



# THE PRIMARY SOURCE

*Our mission is to conserve birds and their habitats.*

## To buffer or not to buffer: Conservation of playa wetlands in southwestern Nebraska

By David Pavlacky, spatial ecologist

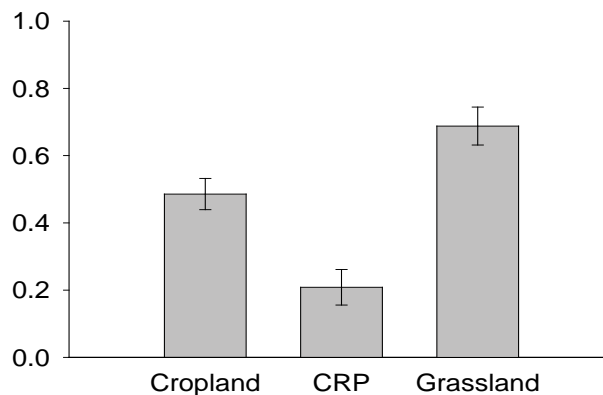
When it rains, it pours ...playas. In a typical year in the Great Plains region, we experience long periods of dry, hot days punctuated at varying intervals by rain. That periodic precipitation fills seasonal, shallow depressions in the grasslands, called playas, that provide important habitat for migrating birds. Some are tiny, others cover large swaths of land, and in many places, series of neighboring playas create wetland complexes.

In some respects – partly because they all but vanish during dry periods – playas are among the most underappreciated of wetlands. The land they occupy is not wet much of the year, and in drought years, playas are simply basins of parched, cracked earth. Even when filled to their brims with water, playa lakes are sometimes referred to as “buffalo wallows” or “lagoons.”

Despite their humble appearance, playa wetlands are biodiversity hot spots in prairie ecosystems. Their shallow waters teem with invertebrate and seed resources, providing important stopover habitat for migratory shorebirds, waterfowl and other birds.



RMBO staff (left to right) Emily Steel, Alison Cariveau and Cliff Cordy monitor a CRP playa in southwestern Nebraska. Photo: Derek Hill



Probability of playa filling following heavy rain, by surrounding landcover type

Many playas are threatened by plowing and sedimentation in agricultural landscapes. Buffers of grassland vegetation and conservation tillage practices, both found in areas that are part of the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), may reduce

sedimentation in playas. However, little is known about the effects of such practices on playa hydrology and wildlife abundance. In southwest Nebraska, the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory investigated playa filling rates and wildlife responses to different landscape types, including agriculture, native grassland and areas enrolled in CRP buffer programs.

Our research showed that playas in native grassland were more likely to become inundated after heavy rainfall than playas in cropland, and playas in the CRP showed the lowest rate of filling (See figure). In contrast with the results for filling, the numbers of dabbling ducks and landbirds using the playa increased with the area of CRP land in the landscape. The number of bird species was lower at playas within agricultural landscapes, and more species were found in playa complexes.

Shorebird abundance was greatest in playa complexes and was lowest in playas with deep pits. Overall, bird abundance and species numbers were greater in large playas than in small playas.

Playas in areas buffered by CRP may not fill as regularly because dense vegetation planted in the buffer zone uses much of

*Continued on page 4*



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## From the director...

*Tammy VerCauteren, executive director*

What an amazing, out-of-the-ordinary summer we have had. As a native Midwesterner, I fully enjoyed the moisture and cooler temperatures, and the wonderful displays of wildflowers the conditions brought. You will read, in this 32nd edition of "The Primary Source," a story by Loni Beyer about some great sightings in the field (Page 3). Our state bird, the Lark Bunting, was back in force, and habitat was in abundance.

Even with cool, rainy days, more than 95 percent of all bird-monitoring transects from Montana to Arizona were completed this summer, thanks to a dedicated corps of RMBO biologists and technicians. What we know already is that more than 100,000 birds were observed, representing nearly 300 species. Stay tuned to learn more in our December issue when we have compiled and analyzed the data.

RMBO has also been active in wetland research with an emphasis on playas, and we recently wrapped up some data analyses. But, what are playas? These shallow wetlands dot the southern Great Plains and provide essential fueling stations for migratory birds as well as water and habitat for resident wildlife. RMBO has been working with Playa Lakes Joint Venture, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and other partners to fill in knowledge gaps about these critical wetlands, including how many are out there, how birds use them and ways we can better conserve them. Learn more by reading David Pavlacky's article (cover story) about the Nebraska playa buffer program.

