



## Bird surveyor dodges cacti but finds desert 'magical'

By Galen Reid

The bird-survey season in the U.S. Chihuahuan Desert drew to a close in early June, leaving behind cracked lips and dreamy memories of vast expanses, cool riparian corridors, bright birds, prickly mesas and lonely sunsets.

Rising long before the sun, shouldering a pack of gear, food and water, slinging binoculars over the shoulder, strapping on a headlamp and setting out for mysterious miles through the cold sand and infinite starry sky is liberating. A surveyor feels as close to his ancestors as to the sleeping rattlesnakes and scuttling scorpions.

With miles covered, a light breeze picks up and a soft glow outlines the horizon. An anxious black-throated sparrow chirps. As stars wane and skies brighten, birds sing their delight, celebrating love of life and bugs.

All the surveyor's senses focus on the morning chorus. Songs and calls are heard, species identified, distance examined, abundance recorded. Sometimes birds are heard and not seen. Order is sought as the dynamic cacophony of avifauna is rapidly transcribed to paper on clipboard. Sweat pours from the brow before sun breaks over the mountain.

The surveyor moves from point to point, dodging lechugilla, ocotillo and catclaw, scrambling across mesas, diving into badlands, recording diversity along the way. Living fully in the moment, he finds a love for the desert during these magical hours.

As the sun rises, heat waves obscure the view. The surveyor takes shade under a dried-out creosote and ponders the silence, the sun and the long walk ahead over hot sand. The promise of a cold beverage back at camp springs him to his feet.

*Galen is one of more than 30 technicians who assisted with the Observatory's 2012 bird monitoring in the Rocky Mountains, Great Plains and Southwest.*



*Sunset at Chisos Basin in Big Bend National Park in Texas (top). Black-throated Sparrows perch on ocotillo cactus, Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico (left). A Turkey Vulture at Big Bend (right).*

Photos by Galen Reid

### **Inside the Source:**

- Page 2 Rancher wins conservation award
- Page 3 BBQ for the Birds & other events
- Page 3 Scenes from camp
- Page 4 Landowners & conservation
- Page 6 Bird Feats
- Page 6 Fall bird-banding open to public
- Page 7 Staff & board migrations
- Page 8 Rocky Mountain Nat. Park study



# Reluctant rancher comes to lunch, ends up winning conservation award

By Tammy VerCauteren, Executive Director

Rancher Russell Davis was not happy about coming to the first landowner workshop we hosted with our partners on the shortgrass prairie of eastern Colorado. It was the start of the drought in 2002 and 90-plus degrees outside.

As I was welcoming folks, an unsmiling Mr. Davis came in. His son had convinced him it was the right thing to do; plus there was a free lunch.

Fortunately, as we toured a ranch, Russell was inspired when he heard staff from Colorado Division of Wildlife, USFWS, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory and others thank private landowners for their stewardship and ask for voluntary partners to enhance habitat and the bottom line for agricultural production.

Russell enrolled his riparian area into a conservation program to protect and promote its health. Then he and his family placed a perpetual conservation easement on their ranch through what is now Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

Russell began speaking at workshops about the importance of working with conservation organizations. He was instrumental in starting the Karval Community Mountain Plover Festival. He became involved in promoting conservation on private lands at the national level.

Russell and Tricia Davis and their Wineinger-Davis Ranch were selected to receive the 2012 Leopold Conservation Award in Colorado, which recognizes landowner achievement in voluntary conservation. RMBO nominated Russell for this award to honor his outstanding leadership and land ethic.


What began as a tentative conversation has transformed the way Russell views his land – and conservationists. Now we are on the same page – we just arrived there from different perspectives.

“Thank you for nominating Wineinger-Davis Ranch for the Leopold Conservation Award,” Russell said in a recent note to me. “I have spent many hours reading up on Mr. Leopold’s ethic of doing good things on the ground to benefit wildlife, the land and the landowner. I see those ethics being implemented by you, Seth [Gallagher, Stewardship Director] and RMBO. ...You are truly a reflection of Leopold’s conservation ethics.”

We understand landowners need to make a living off their land, and they understand – and often share – our goal of ensuring the land is a healthy home for birds and other wildlife. Read more about landowners on pages 4 and 5.



