

Good News!

We are excited about the K-State Birding Club and have met the President Jacob Rigg and Vice President Colby Karnei. The Club has already taken part in the Christmas Bird Count, and we are helping them go to Cheyenne Bottoms for the Birdathon. One of their members, Jared Johnson, is an accounting major and has agreed to be our treasurer (at least as long as he is here in school!) These young people are full of energy and passion!

Most of their members do not have binoculars, so one of our first projects is to get them some. If you have some no longer used binoculars laying around, please consider donating them, so we can give them to K-State Student Birding Club.

If so, contact one of the board members:

Patricia Yeager - pyeagerbirder@gmail.com 776-9593

Cindy Jeffrey - cinraney@ksu.edu 565-3326

Merry Bower - mdbower@ksu.edu

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



prairie falcon

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Newsletter

Vol. 52, No. 9, May 2024

Inside

pg. 2 - Skylight

Pete Cohen

pg. 3 - A Good Wind

Du Clarke

pg. 4-5 - Lethal Beauty - Hazy Horizons

Jay Jeffrey

pg. 5 - Michel-Ross cleanup #2

Upcoming Events

May 7 - Board Meeting 5:30 pm, Manhattan Public Library

May 11 - Migratory Bird Day - focus on the importance of insects

SAVE THE DATE:

June 9 - Birds of Australia - Richard Vanderlip 2:00 pm
Groesbeck Rm. Manhattan Public Library



Skylight plus

Pete Cohen

More American than apple pie are the creatures we spell out as “coyotes”, though how we pronounce the word seems to depend on our personal background.

Some say “coy-YO-tees”, others “ky-YOTES”.

Several centuries ago the emigrants who crossed the Mississippi from the northerly eastern side of the North American continent encountered populations of an animal that was nothing quite like anything they’d seen before. Generally, for lack of a better term, they began calling them “prairie wolves”, and generally describing them variously as cowards, tricksters, and/or rapacious threats. Not until travel began on the Santa Fe Trail did the Spanish word “coyote” appear in English writings. One diarist wrote it as “collote”, which confused those who did not know that the Spanish double ‘ll’ is pronounced as a ‘y’. Another, apparently with a French background, wrote of a “cayebut”

Meanwhile, controversy arose then over whether this was a separate North American species or just an American jackal. That it is a separate American species now seems settled, and in 1823, Thomas Say, one of the 19th century explorers and a promoter of that view, gave it its Linnaean Latin name of “*Cannis latrans*”—the barking dog.

The foregoing information comes from a 2017 book titled “Coyote America” by Dan Flores, an emeritus professor of history (Basic Books, New York). That designation calls to mind an occasion years back when I was exploring horseback the pastures surrounding our place in the Flint Hills. I heard, then saw, a coyote moving this way and that atop a knoll and emitting what I could not describe as anything else than a bark. It kept on continuously as I came nearer, passed, and left behind what I felt was clearly an individual with a strong grief or grievance, its tone as recognizable as in any human. It was a feeling of kinship, despite our differences.

Thus I was surprised much later when our domestic dog of the time chased a coyote who was apparently unfamiliar with the territory, for it became cornered where the creek made a sharp bend beneath an unclimbable bank. It then sought protection amid the cage-like array of exposed roots of a tree that the creek’s periodic surges would eventually take down. Our dog demurred from pursuing the matter and wandered off, while a son and I were given the chance to come literally and closely face to face with the fugitive. In my recall its eyes were a solid orange. There seemed no

pupil (or perhaps one closed up), no opening into the coyote’s inner self, no apparent recognition by it that we were there. There was no more sense of kinship than with the Moon. It was of another world.

With those two events I was a partial example of the larger relationship of humans with coyotes through the ages. Only partially, because I didn’t revere the coyote, as have the Aztecs and other societies, nor did I despise it, as have and do still others. There is more to say about that, for next time.

To start this month in the early eastern dawn of the May 1st, Saturn should be notable above a dim reddish Mars—and below Mars and to the left above a low horizon a sparkle of Mercury might be found. By the 4th in the same time frame Saturn and Mars will be bracketing a waning crescent Moon, and Mars will hang around above the Moon in the morning twilight of the 5th. At month’s end, Saturn and the Moon will hold hands in the dawn of the 31st.