We are excited about cooperative efforts with new partners, including the Colorado Mountain Club and Colorado Chautauqua Association. These partnerships have allowed us to provide special birding trips, attend festivals, and offer seminars about birds and the work we do. We look forward to continuing these efforts and building new partnerships. We will co-host Dick Ashford, of the American Birding Association, at Chautauqua in Boulder on Oct. 15 for his popular "Hawk Talk." Stay tuned to our Web site for more opportunities to learn about birds and interact with our biologists. Also, if you haven't yet, check out our annual report on our Web site ([www.rmbo.org](http://www.rmbo.org)). It's a great document that showcases the important work we do for birds and conservation.

Finally, I want to thank all the board, staff and volunteers who made our annual BBQ With the Birds a great success again. The picnic is a time to share what RMBO has been doing, help members and others gain bird experience in the field through demonstrations and talks, and relax with friends to share our passion for birds and conservation. The weather cooperated beautifully, and we were glad to welcome many new folks to the Old Stone House.

Check the "Upcoming Events" listing on Page 4; we hope to see you this fall.



# Lark Buntings Ascending

By Loni Beyer, biologist

When Lark Buntings arrived to the shortgrass prairies of northern Colorado in mid-May, it was as though someone had opened a flood gate. The landscape was suddenly filled with their chatter, display and song. In northeastern Larimer County, where I was monitoring grassland birds, I was immediately entranced by the gregarious flocks and the shiny black feathers the males displayed. By the end of the week, there were so many Lark Buntings that I was straining to hear through their vigilant flight songs in order to detect the presence of the many other species also setting up territories for the breeding season. Similar experiences were shared throughout the local birding community, and it was not long before the talk had come full-circle: 2009 was an exceptionally good year for Lark Buntings in Colorado.

In July RMBO completed its fourth year of monitoring grassland birds on the prairies of the 26,000-acre Meadow Springs Ranch and 18,764-acre Soapstone

Prairie Natural Area, just north of Fort Collins. Over this period, Horned Larks and McCown's Longspurs were the most abundant birds, followed by Western Meadowlarks. This year 2,677 Lark Buntings were detected; their densities more than quadrupled from prior years. The species was second in abundance only to the Horned Lark in our study areas.

We can only speculate as to the cause for this increase in abundance. Was last year a particularly successful breeding season? Was survivorship greater on wintering grounds? Or was there some change in environmental conditions causing the bunting populations to shift to these areas? For most of us along the Front Range, the first thing that pops in to our minds is the unusually wet season we had. It is well known that Lark Buntings

respond to annual precipitation patterns and are nomadic, moving as necessary to exploit food resources and favorable habitat conditions. So it is likely they came to us this year on the coattails of the abundant spring rain.

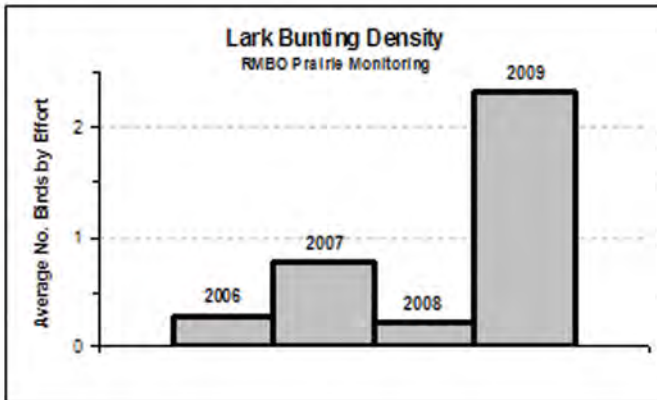
Now, in the first days



Male Lark Bunting. Photo by Bill Schmoker.

of September, we're watching the male buntings' black feathers molt to brown as they flock together with the same individuals that were their breeding rivals just a few weeks ago. Juveniles continue to beg for food as they prepare for their first migration and the unusually lush prairies lose their green. We do not take this year for granted, for even though the buntings were abundant here this year, their populations continue to decline throughout their range. As all the migrants show signs of their approaching southbound journey, we wish them well. The data we're collecting at Soapstone on grassland birds will help guide management efforts there and will help ensure healthy habitat conditions are provided for our state bird.

To contact Loni Beyer, call 970-482-1707, ext. 15, or e-mail her at [loni.beyer@rmbo.org](mailto:loni.beyer@rmbo.org)



## Grants and Awards

Grant funding is critical to the work of RMBO biologists and field staff, and our educators. The following grants and awards have been received since June:

- USDA Forest Service Washington Office: \$20,000 for management and dissemination of the Partners in Flight Species Assessment Database and the Population Estimates Database.
- USDA Rio Grande Research Station: \$18,000 for our project "Wintering Grassland Birds as Bioindicators in the Rio Grande Drainage Basin" project. Other partners in the project include Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas.

