

A Changing World for Kansas Birds

Bob Gress and Pete Janzen

Pete and Bob recently completed a five-year commitment to the University Press of Kansas resulting in the publication of *The Guide to Kansas Birds and Birding Hotspots, Second Edition, Revised and Expanded*. Kansas is a bird-watcher's paradise, boasting exceptional habitat diversity and a key location at the hub of the hemisphere's migration corridors. An astounding 491 avian species have been documented in the state. But this is a changing world for Kansas birds. Join us as we learn more about birds, birding, and the challenges facing our grassland species. Bring your books for Pete and Bob to sign. Books will also be available for purchase.

October Program



Bob Gress
BirdsInFocus.com

Bob Gress is the former director of the Great Plains Nature Center in Wichita and co-founder of www.BirdsInFocus.com. Bob has photographed wildlife in wild places throughout North America, Central America, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Asia and Africa. Over 5,500 of his wildlife photos have been published and are seen in a variety of magazines and in more than eighty books. Check out Bob's bird images at: www.BirdsInFocus.com



Pete Janzen

Pete Janzen is active in the Kansas Ornithological Society and the Wichita Audubon Society and is the author of *The Birds of Sedgwick County and Cheney Reservoir*, as well as numerous articles and papers devoted to birding in Kansas and Oklahoma. Pete has birded every county in Kansas multiple times and has recorded almost 150 species in all of them!

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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Inside

- pg. 2 Melanism
Dru Clarke
- pg. 3 Birdseed Order Form
- pg. 4-5 Golden Encounters - Eagle Peak
Afterword
Jay Jeffrey

Upcoming Events

- Oct. 7 - Board Meeting 5:30
Manhattan Public Library Study room #1
- Oct. 11 - Sat. Morning Birding
Meet at Sojourner Truth Park,
departs for birding at 8:00 am
- Oct. 15 - Bob Gress, Pete Janzen - *The Guide to Kansas Birds and Birding Hotspots* - Presentation by authors
5:30 pm - dinner with authors at El Patron
7:00 pm Program at Manhattan Public Library Auditorium
- Oct. 24 - BIRDSEED ORDERS DUE
Nov. 1 - BIRDSEED Pickup



Melanism

Dru Clarke

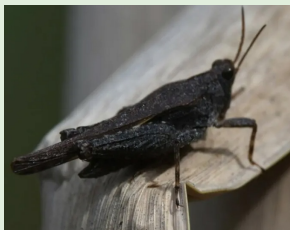
Most of us are familiar with the famous black squirrels of Marysville, Kansas, and have wondered why they seem to be concentrated there. As a recessive gene in most animals that exhibit melanism, there must be a lot of inbreeding among the squirrels in Marshall County. But Marysville isn't the only place they are found. Here in Pottawatomie County, melanistic squirrels occasionally appear, and, near the edges of our mixed woodlands, we see them with some regularity. Indeed, one, just the other day, scurried across the road in front of our ATV and disappeared up the trunk of a chinquapin oak. And a few months ago, I saw one high in the boughs of a mature tree near Hopkins Creek. It is always a pleasant and unexpected surprise to see one!

Both grey and fox squirrels possess the melanistic recessive gene, but here, it is the fox squirrel that sports the darker hued coat. Melanin, of course, is the dark pigment that makes fur, feathers, and skin appear black and, in some instances, it conveys an adaptive advantage over normal pigmentation. Melanistic animals, like black 'panthers' (melanistic jaguars or leopards), squirrels, and the Northern Fulmar are well known. (There is no separate species of 'panther', by the way.) Blackness can offer concealment from predators and, in colder climates, can increase heat absorption.

Anyone who has taken a genetics class or paid attention in general biology has heard of the environmental natural selection of the peppered moth in industrial England. The moth's population, through generations when industrial pollution was ubiquitous, evolved a darker form that blended with soot-covered surfaces, like tree trunks. After airborne particulate matter was better controlled, the lighter form became dominant again. This is termed industrial melanism.

Evidently melanism in some species, like felines, offers resistance to certain diseases. It seems that the feral stray cats who show up at our door are often black. They have survived without our care.

