

Local Area Christmas Bird Counts:

Saturday, December 20, Manhattan
Mark Mayfield markherb@ksu.edu
785.410.3073

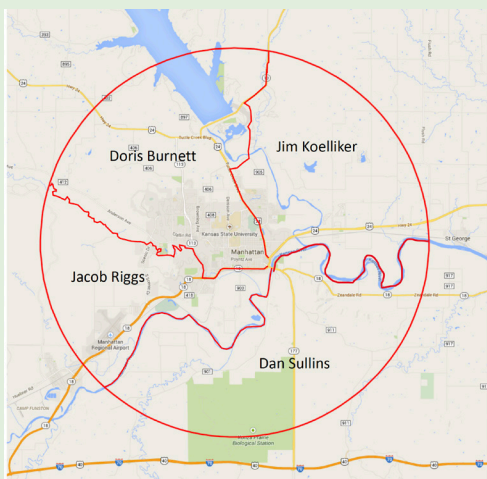
Monday, Dec. 22, Olsburg
Cindy Jeffrey cinraney@ksu.edu
785.565.3326

Sunday, Dec. 21, Wakefield
Chuck Otte cotte@ksu.edu
785.463.5485

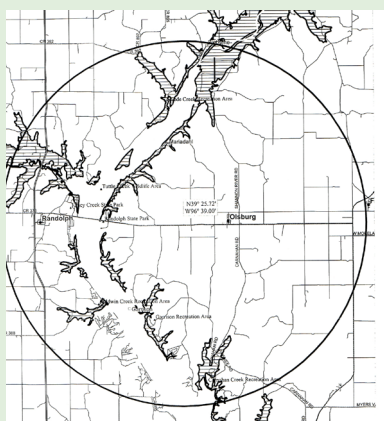
Sunday, Dec. 28, Junction City
Chuck Otte cotte@ksu.edu
785.463.5485

For a list of more Kansas CBCs go to:

<https://ksbirds.org/kos/2025CBC.htm>



Manhattan CBC area



Tuttle Creek Reservoir

Olsburg CBC area

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



prairie falcon

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Newsletter

Vol. 53, No. 4, December 2025

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Jay Jeffrey

Upcoming Events

Dec. 2 - Board Meeting 5:30
Manhattan Public Library Study room #1

Dec.13 - Sat. Morning Birding
Meet at Sojourner Truth Park,
departs for birding at 8:00 am

Dec. 20 - Manhattan CBC

Dec. 22 - Olsburg CBC



The Good of It

Dru Clarke

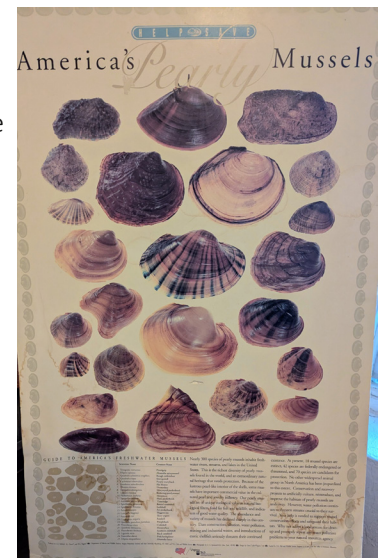
A pile of broken shells lay strewn at the entrance of the road leading to Rocky Ford. Discarded like so much trash, the pearly iridescence of the shattered shells seemed to appeal for help. But it was too late to save any one of them, their soft innards melting into the soil. A modern midden had been created.

NFHAS president had called me to report the find, knowing I was a champion of the most endangered group of North American animals, the freshwater mussel species. I had given numerous programs on mussels, toting a gun case filled with specimens given to me by Ed Miller of KWP from venue to venue. I had t-shirts printed with species named, taken from a field guide, hauling a boxful of them to a national conference in Chicago. My students wore them proudly. Kansas Wildlife and Parks Magazine just reported that six species are threatened, and ten are already on the endangered species list. This species found dead and broken, somehow torn from the substrate at Rocky Ford, was not one of them. But its role in that riverine ecosystem is unrecognized for its importance in maintaining water quality and acting as crucial nutrition for certain wildlife species. Some may think them 'unlovely', not possessing fur or big, limpid eyes, but we should think again of how they fit a perfect niche in our fresh waters.