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## Playa wetland buffers (from Page 1)

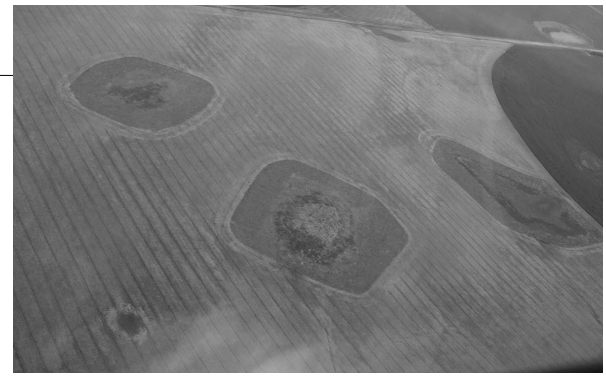
the available water. Despite low filling rates, CRP land at the landscape scale was important for maintaining high numbers of dabbling ducks and landbirds. This seeming contradiction raises the question of whether to buffer or not to buffer.

The results of our investigation suggest that planting native prairie species in CRP buffers may increase the filling rate of playas, reduce sedimentation and maintain high numbers of migratory birds in the landscape. Our recommendation to plant native prairie species in buffers is based on restoring playa wetlands to conditions similar to their evolutionary history.

Conservation efforts should prioritize large playas in complexes, which provide important stopover habitat for migratory birds. Restoring pitted playas will likely improve mudflat habitat for migrating shorebirds.

In addition, applying buffers of native grassland to small, isolated playas may improve filling rates and habitat conditions for migratory bird species.

The full report on playa filling rates can be found on RMBO's Web site, [www.rmbo.org](http://www.rmbo.org). We'd like to thank the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the Playa Lakes Joint Venture for



Aerial photo of playa buffers in an agricultural landscape in southwestern Nebraska. Photo: Tim Hermansen

providing funding for this project from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's State Wildlife Grant Program and Conoco-Phillips, respectively.

To contact David Pavlacky, call 970-482-1707, ext. 11, or e-mail him at [david.pavlacky@rmbo.org](mailto:david.pavlacky@rmbo.org)

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## Upcoming Events

### Northern Colorado Birding Fair

**Sept. 26:** A fun day of bird-related activities, including games, bird walks and presentations with live birds. Again, RMBO staff will be on hand with a booth and activities. At Fossil Creek Reservoir Regional Open Space, from 7 a.m. until 1 p.m.

### Polarpalooza

**Oct. 7:** Help celebrate the 20th birthday of the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District and the public support it provides for organizations in its seven-county area. A full, free day of entertainment, education and culture is planned at the Denver Zoo. RMBO's activities will take place near the Zoo's Bird World.

### Bird Banding Family Day

**Oct. 10:** All are welcome to attend this fun day at the Barr Lake Banding Station. An RMBO biologist will collect data from birds captured harmlessly in mist nets while an RMBO educator will lead participants in a discussion about how and why we band birds, the challenges of migration, and the habitat necessary to keep the birds coming back to Barr Lake. Tickets are \$5 per family, payable at the Banding Station; \$6 per vehicle park pass required.

### "Hawk Talk" with Dick Ashford

**Oct. 15:** Hawks capture our imaginations in ways that few other bird groups do. Dick Ashford, chairman of the board of the American Birding Association, has spent hundreds of hours researching and watching hawks. At Boulder's Chautauqua, beginning at 7:15 p.m., he will help us examine

the natural history of hawks, including their behavior, habitat and adaptations for survival. Tickets are \$3, available at the Chautauqua box office or online at [www.chautauqua.com](http://www.chautauqua.com)

### "RMBO: Conserving Birds and Their Habitats" presentation

**Oct. 26:** Need a refresher on what RMBO is all about? Join RMBO Executive Director Tammy VerCauteren and Chairman of the Board Chuck Hundertmark at the October meeting of the Denver Field Ornithologists (DFO) for an interactive presentation of our current work. The meeting will take place in the Denver Museum of Nature and Science's Ricketson Auditorium. Plan to arrive before 7:30 p.m. and use the west door; exterior doors are locked at that time and the presentation will begin promptly at 7:30 p.m.

### "Habitat Relationships of Wintering Grassland Sparrows in the Chihuahuan Desert of Mexico" lecture

**Nov. 23:** Come to the DFO's November meeting for an update on RMBO's work in the grasslands of the Chihuahuan Desert. Biologist Greg Levandoski will discuss what we've discovered about how bird abundances correlate with that region's different vegetation characteristics. Plan to arrive at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science before 7:30 p.m. and use the west door; exterior doors are locked at that time and the presentation will begin in Ricketson Auditorium promptly at 7:30 p.m.

### Festival of Lights, Brighton

**Dec. 12:** RMBO will be on hand for this full day of activities to celebrate the holiday season. Stop by our booth and put your name in the hat for drawings of some special items that could serve as holiday gifts.