One of the most interesting forms of melanism is found in some species of grasshoppers. It is called "fire melanism." It occurs as an adaptive mechanism in some grasshoppers after a fire where the insects become darker and blend in well with the charred landscape. Look for them after a prairie burn.



fmcghee via iNaturalist

Darkly pigmented humans have **some** protection from ultraviolet radiation and from skin cancer but not enough to prevent sunburn or certain forms of skin cancer. It does inhibit the production of vitamin D, however, so longer exposure to the sun is required to produce vitamin D in the amount produced in a shorter period of time by a light-skinned person. Rickets is a disease caused by a vitamin D deficiency, and I think my white-skinned grandmother had a mild case of it as her legs were awkwardly bowed. She spent most of her life inside as a homemaker, seldom venturing into the sun. When I see old photographs of black slaves, I've noticed some very crooked legs and wondered about whether they were house servants and not field workers. The yin and yang of melanism.

The Northern Fulmar, a tube-nosed seabird, related to petrels and shearwaters, is found in subarctic regions of the North Atlantic and North Pacific. The dark morph, the Black Fulmar, lives in Arctic regions, where there is more permanent ice and snow, so it is certainly not an adaptive melanism for camouflage. Heat is a rare commodity, so the dark feathering may be a warming feature.

When I looked at buying a vehicle, I checked out the seat covering. If it was black, I discounted it as a purchasable one. Sitting on a hot seat is not my favorite. My hair used to be very dark brown, but its melanin has waned, and I am grey as a stormy sea now. Some folks lose melanin from their skin in patches, a condition called vitiligo, and no one knows the cause. I'll pretend that the loss – to my hair and to one's skin – is a sign of increased wisdom. Or, it might just be aging.



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Mail Your ORDER by Oct.24, 2025
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Annual Fund Raiser:

Bird Seed Sale

PICK UP your order Nov. 1, 2025 between 9am and 12n
UFM Community Learning Center PARKING LOT
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Bird Seed Sale 2025				
Black oil sunflower		OUR PRICE	Number of bags	Total
	10	\$8.42		
	25	\$18.52		
	50	\$34.96		
striped sunflower				
	10	\$13.62		
	25	\$29.26		
	50	\$52.76		
flint hills feast				
	10	\$13.52		
	25	\$26.72		
	50	\$47.32		
cheap cheap mix				
	10	\$10.92		
	25	\$28.22		
	50	\$36.32		
sunflower chips				
	10	\$18.96		
	25	\$44.16		
thistle				
	10	\$31.52		
	25	\$64.92		
finch mix				
	10	\$24.72		
	25	\$50.12		
safflower				
	10	\$17.92		
	25	\$39.12		
White millet				
	10	\$7.32		
	25	\$15.72		
	50	\$28.92		
peanut pickouts (shelled peanuts)				
	10	\$21.26		
	25	\$49.66		
medium corn chop				
	25	\$12.32		
	50	\$24.32		
suet cake				
	ea	\$2.24		
TOTAL				

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GOLDEN ENCOUNTERS - Eagle Peak (Afterword) By Jay Jeffrey

Summer, 2009. Driving through open range, small rocks and dust billowing up from gnarled truck tires, buzzing over cattleguards, making my way into Owyhee Canyonlands heading toward a river's remote launch site. Traveling by 4x4 in rough country, the sounds of shocks absorbing bumps, suspension squeaks, random metal-pings, with gravel grating and crunching under the rugged pickup truck; a sea kayak mounted on a rack atop its bed. Sunny with skies of slow-crawling patchy cumulus, occasionally distracted with dark specks of flying raptors and ravens. A region with conditions typically suited to fulfill my idyllic happy place. This route held special memories, great ones, but today my soul jumped back and forth from glowing radiant, to dim and somber. This was the beginning of a trip honoring the life and friendship of a person of my recent past.

Labor Day, 2007. I got the call. The call you need to be seated for. Jon and I wouldn't be sharing any more backcountry trips. A gutting loss, not to some misfortunate event during adventure or exploration, but by tragic idiocy on behalf of some drunk driver. Some pivotal moments in life are not recognized until far into the future. Some forks in the road are deliberated, some are hastily taken, some seem insignificant at the time, some go unnoticed.

