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Bird Migration Celebration

Audubon presents a new four-part documentary series: "Birds on the Move."

[Watch on YouTube](#)

Lesser Yellowlegs. Photo: Alan Toczydlowski/Audubon Photography Awards

Birds on the Move

My Bird Journey - Aves Por Lo Alto

Celebrate Migration With Us

About the Bird Migration Celebration

<https://www.audubon.org/get-involved/bird-migration-celebration>

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

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

May 31 - Birding
Last Sunday of the month 1:00 pm
Meet at Anneberg Pk. by the second shelter
near the pond

May 6, 13, 20, 27 Help @ Alsop Bird Sanctuary Garden
MLK Jr. Blvd and Laramie 8-10 am

June 2 - Board Meeting, Manhattan Public Library
Study Room 1, at 5:30 pm



Drummers in Residence

Dru Clarke

Almost every morning, after 7a.m., through the west bedroom window, we see a red-bellied woodpecker clinging to the suet feeder. We hung it there just so we could capture a glimpse of a bird, and it is no understatement to reveal we are not disappointed with whoever it is who comes. This bird, however, has become a steady and reliable diner, and he hangs on tight as the wire cage swings to and fro, swirling his feathered self as if to unmoor him. Persistence pays off and when he releases his grip, the feeder flies backward as he launches himself through the chill air. We know it is a male bird as the top of the head is red as well as the back of the neck: the female has only a red neck, no red cap.

Photos by Dave Rintoul



Most days we get the smallest of the resident Kansas woodpeckers, the downy, as well as the more imposing red-bellied. The difference could not be more dramatic: in size as well as assertiveness. Both are permanent residents of the state.

We are aware of the presence of yellow-bellied sapsuckers, although they

are quite elusive, playing hide and seek on the backsides of trees. Near Manhattan High School's campus was a mature stand of trees, including some pines, that stood at the edge of Project W.O.L.F's grassland (now a parking lot – think Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi"). On one of the trees were neat rows of holes, about the diameter of a pencil, the industry of a sapsucker drilling for grubs. Sapsuckers are here in winter, but no longer gleaning grubs from that long gone stand of trees.

We know at one time pileated woodpeckers – the largest of the woodpecker clan to live in our state – frequented our woodland for we find large, vertical rectangular excavations in the trunks of

some trees. This is the work of the pileated. Their drumming is loud and we listen for it, but to no avail today. Drumming is one way to identify the presence of certain species, as the cadence, rapidity, and duration vary from one species to another. (See Spring 2026 Audubon magazine, p. 51 for an elucidation of woodpecker drumming). Drumming is thought to establish territorial boundaries, attract a sought-after mate, and keep the bond of a mated pair after they hook up. The tapping one hears from woodpeckers and an assortment of other birds is mostly to locate edible morsels hiding inside wood. The drumming done by ruffed grouse, however, is accomplished by wing-beating atop a log or rock. (We hear them often in the hemlock forest of our New Jersey homestead.)

In the same issue of Audubon magazine (spring 2026) is a piece on brothers Quentin and Owen Reiser, itinerant creators of the video "The Listers" which began as a spoof on "lifers," those obsessive birdwatchers who globe-trot to collect sightings of the world's birds. In their quest to succeed in their creation, they travel for a year – their Big Year - in a retrofitted Kia Sedona throughout the U.S. and amass an impressive collection of over 600 birds and astounding video seldom, if ever, seen in one production. One bird that kept eluding them was the three-toed woodpecker (most woodpeckers have four toes, two forward, two backward, to aid in clinging to and scaling tree trunks. It is thought that having only three toes allows them to lean further backward to be able to deliver a more forceful blow with their beaks.) There are actually several species of three-toed (I thought they were a made-up bird!). Having given up, they camped one night at a road stop and upon awakening in the morning, heard, then saw, a three-toed scaling a tree next to their vehicle! Their year ends in the Great Plains with a much welcomed focus on grassland birds, rapidly declining due to a variety of causes. Begun as a whimsical lark (no pun intended), the brothers have become unintended conservationists and have an ardent following of much needed young folks (as well as old folks like me). You can see the video on YouTube, "The Listers," 1:59', and it is free. Spoiler alert: be prepared for adult language and some unsavory (but funny) scenes.

The search—probably futile – goes on for the Ivory-billed woodpecker and its close relative, the Imperial woodpecker (last confirmed sighting seen and filmed in the Sierra Madre Occidental of Mexico). Some say they hear (and some say they've seen) the Ivory-billed in the remote swamps of the South, in Arkansas and Alabama, but there has been no widely accepted sighting since 1944.