## New RMBO Board Member

The name Larry Semo is familiar to birders across the country, especially those in Colorado where Larry has been a leader in the birding community for a decade. Now, Larry himself will become familiar to Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory staff, members and friends as a member of the RMBO Board of Directors.

A native of Wisconsin, Larry's intense interest in birds started early in his life, and by the age of 7, Larry was birding in the boreal forests of northwestern Wisconsin near the shores of Lake Superior. He comes by the passion for wildlife and the outdoors honestly: his parents and a grandfather were wildlife biologists. His father was manager for Pattison State Park located roughly 15 miles from the nearest town. The wild country surrounding Larry whetted his love for nature and his desire to study how ecosystems function.

After receiving a degree in wildlife biology from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, Larry worked as a bird bander at Hawk Ridge in Duluth, Minn., for many years and then as a wildlife biologist for the Department of Natural Resources in northern Wisconsin. In 1993 Larry was invited to join the environmental consulting company SWCA and work on the federally endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler and Black-capped Vireo in Texas. In 1999 he moved to the Denver area to establish a new SWCA regional office to serve the Rocky Mountains, where he is the senior ornithologist/ecologist with responsibility for overseeing SWCA's scientific reports and products to maintain quality science, directing SWCA's Rocky Mountain region staff, and conducting business development.



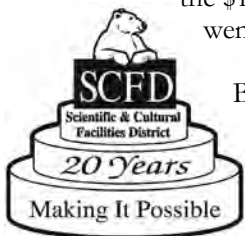
Larry has conducted numerous nesting and migration studies on a wide variety of species as well as distributional and population studies on a multitude of North American avifauna.

He is chair of the Colorado Field Ornithologists' Colorado Bird Records Committee and helped develop the CFO's online system by which observers can record details of sightings. Larry is also the listing editor for the American Birding Association; the Colorado regional editor for the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society's "eBird" program; and is an avian distribution and identification consultant for the "Peterson Field Guide to Birds," the "National Geographic Society's Guide to Birds" and the "Sibley Guide to Birds." Larry also is the Colorado/Wyoming regional co-editor for "North American Birds" and is an identification instructor for the Master Birding Program of the Audubon Society. He is a peer reviewer of scientific articles submitted to various ornithological journals and has authored numerous ornithological articles and papers as well.

Larry has long been involved with RMBO as a volunteer avian surveyor and has a fond appreciation of what its mission stands for. Larry is especially interested in assisting and mentoring the technical abilities of RMBO staff in their career development as well as using his experience in helping run a large biological company as an asset to ensure the continued strength and success of RMBO.

## New Adams County SCFD representative

The Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory is fortunate to be headquartered in a district where the "enlightenment and entertainment of the public" get a major boost from public dollars. Since 1988, when legislation established the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD) and voters approved a sales and use tax, the SCFD has collected one penny on every \$10 spent on retail purchases in Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas and Jefferson counties. Since 1988, SCFD has distributed \$591 million to nonprofit organizations and divisions of government that educate and entertain the public through the production, presentation, exhibition, advancement or preservation of art, music, theater, dance, zoology, botany, natural history and cultural history. Of the \$134,000 RMBO received in 2008, \$93,000 went directly to support education programs.



Bob Grant was appointed to the SCFD Board of Directors this spring to represent Adams County. Bob worked for 28 years as a prosecutor in the 17th Judicial District's District Attorney's office, which serves

Adams and Broomfield counties, and for the last 12 years of his tenure was the elected district attorney. Bob then went on to serve as Executive Director of the District Attorney's Council and taught at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law. He also

devoted time to public art in Adams County, organizing an ad hoc Visual Arts Committee in 1998 to ensure that public art was included in the construction of the Adams County Courthouse.

When he was invited to join the SCFD board, Bob says, the decision to do so was easy: "This is a wonderful opportunity to promote the arts and ensure that folks get the value for their dollar when they're paying their sales tax. It's important to me that this effort is for everyone, especially kids."

To contact Bob with questions or ideas about SCFD, send an e-mail to [rsgrant@msn.com](mailto:rsgrant@msn.com)



