

March Activity

Michel-Ross Preserve Clean up

March 22, 9:30 am till 11:30 am

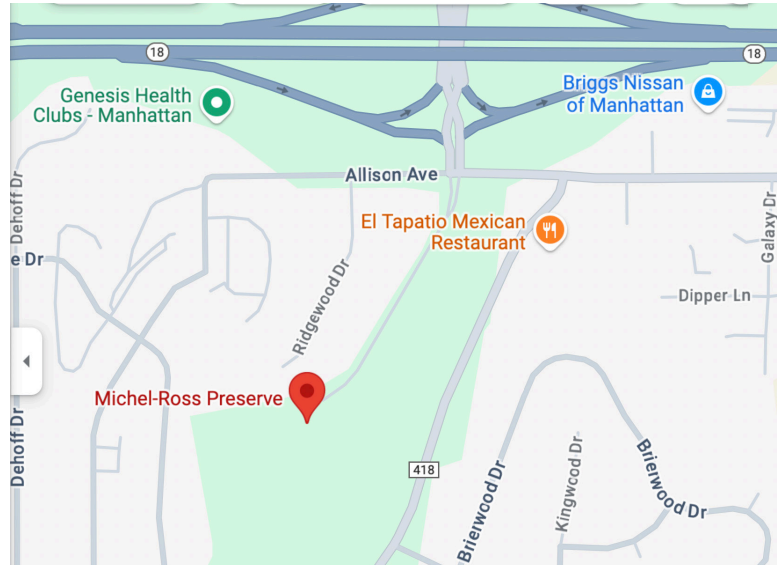
Ready to end hibernation?

It's time for spring cleaning at our properties. March 22 we will stroll the Michel-Ross Preserve to remove trash (and do a little birding, of course). Please bring your own work gloves. Trash bags will be supplied. Many hands make short work. Please help out.

Weather permitting, we will install a soft flexible electric goat fence around our bush honeysuckle control test plot. If you are strong enough to hammer a piece of rebar in the ground please bring a hammer and you will be able to help the goat fence crew.

After our labors we will lunch at the El Tapatio Mexican restaurant across the street. Remember to bring your lunch money if you want to join the group for lunch.

Meet at the dead end of Ridgewood Rd. at 9:30 am. We will work until approximately 11:30 am and then gather at the restaurant.



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



prairie falcon

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Newsletter

Vol. 53, No. 7, March 2025

Inside

pg. 2 -Memory of Wood
Dru Clarke

pg. 3 - Crossword puzzle
Patricia Yeager

pg. 4 - Golden Encounters - Aureate Hunter
(Part 2) Jay Jeffrey

pg. 5 - Golden Encounters - continued

Upcoming Events

Mar. 3 - Board Meeting 5:30
Manhattan Public Library Study room

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

Mar. 22 - Michel-Ross Preserve cleanup
9:30 - 11:30 am
11:30 El Tapatio Mexican for lunch



Memory of Wood

Dru Clarke

My sometimes unfathomable mother, lovely and guileless as she appeared, gave us a six foot long plank, repurposed into a primitive coffee table for our wedding gift. The plank had come from the Frenchtown Hotel (Frenchtown, New Jersey) from the wall paneling the renovators were removing to 'modernize' the establishment. I remember the food there was quite wonderful – soft shell crabs in season! Although 100 miles removed from the origin of salt water – and some delectable desserts as well. But the plank was extraordinary – one edge missing a large chunk that had been worn smooth – and an inch thick, etched with the history of its upright placement on a wall accessible to myriad customers who touched and, sometimes, marked it with their presence, smoothing it as they passed.

It appears to be from a species of pine, revealed by the knots, grain and the rich color. The legs, consigned by mom to a woodworker, are of honey locust, and do not detract from the heft and overarching dominance in our living room. It is really too big to be a fitting piece, but mother remains in our minds and hearts whenever we shift it to make room for our legs or place a consoling drink on its surface, regretting the bleached circlet left by dribbled alcohol.

On Broad Street, perpendicular to New York Avenue where I grew up, horse chestnut trees grew in the space between sidewalk and street. They were huge - tall and robust in girth- and in spring bloomed with bouquets of white flowers that yielded clusters of spiky green husks that, in time, split and released satiny chestnut brown nuts, smooth and soothing to a youngster's touch. They were not like the American chestnut fruits that were sweet and edible, but bitter and now I understand, poisonous, but, boy, were they fun to collect and carry around in pockets, offering some sort of sensual comfort by running them through your fingers and hold in your palm. It's hard to explain what pleasure they yielded.

