

# THE PRIMARY SOURCE

*Our mission is to conserve birds of the Rocky Mountains, Great Plains, and Intermountain West and the habitats on which they depend through research, monitoring, education, and outreach.*

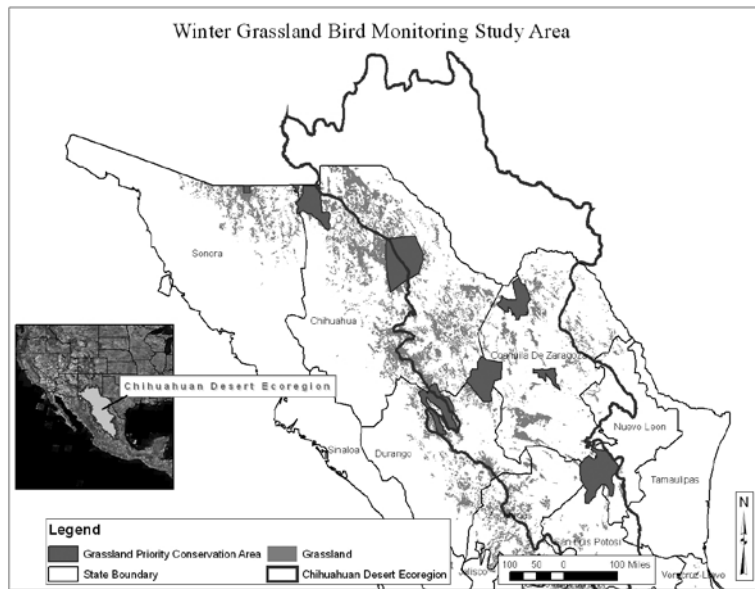
## RMBO Launches Initiative to Monitor Wintering Grasslands Birds in Mexico

*Story and photos by Arvind Panjabi, Director, International Programs*

On January 23, 18 field biologists were surprised to find themselves in the midst of a heavy snowfall on the Chihuahuan Desert grasslands of Rancho El Uno, near Janos, Chihuahua, Mexico. The biologists were there for the first day of a week-long training program that launched a new effort aimed at conserving one of the most threatened avian guilds in North America, grassland birds.

In cooperation with a broad coalition of U.S. and Mexican organizations, RMBO's new International Program has taken aim at dramatically increasing our understanding of the conservation needs of declining grassland birds in what is perhaps their most important wintering area in North America, the Chihuahuan Desert.

Virtually all migratory grassland bird species of the western Great Plains over-winter in the arid grasslands of the Chihuahuan Desert, which lie mostly in Mexico. Yet surprisingly little is known from this region about what areas and habitat types are most important for these birds' survival and how such patterns may change among years. While the region as a whole is vast, covering parts of 11 states in northern Mexico, only a small portion



(<7%) supports native grasslands. These remaining grasslands are facing a fresh onslaught of development pressures that threaten to reduce what is left of this fragile ecosystem within the next few decades. Information on priority regions, habitats, and habitat conditions for the full suite of grassland bird species is urgently needed to develop scientifically sound strategies to conserve and protect important areas of habitat.

Through this project RMBO hopes to better understand the spatial, ecological, and temporal distribution of wintering grassland birds across the Chihuahuan desert in Mexico, with an emphasis

on priority species and priority conservation areas. Eight Grassland Priority Conservation Areas have been identified in Mexico, including Sonorita in northeast Sonora, Janos in northwestern Chihuahua, Valles Centrales in north-central Chihuahua, El Bolsón de Mapimí in Chihuahua, Durango, and Coahuila, Cuchillas de la Zarca in Durango, Cuatro Ciénegas and Valle Colombia in Coahuila, and El Tokio in the borderlands of Coahuila, San Luis Potosi, Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas. Focal species include Scaled, Gambel's and Montezuma Quail, Ferruginous Hawk and all other raptors, Short-eared and Burrowing Owl, Mountain Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Loggerhead Shrike, Sprague's Pipit, and Baird's Sparrow. However, surveyors will record all species encountered during surveys, in order to maximize their field efforts.