# Feathers, fun and food make a fabulous day

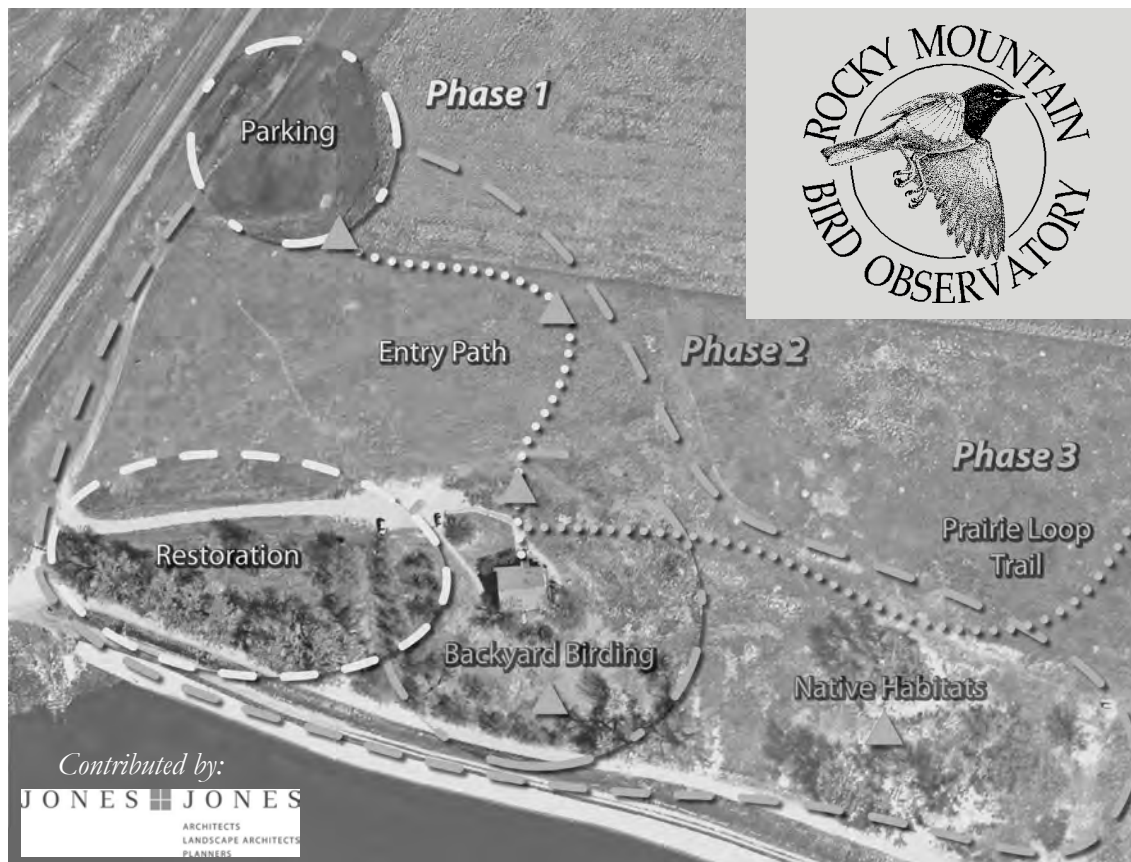
The 2009 **BBQ With the Birds** was a big hit, with a bigger crowd than we've ever had – more than 160 people, including members, friends, staff and board, were on hand for a full day of activities. Many folks were at the Old Stone House and learning about RMBO for the first time. Perfect weather helped everyone enjoy the presentations, games, bird hikes and the buffet. And our silent auction raised \$2,600, all of which will go toward RMBO's education programs. We'd like to give special thanks to partners and members who helped make the picnic a success: author and illustrator Susie Mottashed for once again offering sketching workshops, Dave Menough of Wild Birds Unlimited (with three stores in the Denver Metro area) and Davey Rock of Picadilly Nursery (located in Brighton) for sponsoring the Backyards for Birds seminar, the Raptor Education Foundation for bringing both their birds and their expertise, Palizzi Farms for donating the corn, and Gary Paul and his ranch P&P Cattle near Yoder, CO, for donating 50 pounds of ground beef. We'd also like to thank everyone who donated items for the silent auction. Your support of RMBO is very much appreciated!

*Photos by RMBO members Kitty LeDonne and Steve Deitemeyer, and Education Director Kacie Ehrenberger.*



Karen Levad presented the 2009 Richard G. Levad award to Mike Carter, founder of the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory. The award honors Rich's memory and his dedication to RMBO as special monitoring projects coordinator and to bird conservation. The award goes each year to the person who, like Rich, has provided distinguished service to the ornithological community, made scholarly contributions to the field of ornithology and/or has enthused others about conserving birds and their habitats through sharing his or her personal knowledge and experience. Karen said she was delighted to make the award to Mike because he had done so much to turn her husband's lifelong love of birds into a second career after Rich retired from teaching. Karen said Mike even generated Rich's terrific enthusiasm for field work. Mike is now coordinator for the Playa Lakes Joint Venture and continues to partner with RMBO on a number of projects.





## RMBO needs your input to move Stone House plans ahead

Inspired by a June interpretive planning workshop, RMBO's Brighton staff this summer took the first steps toward improving the appearance of the Old Stone House. Staff members realigned the rocks lining the path and cleaned up the bricks leading to the main entrance to make the approach more welcoming for visitors. And, thanks to RMBO's Nebraska staff contingent, the path is tidily weeded. The spruced up entryway is the first step toward having a headquarters – our home – where we can show people that providing a healthy home for birds creates a healthy home for all of us.