*In addition to branding calves, breeding cows, moving them to greener pasture and all his other ranch work, Russell Davis is engaged in various activities to promote conservation. “All these activities remind me of the incredible opportunity I have been given for managing wildlife conservation on the ranch,” he writes.*



**Board of Directors**  
Larry Modesitt, MBA, CQE, CTP, Chair  
Warren Taylor, Ph.D., Secretary  
Steve Bloom, Ph.D.  
Steven W. Deitemeyer, C.F.  
Grady Grissom, Ph.D.  
Charles Hundertmark, M.A., APR, ATMB  
Shawn Nowlan, J.D., LLM  
Joe Roller, M.D.  
D. Jean Tate, Ph.D.  
Tiffany Watts, CPA

---

Tammy VerCauteren - Executive Director  
tammy.vercauteren@rmbo.org  
Visit [www.rmbo.org](http://www.rmbo.org) for staff list

---

Main Office:  
14500 Lark Bunting Lane,  
P.O. Box 1232, Brighton, CO 80601  
(303) 659-4348  
230 Cherry Street, Fort Collins, CO 80521  
(970) 482-1707  
P.O. Box 489, Scottsbluff, NE 69363  
(308) 220-0052

---

The Primary Source logo with a baby Killdeer and a primary feather from a Pelican was designed by Granby, Colo., artist David Utterback. Primary feathers give power to a bird’s flight. Our members, friends, volunteers and partners are the primary source of RMBO’s power to accomplish its mission to conserve birds and their habitat.

Editing and design: Victoria Collier



## Fall 2012 Events

*Say hello to RMBO staff at these fall events!*

### August

Late August to mid-Oct.: Bird banding stations, various locations. See page 6.

16: Wing Ding: Have a Brew for the Birds! RMBO social and fundraiser, Avogadro's Number, 5-7 p.m., Fort Collins, Colo.

25: BBQ for the Birds, 7 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. See box at right.

### September

8: Fall Bird Festival at Barr Lake State Park, Brighton, Colo.

15-16: Sustainable Living Fair, Fort Collins, Colo. RMBO will have a booth and present a workshop on backyard bird habitat.

22: Harvest Festival, Hudson, Colo.

29: Northern Colorado Birding Fair, Fossil Creek Park, Fort Collins, Colo.

### October

6: Walk on the Wild Side walkathon at RMBO's Old Stone House, Barr Lake, Brighton, Colo. See box at right.

### BBQ for the Birds

Sat., August 25

RMBO's Old Stone House  
Brighton, Colo.

Bird Banding • Bird Walks •  
Kids' Activities • Live Raptors •  
Live Music • Workshops • Exhibitors •  
Silent & Live Auctions • Catered Lunch  
Plus, featured speaker Jim Enderson:  
"Return of the Peregrine Falcon"

**Get details and register at  
[www.rmbo.org](http://www.rmbo.org) or 303-659-4348 ext. 17**



### Walk on the Wild Side

Saturday, Oct. 6, 2012

RMBO's Old Stone House  
Brighton, Colo.

10K (8 a.m.), 5K (9 a.m.)

or 1K (10 a.m.) walkathon

Get info and register at  
<http://walk.birdday.org/rmbo>

**TAKE STEPS FOR A HEALTHY COMMUNITY,  
A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT  
& A HEALTHY YOU!**

### RMBO-Denver Museum of Nature & Science Speaker Series

"Living Dinosaurs:

The Evolution of Birds"

Avian experts discuss everything from the origins of birds to today's issues.

All programs are at 7 p.m. at DMNS.

See details at: <http://www.dmns.org/learn/adults/after-hours/>

#### *Wed., October 24: Early Origins*

Julia Clarke, PhD, Associate Professor & John A. Wilson Fellow in Vertebrate Paleontology, Jackson School of Geosciences, University of Texas at Austin

#### *Tues., October 30: The Diversification of Modern Birds*

Shannon J. Hackett, PhD, Associate Curator and Head, Division of Birds, Zoology Department, Field Museum of Natural History

#### *Tues., November 13: Speciation and Hybridization*

Robb T. Brumfield, PhD, Associate Curator of Genetic Resources and Associate Professor of Biology, Museum of Natural Science and Department of Biological Sciences, Louisiana State University

#### *Wed., November 28: Modern Extinction and Conservation*

John Fitzpatrick, PhD, Director, Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University

## Scenes from Summer Camps





# Conservation a natural for landowners



## Marking Plover Nests in Nebraska

Landowner Dan Culek of Kimball County, Neb., is a boon to Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory's project to mark Mountain Plover nests on agricultural land. Dan says it is beneficial to both birds and landowners to keep the species off the endangered species list, and he enthusiastically marks nests on his land so they are avoided during tilling, as he demonstrates above. Landowners receive an incentive payment for each marked nest, but Dan says, "I would still conserve nests without the nest payments."