Most species have stony irregular valves (shells) covered with a tough impermeable periostracum ('skin') that resists acids, corrosion, abrasion. But others are smooth, like polished stone, and sport bands of different colored stripes. Some, like the broken ones, have paper-thin shells that break like glass when roughly handled. It is a wonder that those can survive in any other than calm water. And their life cycle histories are as novel as they are. One group has on the fleshy edge of its mantle- the organ that secretes the shell - an appendage that is an exact replica of the host fish that the mussel's larvae must attach to and mature within, usually on the fish's gills. The host fish is attracted to the wiggling look-alike and, voila! the mussel discharges a cloud of larvae toward the host. The interconnectedness of different species - even of invertebrates and vertebrates - is often overlooked but is critical to the successful workings of an ecosystem. Because some, perhaps many, of these relationships exist underwater where we cannot observe them, we have a poor understanding of the intricacies of them.

Once there was a thriving industry of button making from the valves of these freshwater mussels, sustained primarily in our SE river systems in Kansas. (Iowa was a big button-producing region.) Then it was discovered that pieces of shell would provide ideal nuclei for cultured pearls and another industry emerged in Japan with the raw material coming from our freshwater mussels. Those industries contributed to the demise of several species, but nearly all today are threatened by excessive sedimentation, heavy metals, pesticides and herbicides that adhere to suspended particles that are then filtered out and concentrated by the mussels in their tissues, making them lethal traps for wildlife that feed on them. (Raccoons in the Wildcat Creek watershed used to haul mussels out onto silty banks and rocks, let them relax their adductor muscles holding their valves tightly shut, then return to feast on them. Smart critters.) Dams, erected to control flooding and store water for drinking and recreational purposes, have prevented migratory fish - many of whom are intermediate hosts for mussels - from swimming upstream, and landlocked mussel species have no access to those fish they have evolved to complete their life cycles on.

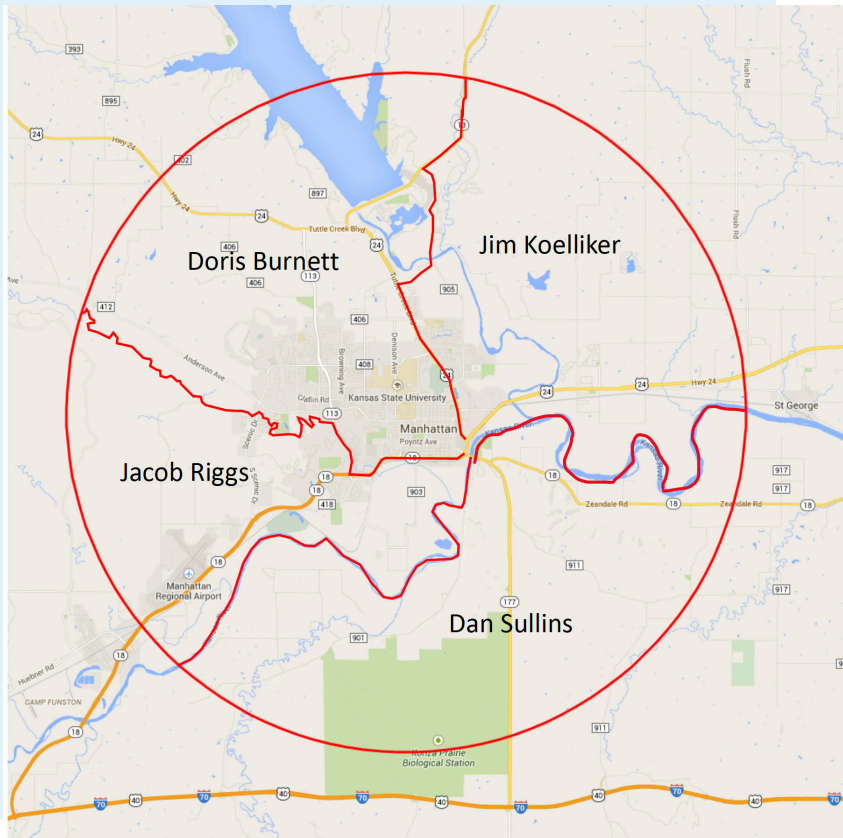
A research report (36 pp. total) on the water injection dredging project proposed for removing sediment from Tuttle Creek (released in fall 2023) summarized the concerns they had for downstream effects, much of which focused on fish population health. They also emphasized the potential effect - aggradation, thalweg channel change, etc.- on the Rocky Ford dam site. But, nowhere in the study are the mussels mentioned. After reading it, I kept seeing the midden of broken shells, summarily discarded like so much refuse and lamented that the research team had no concern for (or knowledge of) the importance of these creatures. Perhaps follow-up studies following the completion of the water injection dredging project will consider the overall biota of the reservoir and the river downstream. The only problem is that there is no data to compare future studies to. It is too late for that.