Readers may remember from the June newsletter that this summer RMBO hosted a course for interpretation professionals. The course generated a wealth of interesting and fun ideas to transform the Stone House into a place where members, friends and others can see and experience bird conservation through demonstrations, lectures, discussions and field trips.

The RMBO Special Purpose Old Stone House Committee is gleaning the ideas that will work best and will put together a plan for the Board of Directors to consider. The committee is now seeking membership and community input on a few of those ideas to guide the planning.

Thanks to the talent and continuing interest of one of the course participants, we were able to present at our picnic a map that shows proposed phases for a few of the suggested improvements. Kari Stiles, a landscape designer with the internationally recognized firm of Jones & Jones in Seattle, developed the map and a brochure that was distributed at the

picnic. The map is shown here, and the brochure is posted on our Web site.

Phase 1, to be accomplished in the next year, would result in a crushed stone path from the lower parking area to RMBO's front door, with interpretive signing to describe the native landscape and bird habitat seen along the way; and restoration of the grove of trees to the east of the house, including a trail through the grove to connect the house with the Barr Lake State Park trail.

Phase 2 would enhance the Stone House's educational elements, including a permanent backyard birding demonstration and outdoor class area, focusing on native plants; and trails through the prairies, along the Cottonwood groves near the house, and through the wetland edges of the canal system to the west of the house. Interpretive signing would highlight the dynamic relationship between plants, water and animals.

Phase 3 looks to the future, when RMBO can work with Barr Lake State Park to develop a longer prairie-loop trail highlighting the bird and bird habitat found there.

At the picnic, attendees filled out a survey to rank the ideas shown on the map. We've included the survey in the newsletter and hope you will fill it in and return it to us at RMBO, ATTN: Linda Alexander, P.O. Box 1232, Brighton, CO 80601-1232. Or, you can go to our Web site, [www.rmbo.org](http://www.rmbo.org), and submit the survey electronically.

We'll report in December on our progress.

# Kids find RMBO's Bird Camp is a hoot

By Cassy Bobnet, education assistant

A rustle in some nearby trees stopped RMBO Bird Camp hikers in their tracks. "What was that?" the kids asked as they tried to pinpoint the source of the sound. On a bird walk below the dam at Barr Lake in mid June, the group of 9- and 10-year-olds had just passed a grove of trees.

Out of the cottonwoods swooped a Barn Owl that flew right over their heads.

"Whoa," the kids whispered as they watched the owl wing silently away. The day campers won't forget this event from Winged Wonders camp, the first of three summer bird camps conducted by the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory's education staff in 2009.

Each four-day camp focused on a different aspect of birds. The kids, coming from as far away as Littleton, gathered for hikes, outdoor activities and games, and classroom presentations and crafts from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, and took a field trip on Friday.

Winged Wonders helped the campers learn about birds' special characteristics, examining how different types of beaks, feet and wings help birds survive in different habitats. During this look at bird adaptations, kids invented their own insect, built bird feeders, made paper bird airplanes, sculpted clay birds and dissected owl pellets. The Friday field trip began with a program at the Raptor Education Foundation, just a few miles southwest of RMBO's headquarters at Barr Lake, visited the Bald Eagle nest at Barr Lake, and finished with a hike at Veterans Park Open Space in Brighton.

A Bird's Life camp, for 11- and 12-year-olds, explored bird life cycles and

survival. Campers had a blast exploring Barr Lake on land during bird hikes and in the water while on a boat ride with a Barr Lake volunteer ranger. The kids loved the boat's gadgets, lights and sirens. They gained an appreciation for birds' nest-building skills as they attempted to build their own nests out of sticks, twine, yarn, ribbon and fishing line. This group also visited the Raptor Education



Winged Wonders campers enjoyed sculpting birds out of colored clay.

Foundation and learned about the adaptations raptors have developed that assist with their survival. These campers traveled to Hudson Gardens in Littleton, where they explored many garden habitats, identifying plants, learning about camouflage and seeing some of the things they could do at home to enhance bird habitat.

The last camp, Friendly Fliers, was for kids ages 10-12, and showed the campers how they can help birds in their own backyards. Each camper made window clings (using glue and food coloring to trace bird shapes, which they then peeled off

to stick on their windows at home to keep birds from flying into the glass). They also built Bluebird houses and bird feeders to put up at their homes. On Wednesday the campers visited Adams County Regional Park, where they had a trash collection competition, sampled water and played their favorite game, Predator/Prey. In this tag game, the predators get red or white poker chips

from the prey they catch, with red representing contaminated prey and white representing healthy prey. After collecting two red chips, the predators were disabled and could re-enter the game as prey; this was meant to demonstrate how contaminants, such as DDT, work their way through the food chain. On their Friday field trip to Hudson Gardens, the Friendly Fliers campers competed for prizes while searching for hidden objects throughout the gardens, identifying coniferous trees in the Conifer grove and searching for frogs in the wetlands.

