

THE PRIMARY SOURCE



NEWSLETTER FOR BIRD CONSERVANCY OF THE ROCKIES | FALL/WINTER 2016 | NUMBER 50

Tracking the Mountain Plover

Migratory connectivity studies shed light on the life cycle of this rare species

by Angela Dwyer, Grassland Wildlife Coordinator

Mountain Plovers are small ground-nesting birds associated with the shortgrass prairie ecoregion of the Rocky Mountain West. Much of the plover's native habitat has been altered, from grassland to cropland agriculture, diminished fire frequency, and changes in grazing regimes.



In some areas, plovers have adapted and survived by nesting in cultivated croplands, and the story of their survival shows how collaborative efforts can benefit species. For over 13 years, Bird Conservancy and our partners have worked with farmers to conserve Mountain Plover nests in Colorado and Nebraska. What began as a pilot project with four farmers in western Nebraska in 2003, has grown into ongoing collaborative efforts between Bird Conservancy and 80 farmers across approximately 200,000 acres of cropland. Working together with farmers, we find and mark nests with tall, brightly colored stakes so farmers can avoid those nests when tilling their fields. It's as simple as it sounds—and effective!

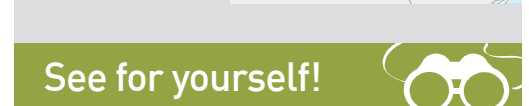
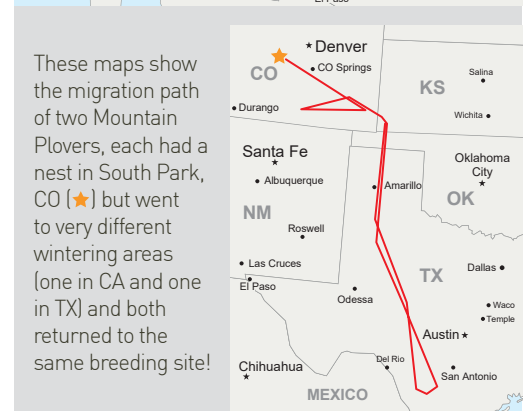
Plover populations have declined at a rate of approximately three percent per year since

the 1960s, when breeding bird survey efforts began. But we know we have made a positive impact in western Nebraska.

To halt these declines, we must understand the causes at a larger scale. The farmers we work with are interested too, they always ask us where these birds go during winter. Knowing where plovers go throughout their life cycle helps us identify threats. In 2016, we collaborated with research partners to initiate tracking studies of Mountain Plover in and around the Pawnee National Grasslands in northern Colorado, at Thunder Basin National Grasslands in Wyoming and in South Park, Colorado. This builds on prior collaborations with Dr. Mike Wunder at the University of Colorado, aimed at understanding population and migratory dynamics. Small transmitters attached to the birds show us where (and when!) they travel and what habitat they use.

Thanks to Dr. Pete Marra, Director of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, 60 GPS tags were deployed at three different breeding sites in 2015-16. We know that some populations are highly adapted to cropland, but others prefer more native habitat such as prairie dog towns or grazed rangelands. Connecting these varied landscapes helps ensure that populations have suitable breeding habitat, regardless of preferences.

We have only begun to scratch the surface when it comes to understanding Mountain Plover, but with each season we come closer—and ultimately saving this special species.



Join us next spring for a once-in-a-lifetime Mountain Plover field experience! Spend a day learning about plovers and their unique habitat. Day and overnight trips are offered.

Space is limited! For more information, contact Angela Dwyer (Grassland Wildlife Coordinator) at (970) 482-1707 x17 or email: angela.dwyer@birdconservancy.org

THE PRIMARY SOURCE

The Primary Source is the member newsletter of Bird Conservancy of the Rockies

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The Primary Source refers to a bird's primary feathers which power their flight. Our members, Friends, volunteers and partners are the primary source of Bird Conservancy's power to accomplish its mission to conserve birds and their habitats.

Editing and design:

William Bevil, Communications Manager

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From the Director

Paying it Forward

It is hard to believe we are only two months away from closing out another year. And what a year it has been!

In 2016, we saw major growth in our monitoring and scientific research programs on the breeding grounds of the Great Plains. Our private lands conservation program expanded to include Montana and South Dakota. These efforts link with our work on the wintering grounds in Mexico and beyond, helping us better understand the full annual cycle of birds' lives.