Incredible wilderness experiences had been shared with Jon, some pivotal – in the golden way. "Sometimes life hangs on the narrowest of hinges." On Labor Day, 2007, the hinges were blasted off, a vaulted door soon installed and permanently sealed shut; this life path closed, no detours available. Not the golden way. That pivotal moment didn't lag; it was an immediate, atomic tectonic shift.

The 2009 plan was to provision a sea kayak, go solo, paddle to hot springs and soak in nature-sculpted rock bathtubs; seeking any available healing. Then paddle to Bobcat Beach, camp, and paddle upstream the following morning scouting shorelines for possible routes to the base of Eagle Peak for a summit attempt. Hot springs were soothing, healing vibes were illusive, but the trip's first day went as planned. Hiking high above camp I used binoculars to scan ravines and ridges across the river below the distant butte and sunlit Eagle Peak.

Jon and I had scanned the butte years ago, from this same hillside spot above camp. We saw golden eagles flying to, from, and over its peak; on one occasion seeing two at the same time. Hence the name we assigned it, Eagle Peak – a jagged-tipped rocky prow, forever plying the sky for its trailing bulwark of cliffs.

One long hilltop ridge looked to be a possible approach for getting to the peak's lower base. From the hillside vantage point, only the top half of that ridge was visible. I'd need to paddle upstream keenly looking for any drainage deltas or arroyos meeting the river; something to serve as an avenue accessing the upper slope leading to that ridgeline.

The morning began with the perky cold temperatures common to arid lands still in shadow. I pushed off from shore, delighted with a slight river breeze, cloudless skies, and surrounding canyonland views of natural artistic design. Paddling upstream I discover a deposition-outflow area formed from previous floods at a confluence of dry arroyos meeting the river, spreading a broad debris fan of various sizes of gravel and sandy-silt sediment, forming a delta overgrown with shoreline vegetation sprinkled with cottonwoods. I stash my kayak and use this alluvial zone as a gateway for hiking to the butte.

Beautiful weather accompanied my long morning hike, as I explored hill tops and troughs while progressively ascending to the ridgeline ending below the butte's bluff and summit. Many hills were riddled with otherworldly-looking bowling ball-sized prehistoric rocks, all dissimilar: some volcanic, igneous, or igneous-quartz creations, others appearing as glacial till remnants from moraines far away; many partially submerged in soils of various colors. All distracting me with multitudes of aesthetic designs – covertly exhausting my time.

Reaching the bluff, I'm met by a steep, convoluted craggy cliff, adjacent to a side slope littered with rock and boulders, all likely composed primarily of a rhyolite-basaltic mix. This slope also has patches of grass, short shrubs, crumbly soils, ledges; and talus and gravel eager to spill with gravity. I step into the shade of a giant boulder and look up evaluating both the slope's scrambling difficulty and distance to the higher daunting summit. Doable, maybe, but no apparent game trails.

My skin is dry, no sweaty sheen. I have little remaining water. What awaits at the slope's top, over the saddle at the peak's base, with any potential options for summiting – is hidden. The apex now looks much larger, more ominous – everything primordial. Upslope breezes are getting warmer, shade providing no protection. Scanning for changing weather, clear skies hundreds of miles away provide an emphatic stable forecast: mid-afternoon temperatures climbing, lots of sunshine, hot.

Common sense says, "No. Retreat." My soul's mission says, "Go. Slow and steady." I drink the last of my water, study the slope and decide on an invisible route, then commit to the ascent. Picking my way up, eyeing places to gain purchase with my feet, arms and hands are recruited at times while alternating between hiking, shuffling, scrambling, and climbing. At times I stop, reassessing the commitment. Step by step, slowly and steadily, I reach the saddle. Extending out from the saddle, a promontory blossoms into open air. I hear loose rocks falling, and 30-40 yards below see a bighorn sheep



"Eagle Peak"
© Jay Jeffrey

ewe on something she considers a trail; she looks up at me quizzically. Extending up from the saddle, off the side of the summit, 5 full-curl bighorn rams look down at me quizzically. In reply, I think to myself, "I know, I don't belong here."