Our intern, Mindy Harmon, and I were excited to watch each camper's interest and knowledge in bird conservation develop throughout their Bird Camp experience. We're considering some changes for the camps for next summer,



A Bird's Life campers on the bridge at Hudson Gardens in Littleton.



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## RMBO Bird Camp (from page 8)

including extending them to all day, incorporating an overnight trip to a park and enhancing the scientific components of the program. RMBO is staying in touch with campers through a seasonal newsletter and plans to have a camp reunion in January. Watch for information about dates and registration for next year's camps in the January newsletter.

To contact Cassy Bohnet, call 303-659-4348, ext. 15, or e-mail her at [cassy.bohnet@rmbo.org](mailto:cassy.bohnet@rmbo.org)



Friendly Fliers day campers, with RMBO Education Assistant Cassy Bohnet at left, test the water at Adams County Regional Park.

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## One man's used truck is RMBO's treasure

By Linda Detroy Alexander

She's an '85 Toyota truck – sassy red with a white topper – that wears her 190,053 miles well. Still, after tooling around in it for 25 years, Randy Siebert was ready to give her up.

“It was an old truck, so I knew it wouldn't be of interest to very many people,” Randy says. “I didn't want to go through the hassle of trying to sell it or dickering over the price, so I decided I'd give it away.”

Randy first thought of Colorado Public Radio, which has been actively soliciting charitable contributions of vehicles for years, and then he checked into some other nonprofits. “I know there's a number of organizations that get gifts of vehicles and then auction them off.”

A longtime member of RMBO, Randy contacted Board of Directors Chairman Chuck Hundertmark on the off chance that RMBO would want the truck.

“I was surprised when I heard back that Arvind [Arvind Panjabi is director of RMBO's International Program] was really interested,” Randy says. “He told me they could use the truck in Mexico. He said that when they would go to Mexico, they would get to El Paso and rent an SUV, which would immediately make them look like drug runners or peg them as a target for thieves or worse.”

When Randy's old Toyota goes with the international crew to Mexico this fall, it should fit in just fine. Randy and his wife,

Glenda Brown, went to West Mexico in 2007 on a birding trip with RMBO bird bander Brian Gibbons. “We saw lots of trucks there of about the same vintage, and we were kidding that ours would fit in well,” Randy says.

The truck, as most old trucks do, needed a little work when Randy gifted it to RMBO, and Arvind was happy to follow through. The brakes were fixed and axle seals replaced, but the money spent will quickly be recouped. The cost to rent a vehicle for the program was running \$1,300 a month.



Other division directors are eying the truck and wondering when they'll get their turn behind the wheel. “It will be available for other divisions when our field season is over,” Arvind says.

But what he wishes is that others will follow Randy's example. “We can especially use pick-up trucks and SUVs,” Arvind says.

Now that RMBO has been through the process, learning all the steps that need to be taken in transferring the title and documenting the gift so that the donor can receive a charitable-gift deduction on income taxes, the next vehicle gifts will be easier.

If you have a vehicle that you're ready to let go, we hope you'll consider donating it to RMBO. We'll get as much mileage from the gift as it can give. Contact Accounting Manager Jim Pauley at 303-659-4348, ext. 14, or by e-mail at [james.pauley@rmbo.org](mailto:james.pauley@rmbo.org)

# Creating a new vista for volunteers at RMBO

Volunteers are a vital part of the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory's operation, and we believe they should get as much from RMBO as they give to us through their time and talents. To build the education division's volunteer program, RMBO Director of Education and Outreach Kacie Ehrenberger sought and was awarded in May funding to add a temporary Americorps VISTA position to the education staff.

For three years, beginning this fall, RMBO will have the services of a VISTA member. The Colorado Youth Corps Association (CYCA) Good Works for Youth project is sponsoring 10 Americorps VISTA positions, and will pay the major portion of the costs through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. RMBO will spend \$2,600 for the first year of the program.

After sifting through 60 applications and interviewing eight people, Kacie hired RMBO's first VISTA member, Amy Rotter, in July (see story below). A new member will be hired for each of the second and third years. After training in August for both Kacie and Amy, Amy began working at the Old Stone House in September. The program is meant to provide a springboard to a career, so Kacie will enhance the training aspects for the VISTA members who work for RMBO.

"It was difficult to choose just one person," Kacie said. "All of them had such interesting experiences. Amy, though, has experience in managing volunteers, which is what we need."