We celebrated another successful season of Summer Camps. Covering the range of childrens' development—from 2 year olds to 17 year olds—there is a camp for everyone. A high point was the graduation of one of our long-time campers, Rachel Dunbar, who describes her Bird Conservancy experiences as vital to her personal growth and leadership skills. Her interest in science has blossomed into the confidence and drive to pursue a career in ornithology. Thank you, Rachel, for allowing us to be a part of your journey.

It has also been a year to reconnect. Our members, donors and partner organizations are truly the wind beneath our wings. With your support, we succeed in conserving birds and their habitats. This year, we asked you, our members,

how you felt about your association with Bird Conservancy. Exact responses varied, but one theme was consistent: pride of association.

Why not share that same good feeling through a gift membership for a friend, family member, neighbor, or in honor of someone who helped you connect with nature, be inspired by science or introduced you to the wonder of birds.

Will you help us broaden our circle of supporters and get more people making a difference in their backyards, communities and beyond for bird conservation? Will you help us reach our goal of increasing our membership from 500 to 1,000 by the end of 2017?

You are our ambassadors and support us because you believe in what we do. Double your impact by introducing someone new to Bird Conservancy! As the circle expands, we reach new heights for bird conservation.

I have my holiday shopping list—do you have yours? A Bird Conservancy membership is a thoughtful and unique gift that makes a difference for people, birds and land!

- Tammy VerCauteren
Executive Director

Help us Broaden the Circle!

Introduce someone to a vibrant community that cares about the health of our natural world. We've made it easy! Simply fill out the form included in this newsletter and return it to us—or give us a call, we'll walk you through it!

Member benefits include:

- *The Primary Source* newsletter
- Recognition in our annual report
- Discounts on special events and gear
- Invitations to our annual member picnic, birding trips and special events
- The satisfaction of knowing you're conserving birds and their habitats!

On the Summer Breeding Grounds

Field report by Kaitlyn Wilson, North Dakota Field Crew Leader

Bird Conservancy of the Rockies just completed a second summer season studying breeding season survival in adults and juveniles of nesting Baird's and Grasshopper Sparrows in the Northern Great Plains of North Dakota and Montana.



Baird's Sparrow eggs in a nest.
Photo by Nicole Richardson.

When we first arrived at the beginning of the season, the species we were looking for had not yet returned from their wintering grounds in Mexico. Then, one morning, the musical trill of a Baird's Sparrow broke through the wind of the prairie. It was followed by the insect-like trills of a Grasshopper Sparrow. The birds had found their way back once again, and the breeding season had begun!

The males are always eager to defend territory. We lured them into mist nets by playing a Baird's Sparrow song, imitating a rival. Within a minute our first sparrow darted into the net

in an attempt to run off the intruder. Each captured bird is fitted with a transmitter, which we use to track their exact location every day, in an effort to determine survival rates and habitat use.

As we continued capturing males, the females began to sporadically arrive. The beginning of the nesting season for Grasshopper Sparrow becomes obvious as they start acting 'nesty'—making chipping calls much different than their usual calls. Baird's Sparrows are more elusive, only giving their nest away when flushed, or by flying circles overhead and chipping because we were getting too close to their nest.

We monitored nests for survival (fail or fledge), and also attached transmitters to nestlings to track their survival. Unfortunately, many of the nests failed, often due to depredation. Predators include Northern Harriers,



Four-day old Baird's Sparrows.
Photo by Kelsey Bell.



Fledged Baird's Sparrow wearing transmitter.
Photo by Nicole Richardson

coyotes, ground squirrels, weasels, and snakes. Some nests were abandoned for unknown reasons. The failures, though disheartening, nonetheless give insights into the challenges facing these birds.



Adult Baird's Sparrow after being fitted with transmitter. Photo by Kelsey Bell

Grassland songbirds are declining at a steeper rate than any other group of birds in North America. A likely cause is habitat loss. We look forward to another season in 2017 with opportunities to learn more and shed light on what can be done to ensure their song continues to be heard across the wide open landscape.

STAFF MIGRATIONS

Welcome to our new Staff!



Adam Beh, Stewardship Director, is based in Fort Collins and oversees our team of biologists and rangeland ecologists working alongside private landowners, land managers and resource professionals to foster proactive, voluntary conservation efforts.



Amber Schiltz is Nebraska Wildlife Education Coordinator is based on Scottsbluff and leads the delivery of nature-based education programs across the Nebraska panhandle.