Gauging my body's energy tank, I stand resting in the saddle. Out of nowhere, an adult golden eagle rises on an upslope breeze stopping at eye level, only 15-20 yards from me, completely stationary while kiting. The golden lies on the updraft with outstretched wings, making the smallest of furl adjustments, facing away from me. The bird then looks back at me over its feathered wings, just like many Wyoming goldens I'd observed almost three decades earlier. Except this time, it's as if to say, "You're not done." With a smile, I'm reenergized. I leave the saddle, skirting the side of Eagle Peak and scramble up its lava-birthing rock, weathered over eons; from a long, long time ago. I reach the summit, a zenith of immense personal significance – Eagle Peak.

Sitting down, I scrutinize the basin below: ravines, gullies, furrows, clefts, draws, arroyos, washes; and non-traversable terrain, including dead ends. This is serious. I'm out of water; it's a steep difficult descent and then a long hike back to my stashed kayak. I need the most direct and energy-efficient route. There's no energy reserve available to afford a mistake. A faint murmur inside me wonders if I have the necessary energy, even with the most direct error-free route.

My shirt and skin are dry, I can't take the shirt off because I'd fry from sun exposure; no lowered body temperature would be achieved. Far away, between two descending hillside ridges, I see a gap that connects with an arroyo behind another hill that forms a wash leading down to the delta and my kayak. The gap's arroyo and wash have soils with distinct colorations unique to that location: black, orangey red, shades of gray, bright whites – I'll know I'm in the correct spot if I can make it there.

Arriving at an expansive area in the basin, I find a narrow arroyo with a bank providing a sliver of shade, about shoulder-width, I lie down in it and wait for my heart rate to slow and my body core temp to drop. Then I resume, making the distant gap and entering the broad arroyo leading to the river. For half a mile I'm entirely focused on breathing and taking each step forward with as little effort as possible. At 200-300 yards from the river, black rocks begin to move, green shrubs begin to wave and shimmer, multi-colored sands blend and ripple like slow-moving stream water...there was no wind.

With 40 yards to go, I see my kayak. Without changing my gait or direction, while passing the kayak, I bend just enough to grab its front carry-toggle and without stopping drag it with me directly into the river. Keeping hold of the kayak's carry-toggle, I completely submerge under the water's surface; bringing my head up only to breathe, before dipping it back underwater. I immerse my head several times, allowing plenty of time for my body temp to drop.

Keeping my body underwater, I grab the kayak's perimeter deck lines and move to the sealed day hatch behind the cockpit and promptly open it and remove a water container. Careful not to drink too fast and choke, I begin hydrating...for quite some time. Physical exertion had been maxed out. Near the end, mental exertion had been maxed out; required to allow laser-focus on the task and not succumb to the mind-bending hallucination of moving rocks and shrubs. Persevering adversity, at a whole new level.

Returning to Bobcat Beach, I'm in early-evening shade, lying on my sleeping pad, continuing to nurse water with electrolytes. A motorized boat travels upstream, first boat I've ever seen here. The lone occupant gives a polite wave with a concerned stare, as if waiting for a sign, asking an unspoken question, "Are you alright?" Elevated on my elbows, still prone, I wave back, an unspoken answer, "I'm OK." Jon would've loved today's epic jaunt. Undoubtedly, we would have been better outfitted with appropriate hydration systems and joyful mindsets before and after the journey.

This trip honored my friend by me living vividly in a profound way, in a way representative of his life. I have flashbacks of powerful nature, tranquility; of serenity. These days, occasionally, I still drift into taking life for granted. Life. Golden, and not golden. It's a gift. It's fragile. It can be fleeting.

Flying close by, a male golden escorts my final day's paddle; eyeing me every now and then, while contour hunting along a steep, boulder-scattered slope below volcanic rimrock cliffs – before flying away after my return to waiting truck at an overgrown jeep trail. I hear chuckers in the far distance. Somehow, I feel I didn't just honor Jon, but shared this trip with him – taut in spirit. A priceless, exclusive, bonded epilogue. He will forever be a part of me and who I am.

NOTE: A photo of Jon paddling in foreground of butte and Eagle Peak was in the July newsletter, Golden Encounters, Part 3, p.5 (Prairie Falcon, Vol. 53, No. 11).

"In memory of Jon 'Jon Jon' Stravers, whose passion for raptors was unsurpassed and who loved and cherished the natural world." (from dedication page in the book, *Hawks at a Distance*, by Jerry Ligouri, 2011; Foreword by Pete Dunne).

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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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