The primary responsibility of the position is to serve as a volunteer coordinator, with a focus on building capacity for RMBO's education programs. The VISTA member will develop volunteer program procedures and job descriptions; recruit new volunteers and develop a program for retaining volunteers; develop a recognition program; and improve our volunteer database to make it easier to schedule and track hours, identify volunteers' skills and interests, and contact volunteers. The VISTA member will also help with recruiting and training of volunteers to assist with RMBO's citizen-science efforts (including Hawkwatch), and building RMBO's fundraising and partnership building.

It's clear the VISTA members will be busy, but each one will get lots of support from RMBO staff. "The VISTA member is not a typical employee," Kacie said. "The whole goal of the VISTA program is to help the people it serves move out of poverty, and RMBO works to give children and adults skills they need to do that through environmental education. Each member is expected by AMERICORPS/VISTA to live at the poverty level so that they understand what people in poverty have to cope with."

# Giving back; moving forward

Amy Rotter wants to make a difference in people's lives.



"I know from experience that even the simplest act of kindness can make a huge difference," says the 22-year-old. "As a member of my community, it is my duty to give back."

With a bachelor's degree from Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich., fresh in her hand, Amy started a 12-month internship in May 2008 at Kids' Food Basket, a hunger relief agency in Grand Rapids, Mich., Amy says, she realized she could pursue a career in community service.

"It was amazing going to work each day and knowing that everyone was there because they truly wanted to be," she says. "What was even more amazing was actually seeing the difference I was making in my community."

Now she's going to take another step toward that goal through a position as an Americorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) member, working with the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory for the next year.

Amy decided to join Americorps as a way to gain the skills, experience and opportunities she needs to continue her journey toward a life of serving others. As a student, she was active in the university's Student Environmental Coalition and the Grand Rapids Citizens Against Sulfide Mining group. In addition to her passion for environmental issues, Amy enjoys working with volunteers and coordinating their efforts. Although she had planned to stay in Michigan, Amy says the RMBO position was too good an opportunity to pass up.

"I think environmental education is an essential to environmental protection," she says. "This position particularly interests me because it will allow me to use the skills and experience I have acquired through my nonprofit work, along with my interest in volunteer coordinating and my love for the environment."

Those interests will be valuable as Amy works with RMBO over the next year. As a student in communications studies, she wrote her senior thesis on how nonprofits work with volunteers. RMBO Education Director Kacie Ehrenberger is looking forward to having Amy's help on finding new ways to engage, educate and recognize RMBO's volunteers. "She's enthusiastic about tackling what we need to do to grow our volunteer program," Kacie said. "We're enthusiastic about having her with us for a year."

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# Staff Migrations

## In...

**Loni Beyer** joined RMBO as a volunteer for the International Program in Janos, Mexico, in January. She came on board as a full-time biologist in March, working on RMBO's research efforts in the ecology of grassland birds' wintering and breeding grounds. Her avian career began during her undergraduate work at the University of California Santa Cruz, where she banded passerines for a local wetland restoration effort. She completed her bachelor's degree in 2001, working alongside the Santa Cruz Predatory Birds Research Group, and assessing the status of Santa Cruz County's Burrowing Owl population. Loni has since traveled and worked on various projects throughout the western United States, Mexico and Central America. These projects included monitoring shorebirds, passerine and raptor banding, and investigating the effects of prescribed burning on primary cavity nesters. In 2008 Loni obtained her M.S. in Environmental Science from Washington State University, where she studied the ecology of rare butterflies. Loni is happy to be back in her native state and pursuing the conservation of our feathered friends.



**Kathy Herbener** joined RMBO in July 2009 as a Playa Wetlands Technician to study the effectiveness of playa buffers. Five years ago, she was a playa wetlands intern and an education program volunteer with RMBO. Now she is working on her doctorate in ecology at Colorado State University and is thrilled to be working for RMBO again. As a volunteer naturalist for Fort Collins and Larimer County, Kathy loves to bring science together with nature education.

## Out...

**Alison Cariveau** was busily directing RMBO's research projects, including playa lakes and their patterns of bird use, when her husband graduated with his PhD and they moved to New Jersey for his post-doctoral position. Now she is enjoying wetter forests, the beach, eastern warblers, great shows in New York City, and lots of time with her two young sons. She misses all of her great friends at RMBO and hopes the family will be out west again before too long.



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# The Old Stone House needs some TLC

As we prepare to make exciting changes at the Old Stone House, RMBO is looking for members and friends interested in joining our new maintenance committee. Longtime member and former Board of Directors Chairman Paul Slingsby knows the Stone House inside and out and will lead the new committee. It will meet as needed to discuss maintenance issues and arrange for any problems to be fixed.

If you're interested in helping coordinate the upkeep of the lovely old building that houses our headquarters, or if you have handyman skills you can offer, contact Jim Pauley, 303-659-4348, ext. 14, or e-mail him at [james.pauley@rmbo.org](mailto:james.pauley@rmbo.org)



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