Mountain Plovers would be declining in Nebraska without cooperation from landowners such as Dan Culek, according to Larry Snyder, RMBO's Nebraska Prairie Partners assistant. In 2012, 42 percent of 66 nests were found and marked by landowners themselves, the largest proportion since the program began in 2004.

## Welcoming young campers to the ranch

Bob Warner hosted Young Ecologists (right) who looked for birds and learned about his ranch near Ft. Lupton, Colo., in June.

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory's Young Ecologists program offers a week of day camps where 11- and 12-year-olds learn about birds and conservation and enjoy games and outdoor activities.

RMBO offers day camps for ages 4 through 12. With rave reviews this summer from campers and parents alike, camp coordinator Tyler Edmonson predicts, "RMBO's Bird Camps will grow next summer, both in size and by offering a weeklong residential camp for teens."



## Helping the Mountain Plover Recover

Mountain Plover nests -- just a scrape in the dirt, lined with pebbles or bits of grain -- are hard to spot.

In 2004 Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory began marking plover nests in western Nebraska to make them visible to farmers on tractors. Since then, the number of participating landowners has grown to 78. Most of the 647 nests marked were avoided during agricultural operations, and about 85 percent successfully hatched.

In 2010 RMBO biologists began using radio-tags -- transmitters they attach to birds' backs to track adults with chicks from hatch date until fledging, usually about 35 days. This allows the scientists to better determine the chicks' survival rate. The tags fall off when the birds molt.





## Thoughts on Ranching and Conservation

By Grady Grissom, Rancher

Thirty-five years ago one would not hear ranching and conservation in the same breath unless the speaker was describing opposing forces. Today, these words are often used in a symbiotic context.

A couple things have changed since the 70s. First, science documented that the Great Plains evolved with large ruminant grazers and that grazing is critical to ecosystem health and services. Second, the “environmental” movement of the 60s and 70s has returned to its roots of “conservation” that recognize a human component in earth systems.

These developments manifest themselves through cooperative conservation efforts on grasslands throughout the western U.S. Organizations like Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory see ranchers as a means to creating bird habitat. Landowner incentives and education are far more effective in habitat restoration than regulation. At the same time, a growing number of ranchers view their livestock as fulfilling an ecosystem niche. These ranchers look for ways to enhance plant and animal diversity because they view ecosystem health as the foundation of a profitable livestock operation.

RMBO remains at the forefront of these developments, and I am honored to be a part of their ongoing conservation efforts.

*Grady Grissom's ranch is in southeast Colorado. He joined Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory's Board of Directors in January 2012 (see page 7). Grady provided the photos of a reclaimed playa and a canyon (below) on his ranch.*

### A Year of On-the-Ground Stewardship Success

From June 2011 to July 2012 Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory's Stewardship Team visited more than 250 landowners and, through various outreach activities, reached 2,260 people. With \$2.3 million in Farm Bill and other partner resources in Colorado, Nebraska and Wyoming, the team's efforts enhanced more than 65,700 acres of private working agricultural lands by:

- seeding prairie and range with native vegetation;
- removing invasive plants in riparian habitat;
- restoring in-channel streams;
- implementing grazing management plans including water development and fence removal; and
- modifying fences and livestock water facilities to be more wildlife friendly.

Stewardship Director Seth Gallagher credits the cooperating landowners and partner agencies for making the past year such a success.





# Bird Feats:



*making strides for conservation*

## **RMBO recognized at Sage Grouse Initiative celebration**

Several Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory staff were on hand in Pinedale, Wyo., in late June to celebrate Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) successes with partners from national and state agencies, nonprofits and landowner organizations.

Seth Gallagher, Brandon Miller, Noah Bates, Christina Santana and Joe Parsons of RMBO's stewardship staff play a key role in enhancing sagebrush habitat for grouse and other sage-obligate species in Colorado and Wyoming.

Natural Resources Conservation Service Chief Dave White presented plaques to



RMBO and other key partners who have brought about on-the-ground successes.

In the last year, SGI has connected with 500 ranchers across 11 states, resulting in:

- prescribed grazing on 1.3 million acres
- 200,000 acres enrolled in conservation easement programs
- 350 miles of fence marked or removed to reduce collision risks for Sage Grouse.

Billed as "wildlife conservation through sustainable agriculture," SGI is a model for voluntary private-lands conservation. It is part of a natural resource conservation movement that marries healthy agricultural lands with healthy populations of wildlife and people. Chief White recently extended funding for the private lands biologist positions for two more years.



We Bring  
People & Nature  
Together™

**Wild Birds Unlimited**

7677 W. 88th Ave., Westminster/Arvada  
2720 S. Wadsworth Blvd., Denver/Lakewood

## **Observatory awarded seat on U.S. NABCI committee**

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory Executive Director Tammy VerCauteren has been awarded a seat on the North American Bird Conservation Initiative steering committee that guides integrated bird conservation efforts for the U.S.

