

Winter Birding in Kansas

The striking Harris's Sparrow (*Zonotrichia querula*) is rarely found far east or west of the middle of North America. It breeds along the edge of boreal forest and tundra in north-central Canada, and spends the winter in the very central region of the United States.



photo by Dave Rintoul

Cool Facts

Because of its remote and restricted breeding grounds, the Harris's Sparrow was one of the last North American species to have its nest discovered. The first nest was found in 1931 at Churchill, Manitoba, by soon-to-be Cornellian George M. Sutton. The Harris's Sparrow is the only bird species that breeds in Canada and nowhere else in the world.

In winter flocks, Harris's Sparrows maintain linear dominance hierarchies that determine access to food and roost sites. The most dominant birds are the oldest males, and they also have the largest bibs. If first winter birds have their feathers dyed black, creating an artificially large bib, they rise in the dominance hierarchy.

From - <http://www.allaboutbirds.org>

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



prairie falcon

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Newsletter

Vol. 41, No. 5 ~ January 2013

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Upcoming Events

Jan 5 - Eagle Day Tuttle Creek (see page 4)

**Jan 7 - Board Meeting 6 p.m.
Home of Carla Bishop**

**Feb 4 - Board Meeting 6 p.m.
Home of Tom & MJ Morgan**

Feb 16 - Backyard Feeder Tour (see page 5)



Skylight plus

Pete Cohen

It's possible that when this issue appears we will be visited by the great P (Precipitation), but as I write the scene is Dry. A bit ironic in that even after Prohibition, Kansas, among others, was known as a "dry state," though I gather that persons seriously interested in alcoholic wetting were rarely disappointed. And when nature turns off the water spigot a few "speakeasies" remain available, a/k/a deeper wells, but as they deplete there are no midnight deliveries to replenish them.

Two years back I learned from a geologist working in Oklahoma's Arbuckle Mountains that the water being drawn out there fell to earth 10,000 years ago in the downpours that followed the last glacial retreat. More recently I was with two ranchers marveling at how a certain spring kept pouring while all the streambeds around were empty, and concluding that, despite appearances, part of these Flint Hills are a sponge.

Waters can move quite stodgily through the earth's crust, perhaps seeping deeply before rising by capillary action, in no hurry. The "sponge" feeding that spring might've been filled during the moist 1870s when there arose a short-lived myth that tilling the virgin sod altered the atmosphere so that "rain followed the plow." Except after a few years it didn't, and homesteads—all drawn square no matter the terrain, instead of in suggested ways to share water sources—were much abandoned.

Starting in 1893 the river Waingunga began to run through Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Books. When it got so low that a certain rock was exposed midstream, Hathi, the elephant, recognizing it was the Peace Rock, raised his trunk (as his father had in another time) and sounded a signal that was carried throughout the jungle by varied voices, all

proclaiming the Water Truce, whereby creatures of hoofs, and claws, and scales, and soft fur, and feathers, weak and emaciated as they had by then come to be, could all partake of the little remaining moving current without pounce or flight, until the river rose.

Meanwhile at Hovenweap in southern Utah, on a giant pommel-like boulder amid a rocky canyon that extends deeply past on either side, stands a condominium built of unmortared stones, looking like it could collapse disastrously at any moment, yet it has stood for hundreds of years. Plainly it was not merely a bother, but a peril, to reach, even for those who'd lived there. I've been informed that they were of peoples who'd lived further south in a dry region laced with flowing streams and where the buildings left behind are of easier access, reflecting, it would seem, a generally peaceful existence. About 800 years ago water became very scarce, and the peoples shifting north, began to live in fortresses. Then they disappeared, perhaps because their drought was implacable, perhaps for lack of a more cooperative response.

The actors in January's sky theatre continue cooperating perforce with the cross-currents of gravities and other forces to provide the Quadrantid meteor showers, with no guarantees. Any related streaks that appear will seem to come from where a hand holding the handle of the Big Dipper might be, basically in the wee hours of the 4th. They will be a diversion to Venus' act of vanishing into the morning twilight the way Mars will have faded away in the evening twilight earlier. As much a spectator as a performer, Saturn will be rising in Libra starting about the 10th. Which leaves Jupiter to roam across the sky all night as the BMOH (Bright Man on High), though he, having been his brightest in December will begin to shave off some luster, while renewing acquaintance with the fattening Moon on the 21st. The Moon will be new the 11th at 13a44, and full the 26th at 10p38.

©2013 Peter Zachary Cohen

Geese at Night

Dru Clarke



It was past nightfall when we got home and went outside to do evening chores. Mike usually does them by himself, but he's drawn the line at milking, so we both donned our muck boots and canvas jackets. The lights from the barn cast a warm glow on the corral where the Jersey, her calf and an old mare waited anxiously to be fed. Range cubes thudded dully in the rubber tub and Iris shouldered me aside to get to them as the heifer frisked about. Fumbling with the halter I managed to slip it onto the cow's bony head and secure it to a rail. Squatting close to her udder, I began what has become a nightly ritual. Her milk made a tinkling sound against the side of the stainless steel pail, the pitch lowering as more of the creamy liquid gathered in the bottom. I hummed "You are My Sunshine" as much to keep a steady rhythm as to calm (or perplex) her. She turned her head and watched me with a great glistening brown eye, but, thankfully, stood still.

Otherwise, the night was quiet. A northwest wind was picking up and the gusts swept up dusty leaves and swirled them about. A far off calling, a primitive musical sound, played by my ear: broken into stanzas by the restive wind, it came and went, like the swirling leaves. Canada geese were on the move. I imagined their v-shaped flight, a lead goose tiring and falling back, then re-joining the pattern on a tail of the v. Of course, I couldn't see them in the dark, so didn't know if the pattern persisted under the lightless cloak: does anyone know this?