The training program in mid-January focused on grassland bird identification and field survey protocol. Sixteen Mexicans, one American, and one

*Continued on page 3*



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## Gardner Assumes ED Role

By the time this issue of *The Primary Source* reaches you, Melissa A. Gardner will have assumed the role of executive director of RMBO. Melissa brings RMBO a combination of dedication to the environment and sound business experience that the Board of Directors thinks will prepare the observatory for the next steps in its growth as a major force in bird conservation.

"I'm impressed with the expertise of the staff and am very excited about the potential of RMBO's growing contribution to bird conservation," Gardner said. "I'm looking forward to meeting the members and partners in the near future."

Gardner came to Colorado from Nebraska after serving four years as an elected member of the Papio-Missouri Natural Resources District (NRD). Operating with a \$30 million a year budget, the district had broad responsibility for protection and enhancement of Nebraska's natural resources. Her tenure with the NRD included service as the district's finance chair.

In her role with the NRD and as associate regional representative for the Sierra Club in Nebraska, Gardner worked closely with all levels of government, and negotiated and administered contracts, grants, and cooperative agreements. She also served as executive director of Earth Day Omaha, directing everything from fund-raising and capital campaign management to public relations and coalition formation.

"RMBO has strong staff expertise in avian biology," said Board Chair Charles Hundertmark. "What Melissa Gardner brings to us is the financial savvy, fund raising ability, and organizational management knowledge we need to build the structural platform for future success in bird conservation."

Before moving into environmental leadership roles, she held marketing management positions with US West Paging and Milex Products, Inc., a pharmaceutical products company. A graduate of Creighton University, Gardner holds a bachelor of science in business administration, and a juris doctorate of law from Creighton University School of Law.



## Special Thanks...

To John and Jane Stulp, who farm near Lamar, CO, for supporting the Mountain Plover Nest Conservation Project. They have participated in voluntary nest survey and conservation efforts since inception of the project in 2003, and provide housing in Fort Collins and the Lamar area to RMBO personnel that work on the project.

And to Eagle Optics for a generous donation of 22 pair of Bosma Compact 10x25 Binoculars for use with W.O.W. (Wonders of Wildlife) Camp this summer. Campers will be able to be out at Barr Lake and other local natural areas and observe birds and other wildlife with these light-weight, high-quality binoculars. This donation is valued at \$1,100 and we are very grateful to Eagle Optics for contributing to RMBO's Education Division.

A special thanks also to Mr. Robert Berry of the Wolf Creek Charitable Foundation who presented RMBO with a \$10,000 donation to support our continued efforts for bird conservation.