So, we need to be content with our resident woodpeckers and continue to look for their signs and hang out suet for those who dare to venture close to us. Why would they not – we need to reassure them that they are welcome.

© 2026 May Dru Clarke

Bartramia longicauda

I love the upland sandpiper, and they have arrived!

The call of the Upland Sandpiper is a distinctive, long “wolf whistle”. It is often confused with the Long-billed Curlew call.

The Upland Sandpiper is a fully terrestrial shorebird that is rarely found in wetland or coastal areas, which makes it unique from other shorebirds. Instead, its preferred habitat is grasslands. Seventy percent of the breeding population of Upland Sandpipers occurs in grassland areas of the central and northern Great Plains (Houston et al. 2011).

Forages by walking briskly through shortgrass habitats, picking invertebrates and seeds from the ground and vegetation. Males perch on fence posts during breeding season and make graceful, circular song flights over the breeding territory, sometimes accompanied by females. Migrates in groups at night, often calling back and forth.



photo, NGPC

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Birding Paddle Trips

San Juan Islands (Part 3) - Sky Larks & Star Wars Birds

"...On his birding peregrinations, Kaufman slept under bridges, ate cat food, picked apples for traveling money. Then true ornithomania hit — he discovered 'listing': he became addicted to tallying birds, to adding to his species-I-have-seen list." — Book review excerpt of *Kingbird Highway*, publ. 1997, by Kenn Kaufman; *Smithsonian Magazine*, 1998.

Calming myself, I focused on strong deliberate forward strokes, as Leon and I paddled through a tidal stream with a series of standing waves; almost half the length of our 17-foot sea kayaks going airborne as we went over the crests into the following troughs — the sound of the rumbling rapids dominating the air space. We were headed to the mouth of a mile-wide pass separating Lopez Island from San Juan Island, which narrowed to almost a half-mile. With large differences between high and low tides, this area could form a maelstrom universe of extreme dynamic water, and our tidal rapids helped feed it.

This was the source that created the "orchestral growling of the surf" that accompanied Kenn Kaufman's cherished 1973 observations of Sky Larks (Eurasian Skylark) in grassy areas not far from the beach we lunched on. He describes the bird as the eloquent soloist of an orchestra.

"...The sound grew louder and then softened again, broke into loud warbling passages and then receded through quiet chirring trills; and the song went on and on, without pause..."

"The beauty of the song went beyond any details of musical formula: it was the spirit that was so moving." — Kenn Kaufman, in *Kingbird Highway*, 1997.

Kaufman was observing a population of Sky Larks on San Juan Island that became established in the 1950s; the birds had emigrated from a different population that was introduced in the early 1900s to Vancouver Island, B.C. (shipped in cages from Europe). However, the SJI Sky Lark population declined and was ultimately extirpated by the late 1990s. Now it's just an SJI ghost bird, but a species still very much enjoyed when reading Kaufman's book; it's easy to become engrossed with his literary mastery. And Sky Larks were a valuable and coveted bird-list tick, during his legendary 1973 Big Year done while hitchhiking which included his ferry ride to San Juan Island.

Fortunately, the winds were kind and I made it through the loud tidal stream and tumultuous island pass, and with deep relief I paddled into a calm bay as the tired sun descended toward the horizon silhouetting a large flock of migrating Surf Scoters as they flushed off the water flying fast and low; like beefy American Coots on steroids.

Early the next morning we paddled from the bay and across the pass — that treacherous gap between islands we navigated the day before — to the western side of Lopez; our timing was between tides and the pass was relatively tame, or at least as tame as a massive river's burgeoning currents during spring runoff. Approaching Lopez, we skirted an islet at a safe distance as to not distress the hauled out Sea Lions that covered it; massive bulls bellowing territorial dominance and flashing grizzly-sized dentition.

Overcast skies break open to clean blue skies; glassy smooth currents abut other currents creating friction at their seams with some places registering a dark sapphire blue in its choppy surface water. It's mesmerizing: reflective deep indigo waters like polished blown glass adjacent to vibrating shaky water as if an earthquake lay deep below — but alive — its surface glittering from the sun as if infused with golden electrical currents; shooting bands of light that reflect off our bodies, boats, paddles, sunglasses. The air: crisp, pure, cold, salty; and surprisingly windless this morning. Near and far, various seabirds whistle in flight or disappear in dives.

