivy"?

We saw Eastern Phoebe, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Blue Jay, Cardinal, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Robin, Turkey Vulture, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. The Ruby-crowned Kinglets were really nice. They were in breeding plumage and the ruby crowns were quite striking.

We had some time left so we went to Lake Elbo where a nice display of Shovelers was promised. At first there was disappointment because the Shovelers were gone but we soon found that the workforce of Shovelers had moved to calmer waters and there was much rejoicing. On that happy note we had used up our time and we headed back to Sojourner Truth Park. This May's birding is the Migratory Bird Day - so call Jim Throne!



## BIRDING

KEVIN FAY

### BOOMING BOOMING

March and April are the months that the Prairie Chicken performs its courtship display known as booming. Many years ago I had made two attempts to see the booming from a blind on the Konza prairie. Both times nothing much happened and I concluded that the whole thing was much ado about nothing, maybe even akin to a snipe hunt. But this spring the opportunity came up to go to the newly refurbished blind on Konza with Hoogy Hoogheem and I was confident that if Hoogy thought it was worth seeing then perhaps I should give it another try. We met at the scenic overlook on K177 just south of Manhattan at 5:20 am. We proceeded a few miles to an access gate to the Konza prairie and then went a few miles to the blind. We needed to be in place by civil sunrise or about thirty minutes before the sun came up. We entered the blind and got settled and waited.

Almost on cue about thirty minutes before sunrise in the dim morning light the booming began. Several males entered the area called a lek. They were making a low rhythmic noise. This is where booming term comes from. It reminds me of bagpipes. The low-pitched sounds are accompanied by higher pitched cackling sounds. I think this must be where the chicken name comes from though the bird is actually a grouse. The males stomp their feet in rapid fashion and move about in little areas of territory. If a male encounters another male at the boundary of the area he is defining there will be brief sparring accompanied by sharp yelps and a jump into the air. The males have tufts along their



### BOOMING BOOMING

necks called pinnae that pivot upward over their heads to form a helmet-like thing. This also reveals yellow patches on the neck that the bird inflates as part of the display. This action went on for about thirty minutes in very repetitive and predictable fashion. It made me think of the kinetic sculptures that tinkerers all across the country make for amusement.

At this point a few females strolled in. They are smaller and not so colorful. They had an air of indifference as they walked around casually. They walked around from male to male and tried not to show too much interest. At one point a female signaled briefly to a male that she was ready but this male was too busy strutting and booming to respond so nothing happened.

Eventually the females strolled away. The sun was up and shining brightly and Eastern Meadowlarks were flying about and even landing in the lek. Several males continued to do their strutting and booming. Hoogy usually likes to stay until the display is over but he sensed that we were all quite chilled and we exited the blind at about 8:15 a.m. We saw nine males and five females.

It was a lot of fun and very entertaining. If you plan to do it sometime be sure to dress warmly. One gets quite chilled sitting still for so long. Be sure to have shoes that will keep your feet from getting chilled.

This is my impression of the booming. I could easily go on. I recommend you go out and experience it for yourself.

*Kevin Fay*



Hello from Rock Hill,

We seem to spend most of our time feeding something be it cattle, birds, ourselves or inadvertently other critters. The cattle during this sub-freezing stint are always hungry. I can scarcely keep my four bird feeders full; in fact, I have started to fill them just once a day as I was emptying my 50-pound sack of sunflower seeds much too quickly. These last couple of weeks the feeders and ground surrounding them have been covered with finch, juncos, cardinals, Harris sparrow and all the other backyard birds that visit the free buffet.

A couple of weeks ago I happened to notice a squirrel sitting on our antique cultivator eyeing my A-frame bird feeder. There have been squirrels and possums digging through the layer of empty hulls beneath the feeders all winter, searching for whole seeds that the birds had

missed. This calculating fellow was obviously trying to figure out a way onto the feeder where the mother lode of sunflower seeds lay just out of his reach. A bit later, I looked out and the rascal was sitting on the ledge of the feeder, greedily stuffing himself with black oil sunflower seeds. Opening the door, I yelled at him to vacate the premises right now. The silly rodent leaped into the air, limbs spread-eagled as though he thought he could emulate his cousin the flying squirrel. It looked as if he was aiming to land on the roof of our smoke house. He didn't come close to his chosen landing spot and instead did a belly-busting splat onto the ground not far from the feeder. Gathering his wits and dignity, he scampered off behind the stone buildings.

Paul called to me one afternoon and said you have turkey coming up to eat. Now that is too much, so after I took a couple of photos through the window, I opened the door and scared the half dozen birds away. I can't afford to feed those huge gluttons. Naturally, they have returned but if caught we discourage their visit with stern voices. Paul confessed that one day when I was gone he took his bb gun and popped one of them in the behind. He said the silly thing didn't even look up and all he could see that the bb did was knock a feather off.

To stay on the theme of turkey, this fall I began to notice that after we fed grain to our heifers and then returned to feed alfalfa, a group of turkeys would be cleaning up the grain that the cattle had left in and around the bunks. I thought at that time they must be hanging around in the timber once they figured out we came to feed at nearly the same time every morning. One day we worked (vaccinated) the heifers so we didn't feed them grain until late afternoon. Sure enough when we went back to feed alfalfa there the turkey were eating the remnants of grain that had escaped the heifers mouths. I had decided that they must be hearing the grain auger but Paul and Randall pointed out they probably were responding to the truck horn. I'm sure this is right as if cattle can learn that a honking horn means dinnertime I guess a bunch of turkey can figure that out too! I wonder how many other ranchers are ringing the dinner bell for wild turkey with the honking of a pickup horn.