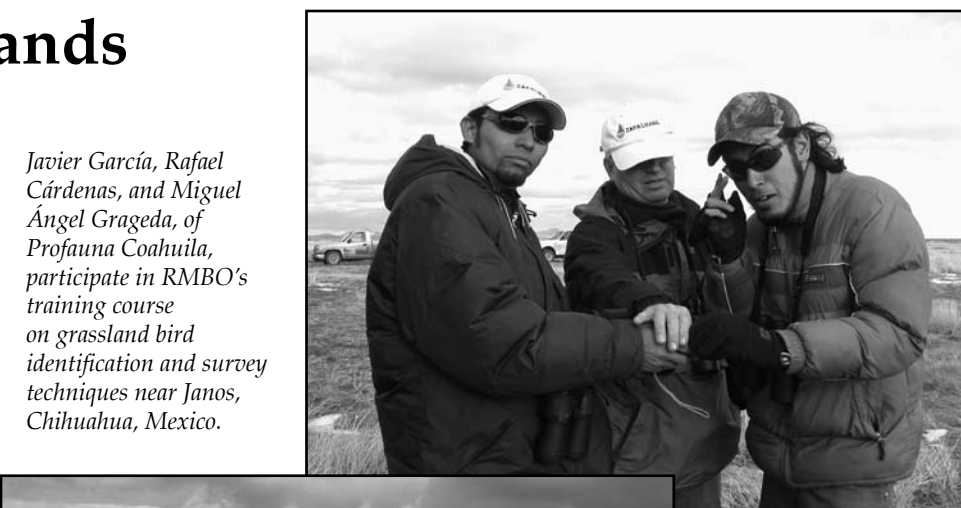
## Wintering Grasslands Birds in Mexico

from page 1

Canadian participated in the workshop, representing six institutions: the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo Leon, ProNatura Noreste, Profauna Chihuahua, Profauna Coahuila, the Universidad Juárez del Estado de Durango, and Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory. The Universidad de Nuevo Leon is playing a central role in coordinating partners and field activities in Mexico.

The group was rather unprepared for the heavy snowfall they received on 4 of the 5 training days -- the most the area had seen in 20 years. Still, participants braved the cold and wet conditions and spent long days in the field practicing sparrow identification, distance estimation, and survey protocol. The snow actually made it easier to see some grassland birds like Baird's Sparrows, as they were forced out of their usual hiding places and out onto the open snow. Grassland sparrows in general were abundant in and around the ranch, as were other less common species such as Short-eared Owl, Mountain Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Ferruginous Hawk, and McCown's Longspur, providing ample opportunities for study. By the end of the week, all participants had dramatically improved their identification skills and were ready to begin field work in earnest.

Field work for the 2006-2007 season wrapped up by the end of February. Lead investigators are now starting to assemble the first-ever snapshot of wintering grassland bird species' distribution and abundance across the Chihuahuan Desert of Mexico. The information will inform ongoing conservation strategies being implemented by government and private organizations to conserve and better manage important areas for grassland biodiversity in northern Mexico. Major funding for the project is provided by The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S.D.A. Forest Service.



Javier García, Rafael Cárdenas, and Miguel Ángel Grageda, of Profauna Coahuila, participate in RMBO's training course on grassland bird identification and survey techniques near Janos, Chihuahua, Mexico.



Magdalena Salinas and Irene Ruvalcaba, of the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, enjoy a laugh during RMBO's grassland bird identification and survey techniques training course conducted near Janos, Chihuahua, Mexico.



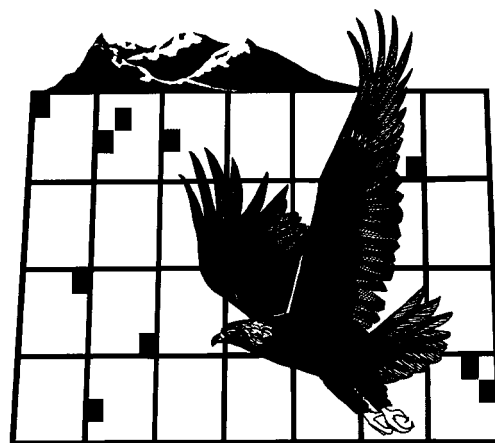
A Black-tailed Prairie-dog scans for predators in one of the largest prairie-dog colonies in North America, near Janos, Chihuahua, Mexico.

# Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas II: Birding at its Best

Chuck Hundertmark, Chair

When I began birding in the 1960s in Pennsylvania, two books shaped the direction of my study of bird life. The first, of course, was Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds: Eastern Land and Water Birds*. At Peterson's urging, I joined the growing flock of birders keeping a life list. More influential than Peterson, however, was Joseph Hickey's *A Guide to Bird Watching*. For Hickey, bird watching was more than keeping a life list; it was studying the behaviors, life histories, migratory patterns, and breeding behaviors of birds. In short, it was what today is called "citizen science."

Over the years, I participated in the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's nest-record card program, ran Breeding Bird Survey Routes, compiled Christmas Bird Counts,



established a bird-banding station, and ran bird transects. In the mid-1980s, however, James R. Travis invited me to help in the field with the Los Alamos County, New Mexico, breeding bird atlas project. I quickly found that atlasing was birding at its best.

For Colorado birders who made the same discovery when the state's first breeding bird atlas was launched in 1987, there's exciting news. The second Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas Project is being launched this year. The Colorado Bird Atlas Partnership, which acts as the Steering Committee for the atlas, has hired Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory to coordinate the project. Tony Leukering is the Atlas II coordinator.