In New York City, vendors tending street grills would roast American chestnuts, and passersby could purchase a bag of them to eat. The vendor would crack one for a customer to be able to get at the sweet meat. I never did appreciate the fragrance, a smokey, cloying odor, but an acquaintance who lived in the city for a while did. He reminded me of this recently, and I am grateful for it.



Regrettably, the American chestnut, a keystone species for the eastern deciduous forests, was decimated by an invasive assassin. A fungus that arrived on Japanese chestnuts in 1874. Our native trees could not fend off the airborne spores that wafted from the northeast throughout its range, all the way to the Mississippi and the Florida Panhandle. Lost was one of the most ecologically entrenched and commercially valuable natural resources in the eastern United States. Remnants exist in milled boards in beloved barns and farmhouses, in the beams and floors, and, I had hoped, in the coffee table in our living room.

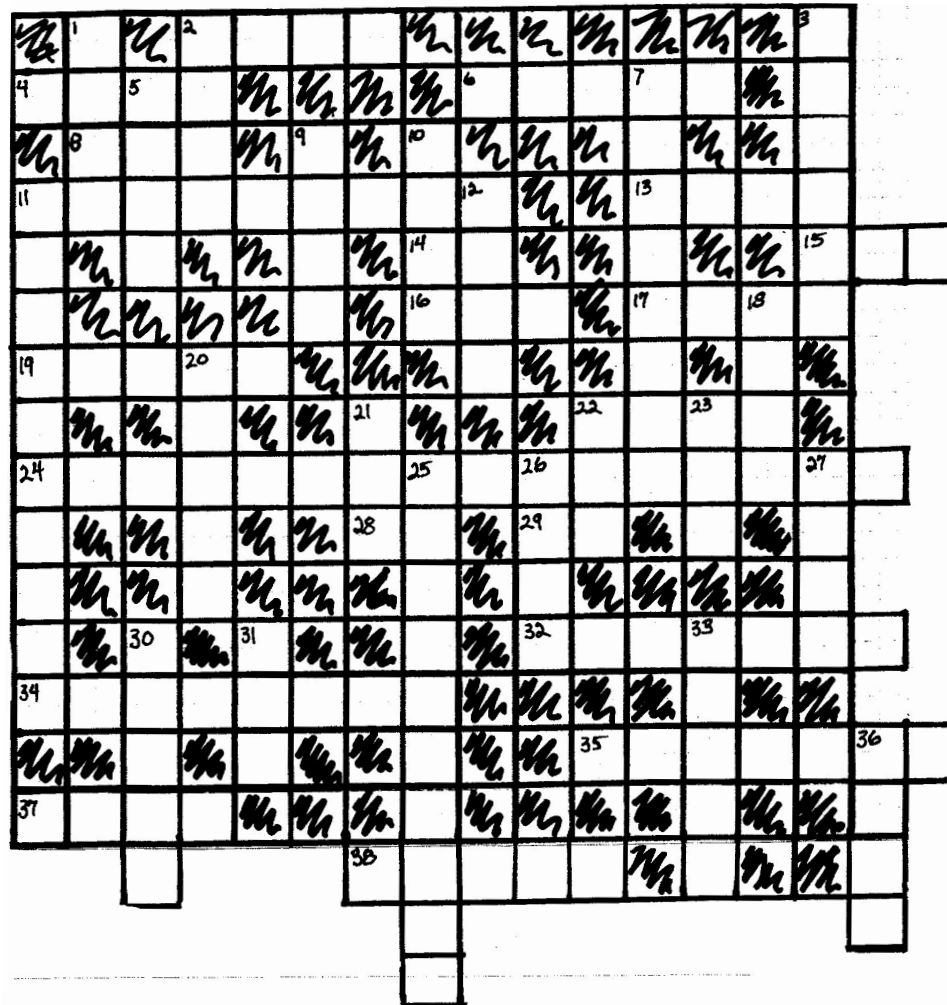
Efforts exist to promote the resurgence of this venerable tree, former monarch of our eastern deciduous biome (along with its array of oaks and other broad-leaved species), like the nursery at State College, Pa. Would that be a coup for science and ecology and life itself to restore this tree to its rightful place in our world?