Veronica Grigaltchik, Private Lands Wildlife Biologist, is based in the Jordan, Montana NRCS field office delivering wildlife habitat conservation programs (with emphasis on grassland birds) for private landowners.



Sherry Nickolaus joins us as Field Trips Coordinator at our Environmental Learning Center in Brighton, CO where she facilitates school and group field trip experiences.

Farewells: Marty Moses, Emily Snode-Brenneman, Don Slusher, Lily Hynson, Nikki Mohney, Peggy Watson



Connecting People, Birds and Land

OUR MISSION

Conserving birds and their habitats through science, education and land stewardship

OUR APPROACH

Our mission is advanced through sound science, achieved through empowering people, realized through stewardship and sustained through partnerships.

Our work radiates from the Rockies to the Great Plains, Mexico and beyond.

Together, we are improving native bird populations, the land and the lives of people.

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For the latest on our upcoming events, visit www.birdconservancy.org, sign up for our e-newsletter on our website or become a fan of Bird Conservancy of the Rockies on Facebook.



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Volunteers hit the trail for Bluebirds in Colorado

Do you love short hikes and live in or near Larimer County, Colorado? Do you enjoy bird watching and have a desire to participate firsthand in scientific research? Then we have just the thing for you!

Mountain and Western Bluebirds have seen major population decreases in the past few decades along the Colorado Front Range.

The **Larimer County Colorado Bluebird Project** enlists citizen scientist volunteers to collect data on breeding birds utilizing nest boxes placed along trails at several locations including Red Feather Lakes and Horsetooth Mountain Open Space.

It's a great way to get some fresh air and exercise while simultaneously making a terrific contribution to bird conservation and monitoring efforts.



Bird Conservancy of the Rockies partners with **Audubon Society Greater Denver** on this program which aims to improve the vitality of bluebird populations throughout the State of Colorado, and to inform and educate the public about bluebirds.



THANK YOU to Mountain Life Church Sunday Schoolers in Fort Collins for their donation of hand-made bluebird nest boxes in support of the Colorado Bluebird Project!

For more information:

Matt Smith, Citizen Science Coordinator (407) 636-0668
matt.smith@birdconservancy.org

Bird Conservancy of the Rockies Science Director elected a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union



Congratulations to Luke George, Bird Conservancy's Science Director, on his election as a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) at the August, 2016 135th Stated Meeting in Washington, D.C. Each year, the AOU recognizes outstanding contributions to ornithological science through the election of Fellows by peers.



Supporter Spotlight

Sharing the Wonder of Birds

Interview by William Bevil, Communications Manager

I recently enjoyed catching up with one Bird Conservancy's long-time supporters, Barb Holme. Barb was a "fan" of Bird Conservancy long before Facebook, having been with us since the beginning. She was one of our first Bald Eagle Watch Citizen Scientists in the mid-1980s, at a time when there was only one breeding pair of Bald Eagles nesting at Barr Lake, and just ten in the whole state of Colorado.

Bald Eagle Watch was one of the catalysts for the founding of Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (then Colorado Bird Observatory). The program was originally created to monitor the Barr Lake nest. Barb was one of the first visionary volunteers who braved the elements, spending a morning each week peering into a scope and diligently recording activity at the nest every 15 minutes. Although Barr Lake was an hour's drive from her home, Barb says she treasured the experience. Thirty years later, thanks in large part to the dedication of pioneers like Barb, Bald Eagles are on the rebound with 53 nests recorded in Colorado in 2016.

As life-long learners, Barb and Dick continue to be interested in avian conservation and the leadership role that Bird Conservancy serves in using science to understand the causes of bird population declines.

Barb describes her interest as very personal, saying "I just can't imagine waking up in the morning or going to bed at night without birdsong." She shares that love of birds with others, including her grandson, describing

listening to the morning chorus with him outside his bedroom window. Now at almost 13 years old, he still remembers the songs. When asked what she thinks about Bird Conservancy and the future of our work, Barb is optimistic but frank, saying "We need to get more people involved and increase awareness about the plight of our birds. People need to know that every one of us can make a difference, no matter what your age or situation. Everyone can offer something."



Barb and Dick Holme

In further testimony to that idea, Barb and Dick have also included Bird Conservancy of the Rockies in their will. Their future gift gives them the confidence that our important work will continue beyond their lifetime.

Today, Barb and Dick continue to enjoy and explore the wonders of the natural world, with several "bucket list" birding experiences still on the itinerary! We wish them many happy adventures and express our heartfelt gratitude for their continuous support throughout the years.