Through the atlas project, hundreds of volunteer field workers will document breeding birds throughout Colorado over a period of five or more years. The outcome will be an atlas with maps showing the distribution of every known breeding bird in the state. The atlas will be a resource for land managers as well as a guide for birders.

Atlas volunteers work in blocks of about 3.25 miles on a side to detect breeding birds in all of the habitats within the block. They record evidence of breeding whether it is the presence of a nest or behavior that indicates likelihood of breeding. Territorial singing, courtship displays, carrying food, or begging young are among the behaviors that can indicate breeding with varying degrees of certainty. By spending 20-30 hours in an assigned block during the breeding season, an observer can generally get a good picture of what breeding birds are present.

Atlasing lets you apply and extend your skills at bird-song identification. It also leads you to pay closer attention to what the birds around you are doing. And it gives you an opportunity to use your birding skills to expand our knowledge of birds and support bird conservation.

For more information about the project, visit the RMBO web site at <http://rmbo.org/specialproj/atlas2.html>.

## Getting Involved in Atlas II

**Volunteer as a field worker.** Atlas blocks are currently being assigned. Volunteers will receive a packet containing field cards and complete instructions. To volunteer visit our web site at <http://rmbo.org/specialproj/atlas2.html> or email Tony Leukering at [tony.leukering@rmbo.org](mailto:tony.leukering@rmbo.org). org. **Sponsor the atlas.** Corporate and foundation sponsorships are welcome. Individual participation is invited at the following levels:

Annual Contribution	Category	Benefits
Commitment	Field Worker	Newsletters
\$ 25	Member	Newsletters and decal
\$ 60	Partner	Above, plus T-shirt
\$ 125	Block Partner	Above, plus annual report recognition
\$ 250	Block Sponsor	Above, plus atlas publication recognition
\$1000	Patron	Above, plus copy of publication and invitations to special events

The Colorado Bird Atlas Partnership is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. Contributions are tax deductible as provided by federal and state law. Donations can be sent to CBAP, PO Box 18882, Denver, CO 80218.

## Biometrician Helps Assess Variations in Monitoring Approaches

By David Hanni, Director, Monitoring Division, and Jennifer Blakesley, Biometrician

What is the best way to conduct point counts? What is the best way to analyze point count data? How long do we need to monitor to spot trends? RMBO researchers and our clients ponder these questions as they seek cost-effective ways to get accurate data on bird population trends. To answer some of these questions RMBO hired Biometrician Jennifer Blakesley, co-author of this article, in 2006.

In 1998, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO) initiated "Monitoring Colorado's Birds" (MCB), a program to monitor avian populations in Colorado. RMBO set up 30 transects randomly placed within each of 12 habitat types throughout the state. Each transect contains 15 evenly-spaced points from which all avian species are sampled during 5-minute point counts. In addition, we record observations of raptors, woodpeckers, and other low-density species along the transect connecting the sample points.

For each bird, details including distance from the observer are recorded allowing us to estimate the probability of detection for each species in each habitat type using Distance Sampling theory. This in turn, allows us to estimate the density of each species in each habitat type, a basis for projecting regional population size to help plan resource management.

This protocol has now been expanded to other states in the Rocky Mountain region.

Since the program began, scientists have proposed two alternate ways to estimate detection probability. First is the Removal method, which divides the five-minute point count period into five one-minute intervals, and second is the Double-Observer method, where two technicians are collecting data at the same time. The new techniques in conjunction with Distance sampling can offer more precise abundance estimates.