She will join directors of federal agencies and national conservation organizations working to ensure the long-term health of North America's native bird populations.

The committee's goal is to deliver the full spectrum of bird conservation through regionally based, biologically driven, landscape-oriented partnerships.

"I am elated RMBO has this opportunity to help ensure sound science drives decision-making, private-lands conservation is based on common sense, and education and outreach motivate people of all ages to contribute to bird conservation," Tammy said.

## **Report informs Chihuahuan grasslands conservation**

"Wintering Grassland Bird Densities in Chihuahuan Desert Grassland Priority Conservation Areas, 2007-2011," published by RMBO in April, documents bird abundance, distribution, habitat use and other information collected over five years in three U.S. and six Mexican states.

The Chihuahuan Desert is the primary wintering grounds for more than 90 percent of western North America's migratory grassland birds. Insight into the wintering ecology of grassland birds is critical to determine causes for their ongoing population declines and to support their full-life-cycle conservation needs.

This first-ever region-wide survey was made possible thanks to many supporting agencies and partners, including the USFWS, Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act and the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo Leon's Facultad de Ciencias Biológicas in Monterrey, Mexico. To learn more, visit [www.rmbo.org](http://www.rmbo.org) and click on International under Our Work.

## **FALL BIRD BANDING STATIONS**

Plan a fall outing to see birds "in the hand" at RMBO's banding stations. Check with contacts to confirm times or to schedule programs. (Most are open 5-6 days a week.)

### **Barr Lake State Park - Brighton, Colo. August 25 - October 14**

School and homeschool groups, contact Emily Snode at 303-659-4348 ext. 11, [emily.snode@rmbo.org](mailto:emily.snode@rmbo.org). All other groups, contact Tyler Edmondson at 303-659-4348 ext. 15, [tyler.edmondson@rmbo.org](mailto:tyler.edmondson@rmbo.org).

### **Chico Basin Ranch - 35 mi. southeast of Colorado Springs, Colo.**

#### **September 6 - October 6**

Contact Katie Miller at 970-310-0852, [katie@chicobasinranch.com](mailto:katie@chicobasinranch.com) or Lee Derr at 719-634-2305 or 719-338-8651. See [www.chicobasinranch.com](http://www.chicobasinranch.com).

### **Chadron State Park - Chadron, Neb. September 1 - October 5**

Contact Maggie Vinson at 308-220-0052, [magdalena.vinson@rmbo.org](mailto:magdalena.vinson@rmbo.org).

### **Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area - Gering, Neb., September 4 - October 5 Open House - Sat., September 15**

Contact Maggie Vinson at 308-220-0052, [magdalena.vinson@rmbo.org](mailto:magdalena.vinson@rmbo.org)

### **Ridgway State Park - Ridgway, Colo. September 10 - 18**

#### **Public Day - Sat., September 15**

Contact Cheryl Day at 970-872-3216, [cday@paonia.com](mailto:cday@paonia.com) or Arlene Crawford at [ourayoutpost918@hotmail.com](mailto:ourayoutpost918@hotmail.com).

### **Grand Valley Audubon Society - Grand Junction, Colo.**

#### **September 20 - October 19**

Contact Cary Atwood, 970-201-9651, [catwood814@gmail.com](mailto:catwood814@gmail.com).



**Sprague's Pipit is a species of concern in the Chihuahuan Desert grasslands.**

Photo by Jose Hugo Martinez

# Staff & Board Migrations



**Nathan Schmitz** joined RMBO as a Private Lands Wildlife Biologist in the Colorado Springs Natural Resources Conservation Service office. An Iowa native, Nathan graduated from Iowa State University. He was previously a Farm Bill biologist for Pheasants Forever in Lamar, Colo., working on Lesser Prairie-Chicken habitat projects in southeast Colorado. Schmitz has also worked for the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the University of Wyoming studying Sage-Grouse.



**Emily Snode**, RMBO's new School Programs Coordinator, grew up in northeastern Ohio where an enthusiastic fourth-grade teacher instilled in her a passion for conservation. She has a bachelor's degree in conservation science from Muskingum University. In 2010 she received her master's in biological sciences from the University of Northern Colorado where she studied fruit bats and their effects on seed germination. Emily has conducted a variety of field biology work in South Africa, Australia and North America. She has worked as an educator for the Akron Zoo, Denver Zoo and the Wilds and as an education intern for RMBO. Emily enjoys traveling, hiking mountain trails, camping, painting, theater and graphic design.