The Moon’s visits ahead include the Gemini Twins the 12th, Regulus (the bright star of the spring’s mid-sky-prominent Leo the Lion constellation), the 15th, Spica in Virgo (just behind and lower than the Lion’s tail) the 18th, and Antares (the reddish heart of Scorpius (poking its head up in the southeast from whence it will extend into southern prominence through the summer).

StarDate suggests taking note of Arcturus, the fourth brightest star in the sky. It shows strongly at the base of the kite-like formation of Bootes, regarded as representing also a plowman with the dual duty of guarding the Big Dipper (a/k/a the Big Bear—Ursa Major) whose handle/tail ends just to northwest a bit. Arcturus’ diameter is said to be 25 times that of our Sun. It’s clocked as moving at 225 million miles per hour, apparently a common speed in the universe. And since it’s only a hair-breadth 36.7 million miles away, its motion can be detected amid the other much more distant “fixed” stars. It has shifted twice the diameter of the Moon in the past two million years, getting closer to us. I find a reference that in 4000 years it will be only a few hundredths of a light year nearer. Likely correspondingly brighter then, but scarcely worth putting off enjoying gazing back at it now.

The Moon will be new at 10p22 the 7th, full 8a53 the 23rd.

© 2024 Peter Zachary Cohen

A Good Wind

Dru Clarke



One hears often about an ill wind blowing: it conjures up images of devastating tornadoes, ripping gales at sea, straight force blows mowing paths across the landscape. An ill wind portends personal loss, a tragedy waiting to happen. But, what of a good wind? Is there such a thing?

Wind enlivens the trees, causing limbs to shriek, sob, moan, and squeal as they creak and rub against each other. Hearing these eerie sounds, one swivels one's head, caught up in the need to know their source. It is the trees, talking through the voice of the wind. Wind can loosen a rotten bough and send it careening landward, creating a horizontal seat upon which to rest or a novel scratching place for livestock to rub their hairy heads and bellies. The bough returns to the earth and may become a sett for a family of badgers or a hollowed-out log where a night visitor may doze during the daylight hours. It may, in time, become earth itself, dissolving into humus to nourish new limbs.

Wind carries pollen, the gametes of male flowers, in streaming currents to distant sites, by chance encountering a female flower of the same species whose quiescent ovules are 'completed' by a dusty mote. People curse this windborne cloud of sunny dust for its allergic properties – juniper, mulberry, ragweed, some of the most suspect culprits – but, all the same, wind is a necessary vector. (The word pollen derives from the Latin for 'mill dust, fine flour', Greek, 'porridge', Sanskrit, 'ground seeds', Russian, pepelu, 'ashes'.) Why most pollen we recognize is yellow (it can also be red, purple, white or brown) or sometimes blue is probably because these colors attract insect pollinators.

But wind doesn't parse the fine differences among the grains. Our grasses are wind pollinated, and the prairie cannot be as it is without wind or grass. What more fitting description than Willa Cather's in "My Antonia", "As I looked about me, I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all

the great prairie the colour of winestains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country, seemed, somehow, to be running." Thank the wind for that. Even in the sea, the waves that bring the seaweeds to shore to lie in drifts are created by wind.

Some seeds are windborne to new locales. What joy a child shows as she/he blows on a dandelion head gone to seed to watch raptly the feathery parachutes float away downwind. As a child myself, I split the plump end of a maple seed – a twirling papery semaphore – and stuck its sticky envelope on my nose, then walked around pretending to be Cyrano (although I didn't know who he was at the time).

There has been much in the news recently about the solar wind that emanates from the corona, the wispy crown surrounding the sun. An extraterrestrial wind, this solar energy protects us from cosmic rays from other sources in the galaxy, though most attention it gets is disruption to our telecommunications networks. But who could not be thrilled to observe the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights, when the wind's particles enter our atmosphere? The corona and the wind it generates may give us new information as scientists observe the April 8 solar eclipse.

