

Team Turnstone – Hilary Turner and Stephen Turner – 120 Species

Hello Supporters of Team Turnstone!

Thank you for your sponsorship in our latest bird-brained endeavor – a 24-hour birding marathon to raise money for Last Chance Audubon Society. This is the third year (after two years off) that we have successfully completed the “Birdathon,” also known as a Big Day.

This year, our Big Day started off a little rough. We knew it wouldn’t be the same as it had been in previous years. Due to my field work, we had to do it earlier than usual; meaning many of the migrants we have seen in past years would not be back yet. Dad estimated that we would see 120 species. I thought that was ludicrous. I joked to him that it might be a Big Day of Big Misses after we struck out on several of our target species at our first 5 stops! I thought we would be able to nail a **Northern Goshawk** up at the Skidway Campground in Deep Creek Canyon. Miss. We thought an American Dipper would be an easy find anywhere along Deep Creek. Miss.

Finally we had to start our clock at 2:45pm when we heard **Clark’s Nutcrackers** in last year’s Cabin Gulch burn. We thought the recently reported **Black-backed Woodpeckers** would be easy in the charred habitat, but after spending an hour and sighting only 14 species, we determined that it was time to move on – without the Black-backed. **Hairy Woodpecker** was a good add in the burn; we had a male excavating a nest hole. Along Highway 12, heading back to Townsend, we looked for cranes. I thought I spotted one, but it ended up being a **Wild Turkey** – a species we have not seen on a Big Day before. Good bird. We decided to stop on the N side of Canyon Ferry at a known **Caspian Tern** nesting colony, but struck out on the tern as well! Brutal!

Moving right along, we stopped at Indian Creek Campground. Here we added **American Goldfinch, Brewer’s Blackbird, and Turkey Vulture**, along with other common species. The Canyon Ferry WMA can be good for **Gray Catbird**, but as we suspected, this late migrant had not yet arrived. We did have the day’s only Cedar Waxwings at this stop.

Next stop: Kimber Gulch – a prairie gimme for **McCown’s Longspur** and **Long-billed Curlew**. We nailed the curlew right away, but again, struck out on the longspur. It was getting to be 5ish and the weather was turning on us.

We hurried back to spend the last hours of the day around Helena – our local patch. Mount Helena City Park was very windy when we stepped out of the vehicle. We walked quickly to a **Calliope Hummingbird’s** known favorite perch. The bird was nowhere to be seen. We moved along the path and the wind seemed to die down a bit. We added singing **Spotted Towhees** and a pair of lovely **Cassin’s Finches**. Coming back around to the truck, waves of relief passed over us as we spotted the Calliope, up now that the wind had died down.

On to Cox Lake - a small mountain lake where we have had good luck in the past. The **Ring-necked Ducks** on Cox turned out to be the day’s only and we also heard **Ruby-crowned Kinglets**. We almost missed out on **Red-naped Sapsucker**, but as we were heading down the final stretch of the Cox trail, one popped up in front of us and started calling. Nailed it! We thought we would try for **Red-necked Grebe** at Spring Meadow Lake State Park and we missed that species, but nailed **Spotted Sandpiper** there. **Wood Duck** was a guarantee at the Helena

Fairgrounds and the K-Mart wetlands revealed a **Red-necked Grebe** pair in the waning light. It was time to go back to the house, get some food, and get in bed.

We rose at 3am to head north to Benton and Freezout Lakes. Upon arriving at Benton, the place where I fell in love with birds, a **Short-eared Owl** showed itself. It flapped, batlike, over the still-dark prairie. As the sun came up, the dawn chorus greeted our ears. **Savannah Sparrows**, **Grasshopper Sparrows**, **Horned Larks**, and **Western Meadowlarks** were so numerous that it was impossible to count individuals, although we tried our best. We spotted dancing **Sharp-tailed Grouse** near a bird blind on the refuge and drove through the shop area of the refuge for a **Great Horned Owl**, which we got lucky on. Once near the water, the mosquitoes were overwhelming. There was not a breath of wind and most of the birding had to be done with windows up – certainly not ideal. Waterfowl and waders were numerous. **Black-necked Stilts** and **American Avocets** were foraging in the shallows as **Ruddy Ducks** and **Eared Grebes** dove in the deeper water. Dad spotted our only **Wilson's Snipe** of the day and two **Bufflehead** females that eluded me. Finally, I had to roll down the window. I knew we were missing stuff that we would only be able to hear calling from the cattails. **Common Yellowthroat** males could be heard singing along with chattering **Marsh Wrens**, and in one of the most spectacular auditory moments of the day, a **Sora** whinnied, causing us to both shout in glee. We continued on the auto tour around the lake and ran into two more **Short-eared Owls**, an **Upland Sandpiper**, and a pair of **Swainson's Hawks**.