**Alex Ushakov**, IT Specialist, works on RMBO's avian databases, web site and staff computer issues. He has bachelor's and master's degrees in computer science from Moscow State University



of Electronic Machinery and an MBA from University of Colorado at Denver. He has a background in web-based services in educational and administrative environments and also in audio/video production, teleconferencing and video streaming. Previously Alex served as lead IT software specialist at Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries, the Austin Val Verde Foundation and the University of California at Santa Barbara.

**Tyler Edmondson**, Community Education Coordinator, was born and raised in Hershey, Penn., and grew up exploring local rivers of chocolate and eastern deciduous forests. After receiving a bachelor's in environmental studies from Eastern University in 2003, he promptly moved to Custer State Park in South Dakota to begin his adventures as an outdoor educator. This pursuit has taken Tyler from the Outer Banks of North Carolina to the redwoods of Northern California and a number of places in between. When not working outside, he can be found playing outside in the forms of volleyball, backpacking, fly-fishing, cycling, and yo-yoing when he reaches the peaks of tall mountains.



**Angela Dwyer** is RMBO's new Nebraska Prairie Partners Wildlife Biologist. Originally from Texas, she moved to Colorado in 2010 and worked for Audubon Rockies on habitat restoration and at Colorado State University on GIS vegetation mapping projects. She studied wading bird ecology and received a master's degree in wildlife management at Stephen F. Austin State University in 2006 and has worked with birds ever since. Angela was the conservation biologist for Audubon North Carolina from 2007 to 2010. She loves exploring Colorado through birding, hiking and skiing.

**Steve Bloom** became a member of the Board of Directors in January. He brings extensive experience as a professional psychologist and organiza-



tional consultant. His commitment to the environment began at the knee of his science teacher father and continued through to this day. After helping to form and develop the Audubon Colorado Board, he is enthusiastic about furthering the mission of RMBO.

**Grady Grissom** joined RMBO's Board of Directors in January. He has been a manager/partner at Rancho Largo Cattle Co. east of Walsenburg, Colo., since 1995. Rancho Largo is a 14,000-acre ranch where the fundamental philosophy is maximum ecosystem health equals maximum ranching profit. After earning a bachelor's in geology from Princeton University, he worked on ranches in eastern Colorado until 1987 when he returned to graduate school. He finished a PhD in geology at Stanford University in 1991 and worked as a farrier in the Bay Area until 1995.



## Farewell to:

**Carol Cochran**

**Patty Knupp**

**Cassy Bohnet**

**Reesa Conrey**

**Thank you for your service to RMBO and good luck in your new endeavors.**





Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory  
P.O. Box 1232  
Brighton, CO 80601-1232  
www.rmbo.org

Primary Source #42, August 2012



Printed with 100% wind power, environmentally friendly toners and vegetable-based inks on recycled paper

## Tanagers cooperate in migration study, but thrushes thwart scientists

The good news for two Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory biologists is that Western Tanagers are not too difficult to capture.

Then there are Swainson's Thrushes.

Special Monitoring Projects Coordinator Jason Beason and Chihuahuan Desert Project Manager Greg Levandoski headed to Rocky Mountain National Park in June to attach geolocators to these species. After two weeks in the field, the score: Tanagers: 10, Thrushes: 0.

Joined by RMBO's Bird-banding Coordinator Nancy Gobris, the scientists focused on finding territories – singing males with females present. In a couple of instances, they found active nests.

“Using call playback in conjunction with the carved tanager decoy worked like a charm,” Jason said. “It was a different story with the Swainson's Thrushes.”

Former RMBO board member Jack Whiting created decoys of both birds to use for the study.

“We spent two and half days attempting to capture thrushes without luck,” Jason said. “We tried the carved lure bird

with the call playback, and it seems to drive the singing males away. I knew that Swainson's Thrushes are secretive, but they are way more so than I thought.”

Nancy and RMBO biologist Jeff Birek tried again in late July to attract the

thrushes without success.

As the birds migrate, the geolocators record day length and sunrise/sunset times so semi-accurate (+/-100 miles) coordinates can be calculated. Knowing approximately the birds' fall and spring

migration routes will help focus conservation efforts. Next year, the researchers will attempt to recapture the birds carrying the tiny devices so the data can be recovered and analyzed.

The project follows the recent discovery by Jason and two partners, using geolocators, that Colorado's Black Swifts spend the winter in Brazil.



**Special Monitoring Projects Coordinator Jason Beason attaches a tiny geocator to a Western Tanager in Rocky Mountain National Park in June.**