Mesmerized and immersed in it all, quite literally really; seated in a closed-cockpit sea kayak, only your upper torso is above water...you're travelling partially IN the aquatic system. A dozen birds are flying straight at us, above the water only as high as our heads. At the last moment the flock splits, some birds flying less than 3-4 feet from my head; we share piercing looks glued to each other's eyes. Not just any good-looking birds, but ravishing Rhinoceros Auklets in breeding plumage with a characteristic "horn" jutting up from an orange bill and white ornamental plumes flaring behind the face's bill and eye, streaked over a dark head. Flying in elaborate attire and fully radiant in morning sun. Their eyes: bright yellow-orange, penetrating mine. They are close relatives of puffins, another member of the Alcid family. And they nest in underground burrows with tunnels up to 20 feet deep. Was I really paddling in an archipelago, or was I dreaming of being in a Star Wars movie?

"Growing up in the Midwest, I had had little awareness of the birds in the Alcid family. Strictly coastal and mostly northern, they were remote and mysterious from a Kansas perspective." — Kenn Kaufman, in *Kingbird Highway*, 1997.

A natural high, when you got it, there's no mistaking it — and I was riding one; or paddling one. But I was still on the upswing. Continuing to paddle through the mesmerizing water, while bathed in the morning's crystalline sunshine, I notice small birds ahead on the water; maybe half a dozen, but sometimes only one or two. Dark or black and white, a seabird the size of a robin, they were disappearing by diving frequently, similar to the behavior of Pied-billed Grebes; I didn't see any fly.

Birding Paddle Trips

San Juan Islands (Part 3) - Sky Larks & Star Wars Birds

“Far from human eyes they navigated the depths, foraging freely beneath the waves, graceful as porpoises, mysterious as whales. And the Marbled Murrelet had a special mystery of its own.” — Kenn Kaufman, in Kingbird Highway, 1997.

I’d recently conducted a biological site assessment for a coastal region in Oregon, and during my review of scientific literature I’d become familiar with Marbled Murrelets, another species of Alcid. And here I was, as if thrown into a mystical crystal ball filled with blue water, sunny skies, and a magical seabird; paddling toward little diving robin-sized birds — Marbled Murrelets! When Kenn saw this species during his 1973 SJI ferry ride, it was still a great mystery as to where these birds nested; nobody knew, it remained a special unsolved bird mystery — unknown to science!

Soon after though, in 1974, the mystery was solved. A park maintenance worker along the California coast was climbing a huge redwood tree and discovered a small bird with webbed feet sitting on a large branch near the top. Coastal old growth coniferous forests: sometimes a mile or so inland, sometimes following rivers to the largest dominant trees, are where these diminutive seabirds nest. In a small mossy cup, on top of a large horizontal branch adjacent to the main trunk. Wookiee habitat maybe, but a seabird? Far out. Leon and I paddled amongst the diving birds, trying not to intrude, but they’d pop up every so often, sometimes within 10 yards of us, looking at us but not distracted or alarmed; before carrying on with another deep-dive fishing sojourn.

I was coming off my natural paddling high, but only slowly, being frequently distracted by perched and flying bald eagles along the coastal rocky evergreen forest; SJI hosts the highest density of breeding bald eagles in the continental United States. Our trip’s favorable weather allowed us to end a day early, typically NOT desirable but this became another fortuitous bonus: some locals from Leon’s home on Orcas Island secretly picked us up at a covert landing spot, in order for him to prepare and dress suitably for a surprise entrance — his attendance being an unanticipated gift at his wife’s 40th Birthday Celebration dinner! I was also invited and not allowed to decline. And my oh my: lots of laughter, great people, homemade multi-course gourmet food, great selection of quality wines...and countless experiences from the paddling trip still permeating my soul and oozing from my pores. Bliss. Life, real life immersed in the outdoors — can be better than Star Wars!



Rhinoceros Auklet (*Cerorhinca monocerata*), adult breeding plumage, by Mick Thompson; <https://www.flickr.com/people/mickthompson/>.



Rhinoceros Auklet, bill horn and facial white plumes; <https://www.seattleaquarium.org/animal/rhinoceros-auklet.>



Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*), non-breeding plumage, by Dubi Shapiro; Cornell Lab of Ornithology | Macaulay Library.



Marbled Murrelet, breeding plumage, on nest in large tree of coastal Oregon old-growth forest; by Brett Lovelace, Oregon State University.

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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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