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Manhattan Christmas Bird Count

Dec. 20th, 2025



Manhattan CBC

Saturday, December 20, 2025

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Manhattan Christmas Bird Count Compilation and Chili Supper



Join the NFHAS and fellow birders after the day of birding for a potluck supper at 5:30 p.m. on December 20th, at the **College Ave. United Methodist Church, Fellowship Hall (1609 College Avenue, Manhattan)**. 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**.

Birding Paddle Trips - Emporia CBC

by Jay Jeffrey

“There is magic in the feel of a paddle and the movement of a canoe, a magic compounded of distance, adventure, solitude, and peace. The way of a canoe is the way of the wilderness and of a freedom almost forgotten.”

-- Sigurd Olson (1899-1982)

Once upon a time, in the mid '90s, I participated in an Emporia, Kansas, CBC. From a canoe. My good friend Brent and I had planned the trip: our put-in would be the Cottonwood River on the south edge of Emporia, and later, after its merging with the Neosho River, our take-out would be at the small rural town of Neosho Rapids. A full day, dawn to dusk. Previously, we'd used a canoe in a Manhattan CBC, on the KAW – we adored canoeing and the freedom and intimacy with the natural world that it provided. Bird observations from a canoe can be uniquely impactful.

The morning started sunny, brisk with crisp cool air, a faint mist above the river. The weather would prove brilliantly sunlit, outstanding throughout the entire day. The paddle started with a bang, drifting past an adult Cooper's Hawk perched in a tree not 20 yards from us; staying perched, just watching us pass by. That was a first-ever for us, super looks at an accipiter that wasn't flushed, when typically, only a fleeting glimpse was allowed as you urgently white-knuckled binoculars with fingers spinning the focus barrel – trying to get any field mark to definitively I.D. the accipiter as Cooper's or Sharpie. We saw a few more perched Cooper's from the canoe, never flushing – such a novel experience.

We recorded numerous, omnipresent, Carolina Wrens; I've not since approached comparable numbers. Distance-wise, our day's paddle was significant – 10 to 11 miles as the crow flies, probably double that if map-tracing the tightly winding river channel – certainly an excellent setup for exceptional numbers of riparian birds.

Around mile 10, we reached the confluence of the Cottonwood with the Neosho River. The winter-season currents of each river were clear, intermingling and mixing into one, picking up speed with authority. Still a sun-splashed day, bluebird skies, sparkling light reflecting off water ripples; the nascent current creasing, swirling, upwelling boils, littered with slurping, twirling and quickly disappearing mini-whirlpools. Soothing sounds of nature, moving water of rivers. We soon slipped over a small rapid and swung into an eddy on the downstream side of an island sandbar, with a mature old-growth deciduous woodland across the channel on the north bank. We heard loud clashing and thwacking sounds, like somebody violently splitting wood with an axe.

But the sound was coming from a different source. Our canoe was mostly stationary, floating in the eddy, only subtly moving forward or sideways with the confused currents below the obstructing sand island. Brent and I searched the forest curious as to what was making the noise. We heard a few additional sounds, like somebody throwing boards off a house roof. Still wordless, not expressing theories, we pulled up our binocs and slouched down settling into the hull, bracing ourselves by pressing into bow and stern decks and thwarts...scanning the woods. Still wordless, we simultaneously gasped with low utterances expressing surprise, followed by bulging eyes and open-mouths muted with profound intrigue. High up in a giant cottonwood tree, a Pileated Woodpecker vigorously inspected the tree's huge limbs. No, there were two Pileateds!