Planned Giving: A Lasting Legacy for Birds and People

Including Bird Conservancy of the Rockies in your estate planning will benefit people, birds, and land. By naming us in your will or as a beneficiary on your IRA, 401k, pension or life insurance, you help us create a healthy world for future generations. To learn more, contact Sonja Macys, Development Director at (720) 634-1076 or sonja.macys@birdconservancy.org

It's as easy as sending this language to your attorney or estate planner:

I give, devise, and bequeath the sum of \$____ [or __ percent of my residual estate] to Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, DBA Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (Federal tax ID number 84-1079882), a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization located in Brighton, CO, for its general use and purposes.



2016 Richard G. Levad Award

Congratulations to **Dr. Pat Magee**, our 2016 **Richard G. Levad Award** recipient, in recognition of outstanding service to the field of ornithology.

The award honors the memory of Richard Levad, who devoted himself to conserving birds and their habitats, sharing his personal knowledge and experience, and inspiring the next generation through his work.

Pictured above: Pat receives his award from **Karen Levad** at Bird Conservancy's Annual Fundraiser on Oct. 13.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Pre-registration is required for all Camp/Educational Programs.



EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

The following programs are offered at our Environmental Learning Center located at Barr Lake State Park.

Audubon's 117th Christmas Bird Count at Barr Lake State Park

Monday, Jan. 2, 2017 from 7 AM - 11 AM

5th Annual Christmas Bird Count for Kids

Monday, Jan. 16, 2017 from 9 AM - 2 PM

**Winter Survival
Spring Break Snowshoeing Trip**
March, exact date TBD

All About Eggs (during Barr Lake State Park's Annual Easter Egg Hunt)
April (Easter weekend)

Birding by Bike
April, exact date TBD

Birding by Canoe
May, exact date TBD



HOMESCHOOL PROGRAMS

Junior Duck Stamp Program (Dec. 9)

Snowshoeing Programs (Jan. 24 & 25)

Great Backyard Bird Count (Feb. 17)

Raptor Program (March 20)

Backyard Climbers Program (April 20)

Annual Bald Eagle Hike (May 3)

SCHOLARSHIPS

Half, full, and partial scholarships are available thanks to Bird Conservancy donors and grants from the Denver Field Ornithologists, Brighton Legacy Foundation, The Dellora A. and Lester J. Norris Foundation and Adams County Open Space.

For more information about educational programs and scholarships, contact Jennifer Watson at (303) 659-4348 x19 or e-mail: jennifer.watson@birdconservancy.org

NATURE CAMPS



"I Love Summer Camp Registration Kickoff and Campfire"

Saturday, February 11, 2017

DAY CAMPS

Wild Nestlings

(Ages 2-5 and accompanying adults)

July 11, 18 and 25

Cost: \$7.50/child/day

Young Naturalists (Ages 4 and 5)

July 5, 12, 19 and 26

9 a.m. - 12 p.m.

Cost: \$20/day

Nature Investigators (Ages 6 and 7)

July 6, 13, 20 and 27

9 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Cost: \$25/day

Habitat Explorers (Ages 8 and 9)

July 7, 14, 21 and 28

9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Cost: \$40/day

Sky and Earth: From Birds to Bugs

(Ages 5 to 9)

Dates: A week in August TBD

Cost: \$130 or \$245

Young Ecologists

(Ages 10 and 11)

June 5-9

Cost: \$275/week

Leaders-in-Training Program

(Ages 12 to 17)

Offered during most Day Camps

Cost: \$5/day or \$25/week

OVERNIGHT CAMPS

Taking Flight (Ages 12 to 14)

Dates: June 11-16

Location: Highlands Presbyterian Camp

On the Wing (Ages 15 to 17)

Dates: June 21- June 30

Location: Highlands Presbyterian Camp

For more info about camps, contact Allison Fowle at (303)659-4348 x18 or via email: allison.fowle@birdconservancy.org

VOLUNTEER TRAINING



Are you passionate about connecting others with nature and science? Become a Bird Conservancy volunteer and be a part of the solution for conservation! Enrollment starts in early 2017. For more information contact Jennifer at (303) 659-4348 x19 or e-mail: jennifer.watson@birdconservancy.org

Volunteer Naturalists: Become a highly-trained volunteer educator that leads interactive in-class programs, field trips, summer camps and educational outreach events. Training held in March.

Education Program Assistants: Assist our educators during in-class programs, field trips and outreach events around the Denver area. Training held in March.