Perhaps a not entirely welcome wind comes at night and whistles around the corners of the house, loosening a screen and sneaking through the cracks of a warped window frame. It is an eerie banshee of a wind and gives pause to one's reverie. My husband's doctor wrote a book entitled "How to Sleep on a Windy Night", and while I haven't read it, I think I'd rather lie awake and listen to it do its gyrations and incantations, livening the darkness and lending an air of mystery to night. I can always sleep later, after the wind moves on.

© 2024 Dru Clarke



Lethal Beauty – Hazy Horizons

Jay Jeffrey

This completes the Lethal Beauty 4-part series on American Kestrels, preceding articles include: Prelude (Prairie Falcon, PF, Jan 2022), Adornment (PF, Feb 2022), and Rapere (PF, Apr 2022). Note: the June 2023 Journal of Raptor Research was a special edition on American Kestrels.

The sound of tires traveling over gravel, in a car or on a bicycle, I find immeasurably soothing: journeying while enjoying the scenic landscape and the season's unique characteristics; its birds, plants, trees, insects, reptiles and amphibians, mammals, the day's weather – muddy and cold, dry and hot, muggy and moist – including whatever the seasonal climatic forces dish out; and everything else that is unknown and unpredictable, mysterious and exciting, explorative and adventurous – the anticipation of all that, courses through my veins once the sound of tires on gravel begins.

It was sunny, cold, in late December after a recent CBC. Lost in the sound of my truck traveling on a remote gravel road, I crested a steep hill and immediately saw a bird perched in the middle of the road; my anti-lock brakes vibrating and grumbling as I slammed the brake pedal to the floor. Binocs flew up, it was an American kestrel with a dead rodent, a large dead rodent. The bird was hesitant, I grabbed my camera laying on the passenger seat and fired off a few photos aimed through the windshield.

The bird then launched into flight carrying the small mammal. With strong wing beats the falcon stayed only inches above the ground until just before a roadside fence when it shot vertically up in steep flight, like a bush plane pilot taking off from a short field or small lake runway only to just barely clear treetops. The falcon came to rest a few feet above the fence on a branch of an adjacent locust tree, claspings its cargo – a trophy-sized deer mouse.

This adult male kestrel, with its perch composed of multi-colored lichen-clad bark, and shadows from other branches crossing its sunlit plumage, was an image through quality optics that filled me with euphoric awe; a coupling of exquisite beauty and culmination of a lethal predator-prey finality.

Later, I cracked open the Crossley ID Guide to Raptors by virtuosos Crossley, Ligouri, and Sullivan. While addressing American kestrels, they start with a plausible statement made by fictional observers, “Oooh, look at the Kestrel sitting on the fence, bobbing its tail up and down...it’s so cute!” The authors then follow with what they suspect a Kestrel might think: ““Why do they call me cute? That really irritates me. I’m not cute, I’m a bad-ass, I’m ferocious...don’t they know I’m the most efficient predator in North America? Despite my size, I can catch it all – insects, mice, snakes, birds, whatever I want. How many birds do you know that can hover incessantly, pounce on a mouse, tail-chase a sparrow, or cross the Delaware Bay without breaking a sweat? Sure I’m colorful, but my expression is fierce, not “cute.”” I laughed out loud, that pretty much summarized what I’d gleaned from research and personal kestrel observations. But can’t they still be cute?

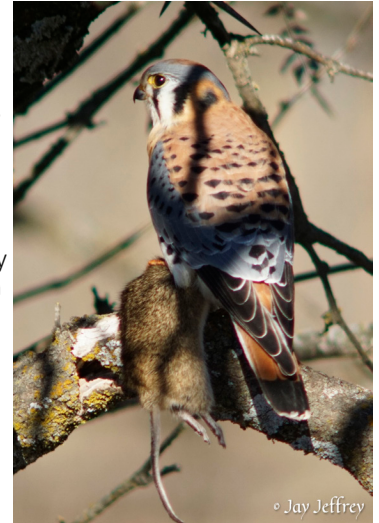
Animals such as young lions, tigers, and grizzly bears have all been called “cute.” These youngsters still bear lethal fangs. Even little hyena pups can draw an “Aw, shucks, it’s so cute.” Yah, *those* hyenas, highly intelligent carnivores known for all kinds of raw butchery and seemingly indiscriminate bloodbath. Gruesome they may appear, vital to ecosystem services they are. Beasts they are, beauties they’re not.