In 2006, RMBO implemented the Removal method in all habitats surveyed in the program while continuing to collect distance data as in previous years. We implemented the Double-Observer method in two of the habitats surveyed, in addition to the Removal and Distance sampling methods. In 2006-2007, we are comparing the Removal, Double-Observer, and Distance Sampling methods in terms of both the estimates obtained and logistics of implementing the methods. These comparisons will provide direction for future sampling methods to be used in avian monitoring programs

Here are some of the analyses that Jennifer Blakesley has been pursuing for RMBO in 2006-2007:

1. Comparison of point transect and line transect data for low-density species using Distance sampling methods. Based on data collected since 2002, we have determined that for many low density species line transects provided
2. Multi-year estimates of density using Distance sampling methods, allowing estimates of low-density avian species that could not have been achieved with single-year data.
3. Estimation of power to detect trends. We have used historical data to help us predict when we will be able to detect trends for individual species. Early detection of population trends is the long-term goal of monitoring.
4. Estimation of statewide avian population sizes. For the first time RMBO is calculating population estimates for individual species. This effort will allow RMBO to compare these local estimates to estimates continental scale estimates by Partners in Flight.
5. Evaluation of Removal sampling method. This method improved precision for the abundance estimates for some species when compared to Distance sampling. Because data required to use the Removal method can be obtained at no additional cost over Distance sampling, we will continue to collect Removal data.
6. Evaluation of Double-Observer sampling method. This method also generated more precise abundance estimates for some species, but is expensive to implement. We will continue to use the Double-Observer method on a limited basis when evaluating the performance of field technicians.

## RMBO Educational Volunteers

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory is looking for committed volunteers to teach educational programs at Barr Lake State Park, Dinosaur Ridge, and at our Education and Bird Banding Station in Fort Collins, Lamar, and Colorado Springs in the spring of 2007 (March-June).

If you like working with children, are enthusiastic, flexible, and have a general understanding of ecological processes, this is a great opportunity to help further RMBO's mission to conserve birds in our region. We will provide training in specific program-content and teaching techniques. Programs are approximately

2 hours in length and occur in the morning. Eligible volunteers should be able to commit 20 hours from March-June.

Please contact Amanda Morrison, assistant education director, for more details. [amanda.morrison@rmbo.org](mailto:amanda.morrison@rmbo.org), or 303-659-4348 ext. 6#.

RMBO education volunteer Terri Hicks-Anderson works with preschoolers at Highland Early Childhood Education Center in Ault, CO.



# SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

by Chris White and Melissa Rechner

## Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco Hyemalis*)

One of the most common winter visitors to bird feeders in Colorado is the Dark-eyed Junco. Juncos are hard to miss, foraging in large flocks in local parks, urban areas and patchy coniferous forests. A medium-sized sparrow, the junco has a distinct white belly, a noticeably pink bill and legs, and a black mask surrounding its eyes. The body tends to be gray to dark gray or brown with white outer tail feathers. The degree of contrast varies within each of the five forms that are found here.

throughout the state, with Slate-colored being more common in the lower foothills and on the eastern plains and Oregon more common in the mountains and on the west slope. The Slate-colored Junco has a dark gray to brown body with a contrasting white belly and is the darkest form observed in Colorado. The source of Colorado's wintering Slate-colored is probably the Northern Rocky Mountains, but the species range is vast, extending from western Canada to the Canadian Maritimes.



Gray-headed junco, photo by Jeff Jones

Dark-eyed Juncos are divided into as many as 15 subspecies dependent upon their range and variations in their plumage. These subspecies have been lumped into five groups that are recognizable in the field. All forms can typically be found in small mixed flocks foraging on the ground for insects, seeds and other plant material.

Here in Colorado, the Pink-sided Junco, which is the second-largest, is most common in winter. The Pink-sided Junco has a light blue-gray hood and broad pink flanks extending all the way to the legs, leaving only a small strip of white on the breast. This subspecies migrates from breeding areas from Wyoming north and west to Alberta, Canada.

The Slate-colored and Oregon Juncos are also common in Colorado and can be found

Slightly less abundant, but more widespread, the Oregon has a well-defined dark gray to black hood, contrasted by a reddish-brown back and sides. Take care when identifying this form, as some female Oregon Juncos are comparable in color and pattern to those of female Pink-sided Juncos. This Junco migrates to breeding grounds ranging from British Columbia to Alaska.