Many birds migrate at night. These geese were winter visitors (from Canada's provinces or perhaps perennial residents of the Great Plains population) hence their nightly flights (not true long distance migration) from all cardinal directions, from fields where they feed, to more secure places of rest, like river sand bars. Moving at night guards against predation and total reliance on vision is unnecessary as it seems birds possess a "magnet in their nose" that detects the electromagnetic field of Earth, allowing them to navigate with precision through the sea of air. Research has discovered a molecule activated by light that forms an electric charge that can operate as a magnetic compass. But would there be enough light at night (from the moon or from the stars) to catalyze it? A night vision pathway seems to be highly active under moonlight (an avian form of "moonlighting")

but decreases during daylight. Polarized patterns of light, strongest at dusk, might act as a compass too. But, most intriguing is the possibility that birds use star patterns, as these constellations cycle around the pole star, to orient themselves. One would think the north star Polaris would be the constant, but when researchers under experimental conditions changed the center of revolution to Betelgeuse, the birds flew as if *it were the pole star: it wasn't the pattern of stars but the direction in which they moved around another fixed one.*

But, do all birds flying at night communicate with one another as the geese seem wont to? According to the Powdermill Avian Research Center, most songbirds do emit short flight notes when migrating at night. In fact, on a "good migration night," thousands of calls might be heard. A collaborative effort among Cornell Lab of Ornithology, National Audubon Society, and the Academy of Natural Sciences used NEXRAD radar imagery to monitor bird movements at peak migration times. (This technology may reveal the night flying pattern I wonder about.) Coupled with this was a network of several acoustical monitoring stations (on the east coast) to record high-pitched calls to later be analyzed for species origin. Bioacoustical monitoring can help estimate populations, peak passage times and patterns of flight calling. But woefully little research (estimated at 4% of the total literature on avian vocalization) has been done on nocturnal vocalizations of birds compared to diurnal calls.

Not only the voices of the geese are heard: when there is extensive cloud cover, the geese fly low, and the sweep of their wings, like those of a large-bladed wind mill, makes a rhythmic "shush, SHUSH, shush, SHUSH" sound. It is as if there is no one else on Earth except you and those birds and their sounds that seem to emanate from some distant time past: the moment could have been thousands of years ago, but is happening now, overhead, in our own time here. And, at moments like this, you feel very privileged to be alive.

©Dru Clarke November 2012 (with testimony from Mike Clarke who has heard their wings)

Eagle Day at Tuttle Creek

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Tuttle Creek Lake has scheduled its annual **Eagle Day for Saturday, Jan. 5, 2013**. The program will begin at 9 a.m. and run until approximately noon.

The program is free and open to the public. All participants should meet at 9 a.m. in the large assembly room at the Manhattan Fire Station, 2000 Denison. Dan Mulhern, biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will offer a short presentation about bald eagles migrating through and nesting in Kansas. Pat Silovsky, director of the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism's Milford Nature Center, will feature several live raptors in her discussion of eagles and other birds of prey.

Following the presentations at the fire station, members of the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society will lead participants on a bus tour through areas near Tuttle Creek Lake, with the goal of watching bald eagles in the wild.

Participants should dress appropriately for the weather, and everyone is encouraged to bring binoculars, spotting scopes, and cameras.

Tuttle Creek Lake's Eagle Day 2013 is sponsored by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Tuttle Creek Lake, Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism, and the Manhattan Convention and Visitors Bureau. Bus service and refreshments are sponsored by the Tuttle Creek Lake Association.

For more information, contact Steve Prockish at (785) 539-8511, extension 3167.



photo by Dave Rintoul

Quiz Answers: Juvenile yellow-bellied sapsucker, Coffee Bean tree



How did you start birding? Please send me your story! cinraney@k-state.edu or 15850 Galilee Rd. Olsburg, KS 66520

We started when stationed in Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri. Our backyard was the Ozark woods, birds were coming right up to our window. Our young boys asked **“what kind of bird it that?”** We got a bird book and then some binoculars and have been hooked ever since.

Cindy & Gary Jeffrey.

Backyard Birding Tour

February 16th Backyard Feeder Tour

Make your reservations now - there's only room for 30 people.

Call Patricia Yeager 776-9593,
or pyky@flintheills.com

Here is the process: Birders will gather at 8:00 a.m. at the starting location. At the beginning location there will be a place for participants to leave their cars. If you would prefer to be one of the 4 or 5 drivers please let Patricia know when you call for a reservation. We will divide into carpool groups and the drivers will be given different routes to the feeder tour homes thus not arriving at the same time at any one location. At 11:00 we will start heading to the host house for a soup lunch. Participants need to plan to take part in the entire experience and not "cut out early" as the host house will set a place for everyone. Then the participants will be returned to their cars at the original meeting location by 12:30p.m. Four to six houses will be on the route, depending on drive time between them.

If you would like to share your feeder birds and put your home on the tour please call Patricia Yeager 785-776-9593.



QUIZ



Can you identify this bird?

Can you identify this tree?

answers on pg. 4



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

Printed on 100% post-consum-
er recycled paper



Non-profit Organization
U.S. Postage Paid
Permit No. 662
Manhattan, KS 66502

Return Service Requested



Published monthly (except August) by the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, a chapter of the National Audubon Society.
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Also available on-line at www.ksu.edu/audubon/falcon.html

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. Website is 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, 66505-1932

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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