I recently cut a burl from a dead elm tree to gift to a woodworker friend. It was worm-riddled and may not be worth even putting a tool to it to eke out a renaissance. The American elm, too, has suffered a kind of genocide, succumbing nationwide to yet another blight. The resisting trees bear unsightly drools, like an old person whose mind had long left his ability to control bodily functions. Dead trees, though, do provide a haven for creatures to overwinter, and for wintering birds to glean them, a sustenance we don't often appreciate.

Dead trees, in another form, like planks repurposed into furniture, give us a link to lives lived well, and hope that we, too, can leave a similar legacy when we pass.

Crossword Puzzle

Created by the Participants at Jan. lunch/birding event



ACROSS:

2. Small houses are made for this family
4. Mourning, Eurasian collared
6. Fabled transporter of babies
8. Female deer
11. Bright in summer, dull in winter, local feeder favorite
13. White, Glossy, White-faced, Scarlet
14. Sound of disdain or amusement
15. One is groovy, one is not
16. Fluffy feathers result in near silent flight
17. Smart test participant
19. Their feathers are sacred to many native peoples
22. Tusked pig
24. Jan. 5, 2025 (two words)
28. Soil information helpful to gardeners
29. Former
32. Avian urban dwellers
34. Two of this family are found locally in winter. Both are vocal in winter.
35. A hawk-like bird with owl-like face.
37. What we wish the snow would do.
38. Large long tailed colorful noisy bird with featherless face

DOWN:

1. A bird selected as a character in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
2. Menace or asset is defined by the person who encounters it
3. A different kind of puzzle
5. Small herbivore that may gnaw on bird seed below the feeder
7. Colloquial name for a Yellow-bellied cuckoo
9. Swallow-tailed and Mississippi have been seen in Kansas
10. Canyon talk
11. This bird species sometimes uses bait to attract fish
12. Large diurnal raptor
18. Slimy vegetable
20. National plant of India and Vietnam. Seeds can remain viable for many years.
21. Line, tie, code
22. Turtle species
23. Stern of ship
25. Bird found in U.S. primarily at the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. Hint: dance/6th tone/California
26. High tide is lower. Low tide is higher.
27. All five species of this family are found in North America. You may hear its eerie call across a lake.
30. Long-legged shorebird. A summer Kansas resident. Elegant even though it picks at it's food.
31. Closely related to Crows. Insider hint: In the families of both Cindy and Chuck
33. Great, Snowy, Cattle
36. Escape route

Answers in April issue (or if you can't wait visit our website nfhas.org)

GOLDEN ENCOUNTERS – Aureate Hunter (Part 2) Jay Jeffrey

“The subtle beauty of this magnificent bird belies a dark reality. The golden hackles hide a brain born to kill. The soft grays and browns that paint each mottled pinion in patterns complex and unique also stiffen the wing and tail for the daily task of administering death.” – David Ellis

A spring day in remote Wyoming, 1997, warm dry air, atop a long barren-surfaced tabletop ridge, bordered on its sides with steep slopes descending into sagebrush; easterly aspects with some patches of aspen and mountain mahogany, interspersed among slowly-melting deep drifted snow banks. Walking along meandering transects for systematic coverage of the tabletop, in search of Mountain Plover nests. Cerulean skies with fast moving cumulus not far overhead, large cloud shadows ghostly crossing the ground being surveyed. If it were a clear bluebird sky and a dark shadow crossed the ground, beware, there may be a grim reaper in the sky – a Golden Eagle, hereafter referred to as a golden(s).

Plover nests in this harsh environment, gravelly bare ground with scant grasses and forbs, far from wetlands, may seem unusual – it is. Mountain Plovers are rather unique, shaped like a Killdeer but smaller and uniformly tawny fawn-colored, blending perfectly into their surroundings, especially when incubating eggs. They run from nest when approached, but do so when you’re 30-40 yards away, and if you don’t see this immediately, they are yards from the nest in seconds. It’s imperative to see the initial flush and then laser-focus your eyes on the flush spot, not letting your eyes leave that mark as you walk directly to it regardless of what may be at your feet or in your path. The nest and eggs are indescribably camouflaged, when within a yard of the flush site you stop to scan every inch of ground looking for the most indiscernible sand, gravel, or micro-twigg clump. Time passes slowly. If unsuccessful, you take a few steps forward and repeat. When successful, you have discovered three small eggs, sandy-cream colored with dark spots. Discovery is highly rewarding, a successful expert-level Easter egg hunt if you will.