The Gray-headed Junco is a year-round resident of Colorado's mountains where it breeds most commonly in closed-canopy aspen and lodgepole pine habitats. It is characterized by a pale gray body and an unmistakable red back. This elevational migrant can be found in the lower mountains and foothills, as well as in wooded urban areas in winter.

The least common and largest winter junco in Colorado, the White-winged Junco looks similar to the Slate-colored, but is paler in plumage and has a more defined mask surrounding its eyes. Despite the name, this subspecies sometimes lacks prominent wing bars and occasionally, individuals of the other four forms may possess them. The White-winged Junco can be found from Larimer County south to Custer and Pueblo Counties, within an isolated range along the eastern



Slate-colored junco, photo by Jeff Jones

foothills. This subspecies migrates to parts of Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska and the Black Hills area of South Dakota during the summer months to breed.

The next time you are looking at juncos at your birdfeeder or passing a flock of small birds in a park, stop for a moment and see if you can observe the pink flanks of the Pink-sided Junco, the bright red back of the Gray-headed Junco, or the distinct dark gray hood of the Oregon Junco. You may be surprised at how many different forms you can spot.

Chris White is a biology graduate of Arizona State University working as an intern with RMBO. Melissa Rechner is a natural resource management graduate of Colorado State University interning with RMBO. Both are planning to pursue graduate degrees.



Oregon junco, photo by Jeff Jones

## RMBO Spring Events

Join RMBO for any (or all!) of these up-coming events:

### Flagler Field Days

April 14 and 15

Join fellow birders for an exciting weekend of bird-watching in the plains community of Flagler! Tours guided by expert birders and local farmers and ranchers will give you a taste of both rural Colorado and its unique bird life. Trips include a Greater Prairie Chicken Tour, Spring Migrants at Crystal Springs Ranch, Grimes and Mills Ranch/Farm Tour and Loutzenhiser Farms Tour. For more information call 719-765-4051

### Karval Mountain Plover Festival, Lincoln Co, CO

April 28 and 29

The 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Karval Mountain Plover Festival will include education presentations and field trips on the shortgrass prairie in search of Mountain Plover, Burrowing Owl, Ferruginous Hawk and Swift Fox. Other highlights include visits to Great Plains riparian and playa lakes habitat in search of migrants. Evening Chuckwagon Cookout and entertainment included with \$75 registration fee. For more information contact Carl or Cherry Stogsdill at 719-446-5354 or rainbowvalley@prairienetworks.com

### "Birds, Bugs, and Beasts", Chico Basin Ranch

May 5

Visitors will have the opportunity to see birds in the hand at RMBO's Education and Bird Banding Station on the ranch starting at 6:30 am and can then choose to spend the morning with Dr. Paula Cushing, a spider expert from the Denver Museum of Nature & Science or go on a wagon tour of the ranch stopping along the way to see the wildlife the ranch supports including birds, mammals, invertebrates and more! Continental breakfast and lunch provided.

### "Riding the Range- It's For The Birds!"

Chico Basin Ranch

May 5

Bring your bike and your binoculars to this 83,000 acre working cattle ranch located about 35 miles southeast of Colorado Springs. Spend a fun-filled day on the Ranch! Start out learning about birds at the Education and Bird Banding Station, and then take an "exclusive" 11 mile, down-hill, bike ride to the historic Bar JH Ranch for lunch. \$35/adult, \$75/family with children under 12, children over 12 are \$20, military \$20. All proceeds benefit Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory and The Ranchlands Learning and Research Center.

### "Breakfast With the Birds", Fort Collins

May 12

Come out to the Environmental Learning Center North for a fun morning learning about birds at the Education and Bird Banding Station. See songbirds up-close and learn about their amazing adaptations and behaviors. \$5/person, \$15/family. Continental breakfast provided and coffee compliments of Daz Bog.

### International Migratory Bird Day with Girl Scouts, Brighton

May 12

Join Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory and visit Barr Lake State Park's Wildlife Refuge to identify plants and animals, use binoculars and spotting scopes, observe and identify birds by sight, song and call, observe bird behaviors, sketch birds in their natural habitat, and create your own life list of birds. By participating in this exciting event, Girl Scouts will gain skills and knowledge necessary to obtain the *All About Birds and Wildlife* badges.