Nancy Miller

Selecting Bird Seed *continued*

**Milo, wheat, oats**

These agricultural products are frequently mixed into low-priced birdseed blends. Most birds discard them in favor of other food, which leaves them to accumulate under feeders, where they may attract rodents. In the Southwest, however, milo attracts pheasants, quail, and doves.



Follow these tips and recipes for home-made additions to your bird feeds:

**Peanut butter pudding:**

Peanut butter is a good substitute for suet in the summer. Mix one part peanut butter with five parts corn meal and stuff the mixture into holes drilled in a hanging log or into the crevices of a large pine cone. This all-season mixture attracts woodpeckers, chickadees, titmice, and occasionally warblers.



**Fruit for berry-eating birds:**

Fruit specialists such as robins, waxwings, bluebirds, and mockingbirds rarely eat birdseed. To attract these birds, soak raisins and currants in water overnight, then place them on a table feeder, or purchase blends with a dried fruit mixture. To attract orioles and tanagers, skewer halved oranges onto a spike near other feeders, or provide nectar feeders.



**Nectar for hummingbirds:**

Make a sugar solution of one part white sugar to four parts water. Boil briefly to sterilize and dissolve sugar crystals; no need to add red food coloring. Feeders must be washed every few days with very hot water and kept scrupulously clean to prevent the growth of mold.

**Audubon QUICK REFERENCE SEED CHART**

SPECIES	PREFERRED SEED/FOOD											
	Oil Sunflower	Striped Sunflower	Sunflower Hearts	Niger (Thistle)	Peanuts	Tree Nuts	Fruit	Millet	Safflower	Flax	Cracked Corn	Suet Cake
Bluebirds												
Buntings												
Cardinals												
Chickadees												
Doves												
Goldfinches												
Grosbeaks												
House Finches												
Jays												
Juncos												
Mockingbirds												
Nuthatches												
Purple Finches												
Quail												
Siskins												
Sparrows												
Tanagers												
Titmice												
Towhees												
Woodpeckers												
Squirrels												

For More Information

- Visit the *Audubon At Home* Web site: [www.audubon.org/bird/at\\_home](http://www.audubon.org/bird/at_home)
- Contribute to conservation efforts by participating in citizen science projects like the annual Great Backyard Bird Count each February ([www.birdsource.org/gbbc](http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc)), or Project FeederWatch (<http://birds.cornell.edu/pfw>).
- Visit the Audubon Marketplace to view Audubon licensed products and publications: [www.audubon.org/market/licensed](http://www.audubon.org/market/licensed)

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

**NORTH AMERICAN BIRDFEEDER GUIDE**  
Robert Burton and Stephen Kress. Dorling Kindersley, New York, 2005

**BIRDS AT YOUR FEEDER**  
Erica H. Dunn and Diane L. Tessaglia-Hymes. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc. 1999

THE BIRD GARDEN

Stephen W. Kress. Dorling Kindersley Publishing Co. New York, 1995

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To conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity.

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Audubon

SEED AND FEEDER SELECTION GUIDE  
BY STEPHEN W. KRESS, PH.D.



Selecting Seed & Feeders

Audubon at Home Website: [www.audubon.org/bird/at\\_home](http://www.audubon.org/bird/at_home)

CALLING ALL MEMBERS ---- PLEASE COME TO JUNE 1ST  
YEARLY PLANNING BOARD MEETING 3 P.M.

JOIN US FOR SUPPER AND PLANNING THE NEXT YEAR  
AT PATRICIA YEAGERS! 5614 BYERS HILL, LAKE ELBO - FROM MANHATTAN GO EAST ON HWY 24, JUST PAST MILE MARKER 321 IS "LAKE ELBO RD" TURN LEFT (NORTH) AND GO NORTH UNTIL THE PAVEMENT ENDS, TURN INTO LAKE ELBO HOUSING DEV. IGNORE ALL RIGHT TURNS UNTIL YOU CROSS THE DAM, THEN TAKE THE FIRST RIGHT - "BYERS HILL" 4TH HOUSE ON THE RIGHT, CEDAR-SIDED

**A downside to bird feeders**

Backyard bird feeders have become almost as ubiquitous as garden hoses. One result: the northern cardinal's range has grown significantly since the early 1960s. Yet scientists know little about the long-term effect the explosion in feeders is having on bird populations.

So a group of biologists in Britain has pulled together a look at what is known. They find that most of the effects from supplemental feeding seem to be positive. But seed-laden feeders have the potential to trigger long-term changes in species' range and breeding patterns.

In reviewing studies from the past 30 years, the team finds that supplemental feeding led female birds to lay eggs significantly earlier than is typical for their species. For some birds, such as Florida scrub jays, this put the young out of sync with the natural food sources they needed at that stage of their development. For one species of flightless parrot in New Zealand, a feeding campaign to increase the birds' population actually led to the birds hatching more males over time than females.

The biologists add that some of the less desirable effects of supplemental feeding could be reduced if more people follow best-feeding practices, such as those outlined by [Project Feeder Watch](http://Project Feeder Watch), led by researchers at Cornell University. The results appear in the current issue of *Frontiers in Ecology*. Peter N. Spotts

Jan Garton



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If you do not want to receive the national magazine, but still want to be involved in our 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.

RARE BIRD HOTLINE: For information on Kansas Birds, subscribe to the Kansas Bird Listserve. Send this message <subscribe KSBIRD-L> to <list serve@ksu.edu> and join in the discussions.

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