The largest woodpecker in North America, the Pileated, *Dryocopus pileatus*, the Latin name *pileatus* translates to “capped.” A stunning and flashy superstar of woodlands: boldly-colored plumage composed of head capped with a scarlet-red crest, face with black eyestripe, devil-red moustache, black body with white-striped neck markings; brandishing a long, stout, knife-like bill. In '92, during Florida field research, I pulled a pileated from a wispy mist net. In my hands, compared to all other netted birds, it was monstrous; crow-sized, wide as a pineapple; thick featherless dinosaurian legs with large feet of long powerful toes, tipped with long talon-like claws; and, up close in my hands, wielded a beak akin to a downsized short sword of an ancient Roman. Yet, in my hands, the bird was timid.

We watched the oversized woodpeckers use their short heron-like necks to snake back in coil, then explosively release, while anchoring the force with feet and claws clenched vise-like to the tree, striking with their dagger-like beaks used as potent wedges – masterful chisels; blasting huge slabs of dead bark off limbs the size of telephone poles, the slabs crashing to the ground.

The woodpeckers' bark attack included vicious blows, with their bill and head glancing off a tree limb, beak tips trailing the large slabs into air before heads retracted, as if guiding the slab to the woodland floor; while remaining cemented to the tree with clawed feet. The superstars flaunted their stuff.

Pileateds' primary food is carpenter ants which they lap up from excavated nooks and crannies using their whip-like tongues; and to a lesser degree, they also feed on larvae and adults of leaf and wood-boring beetles of various families (such as Chrysomelidae, Buprestidae, Cerambycidae). All found under and within bark, or in tunnels of limbs and trunks under bark.

Birding Paddle Trips - Emporia CBC

continued

Continuing downstream, we euphorically volleyed quips about what we'd just seen. Since the '80s, Brent often fantasized about disappearing into Louisiana's Atchafalaya Basin with a canoe, seeking to rediscover and obtain a verifiable observation of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker (larger than a Pileated, presumed extinct by most – but not all!). He was driven by a deep desire for discovering the magical rare, notoriety did not enter his mind. Our Neosho River observations were plenty magical for me, and conveniently in our Kansas backyard.

We paddled close to one riverbank, and although leafless, the tree canopy blocked enough sun to dapple light amongst the jungled understory. At one location, massive roots of a sycamore tree – with its peculiar bark, blotchy in white, gray, and brown – extended horizontally far out over the river water; they, also sun-dappled. Remarkably, an adult male Sharp-shinned Hawk was perched on the sycamore's pretzeled rootwad, close enough that I could've reached out with the paddle and touched him! He didn't flush; we just eyed each other as the canoe slithered by.

A mere 10-15 yards past the perched Sharpie, the canoe flushed several concealed and reluctant song sparrows; although staggered in timing, all quickly flew into tall bankside ragweed, sunflowers, and nettle. Out of nowhere the Sharpie appeared, braking in flight just before the tall weeds, briefly hovering, and then speedily and aerobically infiltrating the tight-knit weeds – a loud smack sound soon followed, with a few sparrow feathers floating in the air; the Sharpie perched on the ground, atop its prey. Flaunting its stuff. More euphoric quips followed. River magic.

Later, past sunset, only the horizon was illuminated. The canoe glided over a few gently rushing rapids, emanating soothing sounds. Drifting in relative silence, southerly, the silhouette of Neosho Rapid's westside bridge appeared; with Brent's truck also assuredly silhouetted. Soon, church bells rang in the nearby town, it wasn't Christmas Eve or Day, they signaled some other joyous purpose or occasion. For us, it was perfect, listening to the festive ringing while we strapped the canoe atop the truck – it was a Christmas Bird Count of a lifetime, near Euphoria, Kansas. Happy Holidays!

2025 © Jay Jeffrey



Pileated with its excavation efforts for insects. Photo © Thierry Grandmont, Cornell Lab, Macaulay Library, ML302506451; cropped from original.

<https://support.ebird.org/en/support/solutions/articles/48000952192>



Pileated Woodpecker. Print of Plate 111, Birds of America. John James Audubon (1785-1851). Print may be based upon Harvell engraving/coloring reproduction (public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:111_Pileated_Woodpecker_b.jpg)



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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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