We decided that Giant Springs State Park in Great Falls would be a good next stop, since we weren't feeling rushed and had missed out on some riparian species in Helena the previous day. I thought I spotted a **Downy Woodpecker** in a big tree, right as we pulled in, but couldn't respot it. A consolation prize was a singing **Least Flycatcher**, the only Empid of the day. We moved down to the river and caught a group of distant **Cliff Swallows** foraging and a male **Common Merganser**. As we got up onto the cliffs that overlook the river, Dad spotted a male **Bullock's Oriole** and a **Northern Flicker** was the only of the day. We wound back around to the truck and again, I scanned the big tree for the **Downy Woodpecker**. Not able to find it and about to give up on that species for the day, I turned and right there next to the truck, a female Downy was working the base of a small tree. Moments like this are what I absolutely love about bird watching and life in general. High five and on to the next stop – Freezout!

Thanks to some intel from a friend, I had a location pinned on my phone of where a **Long-eared Owl** had been seen recently. We drove into the WMA, opposite the way we normally do. After scanning the first hedgerow unsuccessfully, we were about to head on to the second hedgerow, when I spotted a large clump of sticks in a bush and put the binos up. Sure enough, a **Long-eared Owl** was on the nest guarding her two nestlings, which were about old enough to fledge. She never took her eyes off us. The cool thing about this bird was that Dad had never seen one before. It's called a Lifer when a birder gets eyes on a bird that he or she has never seen before. So Dad got his Lifer **Long-eared Owl**, and we moved on to the water. A grebe was floating near the shore. When we got the binos up, we noticed a very bright yellow bill. Interesting, and once it was in the scope, it was clear that this was a **Clark's Grebe** – a Lifer for me!! I think this was our first Big Day where we both got a Lifer, and the fact of the sightings being just minutes apart astounded me. Another example of how amazing both bird watching and life can be. We moseyed on around the lake, spotting some **Forster's Terns** and one **Common Tern**.

The identification of these two tern species is an extreme challenge, but we stepped up to the plate and found the gray-bodied Common in with the more numerous Forster's, as well as an ID error in Dad's electronic field guide.

At this point, we had about three hours left in our day, which was actually really great. We both commented on this year's Big Day feeling less rushed than usual. We were still missing some really important birds, however, and I really felt the need to try for some Eagles. We decided to drive the Simms-Cascade Cutoff, a lovely dirt road that goes through some amazing country. We must have spotted 10 **Northern Harriers** (in search of a **Ferruginous Hawk** which ended up being a big miss) along this road and we found another **Upland Sandpiper**, oddly perched atop a utility pole rather than the typical fence post. Once we started coming up on Crown Butte, I really scanned the skies for a **Golden Eagle**. I fell in love with this species while working on a wind farm in North central Montana and was extremely disappointed that we hadn't encountered either of the North American eagle species yet on our day. Nothing.

So we reached I15, got on and quickly got off at Tower Rock State Park, our stakeout for **White-throated Swift**, which I assured Dad would not be back on territory yet. We had about 30 minutes left in the day. As we pulled up to view the rock, the swifts were immediately obvious but a large dark bird was also circle soaring over it. It kept dipping out of view, and I just couldn't ID it, so I got out the scope and as I was trying to get it in the scope (and failing miserably) Dad spotted a pair of **Peregrine Falcons**, which shot out of the rock and headed east. Great birds, and a first ever on a Big Day for us! I finally got the big guy in the scope – it was a **Golden Eagle**. I hollered with joy! It was another of those moments where you just feel so alive.

We decided to head to a nearby Fishing Access Site, where Dad had heard of a **Golden Eagle** nest, but never been able to find it. As we pulled off, we spotted another large, dark bird soaring over the cliffs. I got the binos up and unbelievably, it was an adult **Bald Eagle**. Dad scanned the cliffs and got what he thought was a big nest in the scope. I looked at it – a pile of big sticks and said "yep that looks like a nest." We scanned a bit more. The minutes were slipping away, and we were hoping for a goldeneye on the river or some other last minute add. I finally glanced back in the scope at the nest and an adult **Golden Eagle** was in view on the nest, with its wings raised up, as if it had just landed. What a thrilling way to end a spectacular Big Day.

The Bald Eagle was species number 120 on our Big Day. Somehow, Dad had guessed the exact number of species we would see, from the get-go! I actually only saw 119 species because I missed the **Bufflehead** at Benton Lake, and normally this would bother my super competitive self, but I let it go. It was an amazing, if not exhausting, 24 hours of birding with my Superhero of a father. It was full of those moments that just make you feel alive, fulfilled, like you were in the right place at the right time. Maybe those of you who aren't birders don't know what I am talking about, but I can guess that each of you probably has something in your life that makes you feel that way too.

Thank you again for your sponsorship and I look forward to writing this letter again next year.

Hilary and Stephen Turner (Team Turnstone)