Approaching a barbed wire fence, I discover the hanging dried remains of a Pronghorn fawn – skin, hooves, head – intertwined with mangled strands of wire; juvenile remnants of our fastest land animal. Ideas, possibilities answering this mystery, speculation, but knowing the past reality will remain an unresolved case. But I wonder about a golden, chasing or harrying a fawn so effectively as to run it into the fence. Pronghorns won’t jump fences, but will crawl under the bottom wire if possible. Only recently, at that time, had I heard about goldens killing Pronghorns. It seemed so remarkably astounding, a bird of prey killing an ungulate, and the fastest one in the Americas! But later I would learn that killing a Pronghorn is relatively small potatoes for goldens.

Regardless of hunting abilities, I was enamored with goldens. I’d literally spent countless hours conducting 30-minute raptor point counts at fixed stations along this tabletop ridge, each spaced roughly equidistantly along each side of the ridge atop steep slopes, performed at different times through the day. The ridge was probably 5-6 miles long. Observations of goldens were relatively common, and typically exuded flying power and grace. Called “Undulating Flight,” goldens’ can display a mesmerizing territorial flight (when a golden intruder might be seen far away), at times flown in gale winds, where the bird swoops deeply down into a transparent trough and up to an invisible summit, then continues repeating this flight as if following the route of a linear roller-coaster. I observed this several times, always left in a trance.

During some point counts I’d scan and scan with my binoculars, not seeing a raptor for miles. And then a golden would raise into the air 20-30 yards in front of me as if pulled up by a string, the bird actually adjusting only the furl of its wings to utilize the wind-updraft along the tabletop’s side-slope; flying but hovering fixed in space -- completely stationary (hence the term “Kiting”).” Stealthy, sometimes completely surprising me. Like a fighter jet quickly raising out of nowhere to chaperone the flank of a slower large aircraft. The golden often looking back at me over its feathered wings, as if to say, “You wish you could do this.” And I did, and I do. On some of those days, wind speed was over 70 mph. On other days, I might see a golden soaring a quarter mile overhead; some have been known to soar 4 miles high.

Golden Eagle launching from perch. Photo of reprint of painting by Russian artist, Vadim Gorbatov.



Continued on page 5

GOLDEN ENCOUNTERS

They're like a big Buteo hawk. No, they're not. They weigh 8-14 pounds with a wingspan averaging 6 to 7+ feet (Lebron James is 6'9" tall). Let's start at the bottom, which is actually their top predatory tool and weapon: taloned feet. With toes spread, goldens' feet are about the size of a mid-sized human hand with fingers spread; without talons. With talons, larger than large-sized hands. Per foot, goldens' have three toes forward and one backward (called the hallux). Without your pinkie, grab a tennis ball -- that's how goldens articulate their toes. Talons are around 2 inches long, the hallux (rear toe, our "thumb") is longer, up to 2.5 inches; longer than a Bald Eagle and shorter than a Harpy Eagle. Grizzly claws are 2-4 inches in length.

With feet clenched, goldens' can essentially lock their grasp due to a teeth-and-slot ratchet-type gear mechanism between a lower leg tendon and its surrounding inner sheath. Grip strength reporting varies, as does confirmed validity, but human hand gripping power is reported to be 65-105 PSI (pound-force per square inch). A Rottweiler's bite at 315-329 PSI which is more powerful than a Pit Bull. An African Lion's bite at 580-1000 PSI. Grip strength for a single golden foot has been reported as 750-800 PSI, or another range reported was 900-1200 PSI. Within moments, a golden could probably pierce, crush, and deflate a soccer ball with one foot.

Talons of goldens are very sharp; their feet extremely formidable. The range of potential prey and different hunting techniques used by goldens is astonishing. They are the apex of aerial Apex Predators, and as such, true harbingers of death.

Part 3 of this series will dwell into the diversity of goldens' flight, hunting tactics, and exploits; and share an encounter not to be forgotten in my lifetime.

"To understand the Golden Eagle is to immerse oneself not just in killing, but in killing by extreme violence. The Golden Eagle should be depicted as precisely what it is." — Russel Galen (David Ellis' literary agent)



Golden Eagle taloned feet, Human hands.



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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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