As mentioned in a previous essay, one American kestrel was observed repeating a sequence – described in vivid detail – performing electric-fast actions on domestic chicken chicks. These actions included an initial neck snap and then a coup de grâce involving a precise lobotomy and medulla-scrambling technique. With kestrels’ mammalian prey, a straightforward beheading may follow the neck snap. If reviewed in slow motion, my guess is that a “cute” appearance to these beauties may be much more difficult to ascribe.



The falcon's fang: all falcons possess a unique beak when compared to other birds of prey (except kites and shrikes, which also have this type of beak). What makes it unique is the “tomial tooth.” Tomia are the cutting edges of bird beak mandibles (upper maxilla and lower mandible), covered with a horn-like keratin sheath. Raptor beaks have sharp tomia with a significant down-curved maxilla (upper beak tip) -- for eating; disassembling prey, and pulling, tearing, shredding, and cutting meat.

In front of the sharp clawlike beak tip, falcons' maxilla have an additional sharp triangular projection – the tomial tooth. Which I call the falcon's fang because to me it resembles a mammalian canine tooth, used for cutting, tearing, and snapping necks of prey. And the falcon's lower beak has a corresponding cleft, or notch, an indentation that the fang nestles into when the bird's beak is closed. Together, the fang and cleft may be used to more precisely and effectively snap vertebrate necks and shear spinal cords – to kill.



© Jay Jeffrey

Lethal Beauty – Hazy Horizons

Jay Jeffrey

Over the last few decades, ornithologists and conservationists have become increasingly alarmed due to a widespread and steady long-term decline in North American kestrel populations. Using data from breeding bird surveys, there's been an estimated 50% decline in the total population since the 1960's. Various drivers of this decline have been identified, but many hypotheses and population losses remain untested or mysterious.

Over half a dozen research efforts are recommended, or in progress, for addressing information gaps related to kestrel declines. The latest genesis of kestrel research (and other species) largely focuses on attempts to identify aspects of the full annual life cycle for fledglings and adults: survival, migratory movements and routes, seasonal breeding and wintering territories, etc. Novel technology continues to aid these efforts. For more information, Google search The Peregrine Fund and its American Kestrel Partnership, and the MOTUS Wildlife Tracking System. MOTUS stations in Kansas are already providing detections of tagged kestrels. No kestrels have been tagged in KS (nanotags for MOTUS application), but 9 research projects outside of KS have tagged 204 kestrels in North America. These birds have visited 167 different MOTUS stations providing 715 detections, in 4 different countries.

Hopefully science provides viable answers to support conservation actions to prevent our beloved lethal beauty, the American Kestrel, from permanently flying off through a hazy horizon...sacrificing itself, not voluntarily, as another of our "Canaries in a Coal Mine" -- indicating continued negligence of our collective environmentally conscious conscience.

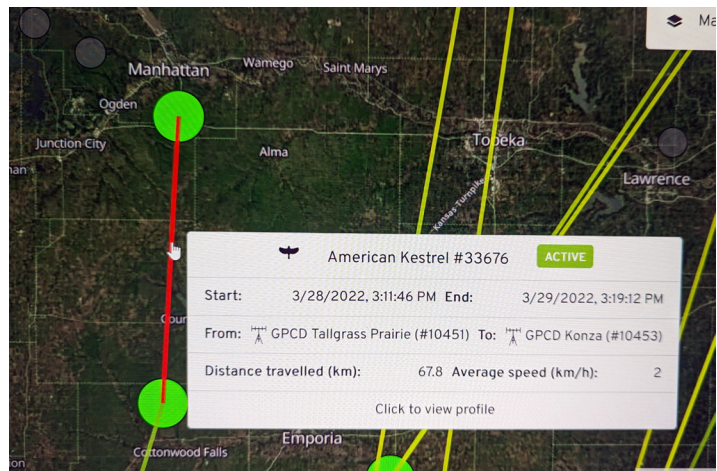
© Jay Jeffrey, 2024

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

(1) Adult male AMKE with trophy-sized deer mouse, on honey locust tree branch. Photo by Jay Jeffrey

(2) Female AMKE showing upper beak tomial tooth and lower beak notch where tomial tooth nestles when beak is closed. Photo courtesy of Ron Dudley.