### "Breakfast With The Birds", Lamar

May 19

Willow Creek on the Lamar Community College campus. Come out for a fun morning learning about birds at the Education and Bird Banding Station. See songbirds up-close and learn about their amazing adaptations and behaviors. Then,

take a short trip to a near-by playa to learn about the importance of these areas to birds and other wildlife.

### Boy Scout Bird Day, Fort Collins

May 19

At the Environmental Learning Center, 3745 East Prospect Road, Fort Collins, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, along with Rocky Mountain Raptor Program and Colorado Division of Wildlife will present activities and information for Scouts to complete their Bird Study Badge.

### "The Singing Life of Birds", Denver Museum of Nature and Science

May 23 and 24

Donald Kroodsma. (See separate article on page 8 for details.)

### Project Wild II- Amazing Birds!, Audubon Center at Chatfield

June 7, 7:30am-4pm

This workshop is designed to give classroom teachers more information and knowledge of birds and to suggest learning activities to use in the classroom. The workshop will focus on bird anatomy and adaptations, bird behavior including migration, and Colorado ecosystems and the birds found in each. The fee for the workshop is \$20, and continuing education credit is available.

### BioBlitz, All Species Count, Barr Lake State Park, Brighton

June 15 and 16

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory and Barr Lake State Park have partnered for the Second Annual BioBlitz, All Species Count. RMBO members and BLSP volunteers, and their friends and families are invited to attend this free event to help count every living thing within the Park boundary. Join us for an afternoon, evening, or early morning count of birds, wildlife, insects, and plants.

For more information about these events, please contact Shelly Morrell at shelly.morrell@rmbo.org.

# RMBO Brings Kroodsma Back to Colorado

This year, RMBO launched a new lecture series, *The Secret Life of Birds*, co-sponsored by the Denver Museum of Nature and Science (DMNS) and made possible through funding from the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District. Lectures are held at DMNS. The series kicked off March 1 with "The Tropical Life of Birds," a slide presentation by Nancy Bell narrated by her husband, Chuck Bell, vice chair of the RMBO Board of Directors.

Next up will be Donald Kroodsma's presentation on "The Singing Life of Birds." Members of Colorado Field Ornithologists (CFO) will remember Kroodsma's dynamic



presentation and workshop from last year's annual CFO convention. If you love the early morning chorus of summer bird song, you won't want to miss this event. Kroodsma will offer a lecture May 23 and a bird walk May 24. Here are the details:

## The Singing Lives of Birds

Donald Kroodsma, PhD, author and professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts

Come listen to birds as you've never listened before, hearing what they have to say as a window into their minds, not just to identify them but to identify with them. Kroodsma has studied birdsong for more than 30 years and is recognized as the reigning authority on avian vocal behavior. He is the author of *The Singing Life of Birds* and winner of the 2006 John Burroughs Medal.

Wednesday, May 23  
7:00 p.m.  
Ricketson Auditorium, DMNS  
\$12 member (Museum and RMBO);  
\$15 nonmember  
Book sale + signing

## Bird Walk with Donald Kroodsma

Don't miss a special bird walk led by Kroodsma, one of the leading authorities on listening to birds and a guy who actually makes getting up very early in the morning worth it. Co-leader of the walk will be Joe Roller, of the RMBO board. We'll walk a few minutes away from where we park, stand in a "birdy" spot, and listen to the earliest singers before dawn. New voices pipe up and add to the chorus, one by one. Each birder will get to listen to singing birds through headphones, using a parabolic reflector--an awesome experience that seems to put the bird on the beak of your cap! Following the dawn chorus, we'll walk a ways to see what else we can hear and see. Limited to 20 participants.

Thursday, May 24  
4:30 a.m.- 10:30 a.m. approximately  
Cherry Creek State Park  
\$25 member (Museum and RMBO)  
\$35 nonmember

To register for these events call  
303-322-7009 or 1-800-925-2250



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