CITIZEN SCIENCE



Bald Eagle Watch: Monitor and collect data on Bald Eagle nesting behavior and productivity along the Front Range of Colorado. Next training will be at Barr Lake State Park, Brighton on Jan. 21 from 9 a.m.-Noon.

HawkWatch: Gather information on raptor migration at our site at Dinosaur Ridge in the Dakota Hogback Natural Area near Morrison, CO. Classroom training Feb. 21 from 5:30-7 p.m. at Dinosaur Ridge Discovery Center, followed by an outdoor session Feb.25 from 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Colorado Bluebird Project: Monitor and collect data about bluebirds using nestboxes on hiking trails in Larimer County, CO. Training held in February in Fort Collins (exact date TBD).

Eastern Screech-Owl Monitoring: Gather information on this owl species along the Cache la Poudre River in Fort Collins, CO. Training held in March in Fort Collins..

For more information about Citizen Science programs, visit our website: <http://www.birdconservancy.org/get-involved/volunteer/citizen-science/>



More than 13 million people— including 4 million kids— attend SCFD funded programs each year, many for free or reduced rates. SCFD funding supports Bird Conservancy's education programs, helping us connect, engage and inspire thousands of people in nature each year.

Reflections in the Rearview Mirror

by Tyler Edmondson, Education Director

As I look back on the summer of 2016, I cannot help but reflect on the impacts that our Nature Camps are having. Maybe it's because I'm often the van driver for Camps that I've come to think about the transformational process metaphorically, as though looking into a rearview mirror.



Young Ecologists day campers after a long day of field trips and birding. Photo by Tyler Edmondson.

The growth that Camp participants experience is often profound, and starts on day one. In the rearview mirror, I often see first-timers to "Bird Camp" with looks of apprehension, nervousness and even a bit of fear. Maybe it's because they were forced to attend Camp by their parents, or that they were talked into it without really understanding what they were getting into. In the rear view mirror, I often see new campers struggling with low self-esteem, anxieties and insecurities, depression, poor physical health, and an indifference toward the natural world.



Winged Wonders day campers with fresh rock paint on their faces. Photo by Tyler Edmondson.

As returning campers initiate bird song identification competitions, I see looks of dismissal by some who consider themselves too "cool" for birds. I see veteran campers and staff engaging them in meaningful conversation, and new campers sheepishly responding to questions posed to them. They begin to perk up, perhaps recognizing that someone is truly seeing them, listening to them, and accepting them for who they are.

Later, I see a van full of campers singing silly songs at the tops of their lungs, and belly-laughing so hard they cannot breathe. I see campers summiting their first mountain and waking to the sound of the dawn chorus for the first time. I see sleeping campers drooling on the shoulders of former strangers. With their guard now lowered, they've opened themselves up to new friendships and possibilities.



Taking Flight camper Hannah Rockwell nature journaling. Photo by Tyler Edmondson.

On the final day of Camp, in the rearview mirror, I see inseparable new friendships. I see campers holding back tears as we pull away from our temporary home in the mountains. I see campers silently pondering how their lives will be different when they return to the everyday. I see campers who are excited to continue nature journaling, birding, and playing in the outdoors. I see campers who are excited to share their new-found passions and knowledge with others. I see a community of powerful, young leaders.

At that moment, in the rearview mirror I see hope and joy. I see self-confidence, freedom, healing, and peace. In the rearview mirror, I also see the future.



On the Wing Campers after a long hike in the mountains. Photo by Tyler Edmondson.



My Life-Changing Moment

by Rachel Dunbar

It was my eighth grade year.

When I made that first step into Barr Lake State Park, a blissful feeling swept my body. An air of relief filled my lungs and exhaled all my doubts.

After dropping me off at Bird Conservancy's Environmental Learning Center, my parents never saw the same Rachel again. Only 6 days were needed for me to completely transform into a different person. One who wasn't afraid to let others hear her voice, see who she is, someone no one had seen before.

I often wonder what transformed me. The solo hikes, the bird watching, my growing independence, my new best friend. Then I finally realized it was all of it. All of the good stuff that makes camp, camp. The things that make you not want to let leave; you wish to see the smiles, hear the laughter, and feel the joy all over again.



Rachel is an Alumna of Bird Conservancy's Taking Flight camp and Leaders-in-Training Program. She plans to pursue a career in ornithology and is currently an intern in the Collections Department at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science.

The Primary Source No. 50 - Fall/Winter 2016



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