(3) Example of MOTUS tracking system with Konza station AMKE detection, the tagged bird was detected one day prior at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve station. Via motus.org.



Thank you Work Crew!

Thank you to the 11 hearty individuals that helped remove bush honeysuckle from our first test area at the **Mitchel-Ross preserve** on March 16th. Dick Oberst and Dan Swenson donated skills with their chain saws on the largest bushes while others pulled out baby bushes from the recently rain dampened soil. Others hauled out the brush and cut it into manageable pieces which we placed into a Howie's donated 40-yard dumpster. All received a good work out in the 2-hour effort and we enjoyed lunch together afterwards. We get a lot done when we work together!



Pictured from left to right are Steve Kramer, Dan Swenson, Jacque Staats, Dick Oberst, Merry Bower (seated) Doug Denning, Gloria Raney, Susan Blackford
Not pictured volunteer workers: John Hill Price, Kevin Fay and Patricia Yeager



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

Return Service Requested

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

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.

Published monthly (except August) by the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, a chapter of the National Audubon Society.
Edited by Cindy Jeffrey, 15850 Galilee Rd., Olsburg, KS 66520. (cinraney@ksu.edu)
Also available online at nfhas.org

National Audubon Society:

The following gifts qualify for **membership in**

A monthly recurring gift of \$5 or more

An annual recurring gift of \$20 or more

A one-time gift of \$20 or more

ONLINE - www.audubon.org - under membership tab,
and check the FAQ at the bottom of the page.

OR MAIL a check to

The National Audubon Society

ATTN: Donations

225 Varick St. 7th Floor

New York, NY 10014

Questions about membership Call 1-844-428-3826 or email the
National Audubon Society customerservice@audubon.org

**When you join National Audubon Society you automatically
become a member of NFHAS.**

NFHAS Subscription Information: If you do not wish to join
the National Audubon Society, but still want to be involved in
NFHAS local activities, ***you may subscribe to the Prairie Falcon
newsletter for \$20/yr.***

Make checks payable to the Northern Flint Hills Audubon
Society and mail to: **Treasurer, NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932,
Manhattan, KS 66505-1932**

WE NEED YOU! PLEASE consider joining our NFHAS Board.

NFHAS Board

President: [Patricia Yeager](mailto:pyeagerbirder@gmail.com) - pyeagerbirder@gmail.com 776-9593

Vice Pres.:

Secretary:

Treasurer: Jared Johnson

COMMITTEE Chairs:

Membership: Merry Bower mdbower@ksu.edu

Programs: Board

Butterfly Garden & Northeast Park

Alsop Property: Patricia Yeager and Merry Bower

Education:

Bird Seed Sales:

Newsletter: [Cindy Jeffrey](mailto:cinraney@ksu.edu) - cinraney@ksu.edu 565-3326

Fieldtrips: Patricia Yeager, and Board

AOK Representative: [Cindy Jeffrey](mailto:cinraney@ksu.edu) - cinraney@ksu.edu 565-3326

At-large: Susan Blackford, Kevin Fay

Contacts for Your Elected Representatives (anytime). Write, call or email: Governor Laura Kelly: 2nd Floor, State Capitol Bldg., Topeka, KS 66612. KS Senator or Representative: State Capitol Bldg., Topeka, KS 66612. Ph# (during session only) Senate - 785-296-7300. House - 785-296-7500. U.S. Senator Jerry Moran, U.S. Senator Roger Marshall U.S. Senate, Washington DC 20510. Representative Tracey Mann, Jacob LaTurner, Sharice Davids and Ron Estes: U.S. Capital Switchboard 202-224-3121.