

Fledglings Take Flight

Both backseat windows of Larry's new truck were rolled down for most of the 189 miles driven for the Fledglings' first Birdathon. We rolled them up late in the afternoon when the thunderstorm hit, complete with thrilling lightning strikes and very dark gray clouds. Fortunately, we were on Highway 200 at the time, traveling east from Brown's Lake to Lincoln, and would've rolled-up the windows anyway due to increased speed.

As in daily birding excursions, one can spy many medium-to-large-sized birds through the windshield and closed windows of your vehicle. However, when you want to count every "little brown bird" possible while doing your Birdathon, you need someone able to confidently bird-by-ear, even from a slow-moving vehicle. Nearly half of our 127 birds were such birds, and many of them were singing. Shane, although participating in his first Birdathon, knows the vocalizations of most, if not all, of the birds on our list. He routinely said, "Stop, please." And, sure enough, as we jumped out of the truck – binoculars and cameras at the ready – Shane named the small bird singing from just beyond those shrubs, trees, or sagebrush, or on top of a far fir tree.

Larry offers a First Class outing. He provides a very clean and NEW truck, a cooler full of fresh fruit and cold drinks, and thorough knowledge of the landscape, history, and management of vast tracts of land. He's been birding for decades and really knows his birds and their habits. He was another essential team member. Me? I was happy to have my zoom lens ready, willing and able to take photos of any bird within range.

We began the morning at 5:00 a.m., 30 minutes before sunrise, in Grizzly Gulch, listening for those "early birds" we've all heard about. We found flycatchers, warblers and robins. In all, we listed 23 species by 6 a.m. Larry spied a Merlin at Hill Park as we drove through town on our way to the Fairgrounds. There we counted 27 Cedar Waxwings as they flew over our heads, and at least 12 Wood Ducks, among the various species identified there. At Spring Meadow Lake, we found a Red-shafted Flicker, American Goldfinch, and an Evening Grosbeak, along with other additions.

An unscheduled stop at the Sevenmile Creek bridge on Birdseye Road yielded rich bird activity. We added 40-Cliff Swallows, a Red-winged Blackbird, a Brewer's Blackbird, and others to our growing list.

Turning onto Austin Road we found a Red-naped Sapsucker, Belted Kingfisher, Dusky Flycatcher, Western and Mountain Bluebirds, a Veery, and a Northern Waterthrush, among many other songbirds. Farther along, we logged a Calliope Hummingbird, an American Kestrel, a photographable Willow Flycatcher, and a Bobolink. Shane recorded the song of the MacGillivray's Warbler and a Lincoln's Warbler, among others, such as the White-crowned Sparrow, to help document found species in eBird. We spied our first Red-tailed hawk near the Big Barns of Blossburg, on the lower reaches of Austin Road.

At Nevada Lake we were fortunate to add a Common Merganser to our list after much debating, as he was quite some distance from us, on the other side of the reservoir.

Driving slowly along the Cut Off Road, traveling west from HWY 141, we first saw one Long-billed Curlew just on the other side of the fence, and then another flew in close-by. They vocalized back and forth as we watched and took photos of their beautiful coat of designer feathers and L.O.N.G. decurved bill! Just

a short distance down the road we found a Wilson's Snipe sitting on the jack-leg fence. When it flew we were sad, until it landed much closer to us on a fencepost.

At the Aunt Molly Wildlife Management Area (WMA) we witnessed a Warbling Vireo visiting its tiny, woven nest hanging from a fork in a cottonwood tree. It was carrying a piece of material in its beak. Nest-building is a sign of breeding activity for this species, which is important to note - and exciting to find! We also counted three Vaux's Swifts among other species.

Farther along we were delighted to find numerous waterfowl in ponds along the road - including a Redhead, Eared Grebe, and a pair of Cinnamon Teal. A bird perched on a fence near a farmstead turned out to be not a bluebird - but a Say's Phoebe! We watched it move from perch to perch as it darted out for flying insects.

Soon we were into the "Little Brown Birds" a.k.a. sparrows of the sage. We found these: Clay-colored, Vesper, and Brewer's. But then, at the bridge over the Blackfoot River, we found a rare bird. According to *P.D. Skaar's Montana Bird Distribution, Seventh Edition 2012*, the Eastern Phoebe has been reported in Montana a total of seven times. We were delighted to have it readily accessible and available for portrait photography. This made species number 100!

On our way to Brown's Lake, Larry recognized that the two eagles soaring, seemingly together, were NOT both Bald Eagles, but one mature Bald Eagle and one immature Golden Eagle. We were delighted!

Brown's Lake held many beautiful birds to add to our growing list, including Forster's Tern, Black Tern, and a Common Loon. Before leaving Brown's Lake we found a Ring-necked Duck and a Red-necked Grebe - with three young taking a ride on her back! I had never seen young on an adult's back, and Larry had never seen Red-necked Grebes before, making it a very special sighting! For Shane, seeing the young ride on the back of the adult was a first, along with first time sightings of the Eastern Phoebe and Forster's Tern.

Our one Trumpeter Swan was sighted at the Blackfoot Waterfowl Production Area (WPA). We also witnessed Black Terns mobbing a Common Raven, encouraging it to leave their nesting area.

Before we set out we knew that two of the other LCAS Birdathon teams had each recorded 120 species of birds, so our goal, naturally, was to find 121. At 7:45 p.m. we counted a Swainson's Thrush (#118) and a Hermit Thrush (#119) was heard. At 8:00 p.m. we heard the drumming of the Ruffed Grouse - Number 120! High Fives were exchanged! But! Could we get another?

At 8:15 p.m. we heard "Drink three beers" which is the song of the Olive-sided Flycatcher. 121 Species! YAY!

20-minutes later, we found a Brown Creeper working its way up a lodgepole pine. #122. Then a Cassin's Finch at the top of Stemple pass made #123. It was 9:00 p.m. and the sun was setting through clouds in the west as we watched from the top of Stemple Pass. Our day was coming to a close, and it had been a good day. A VERY good day!

As we dropped into dusk along Virginia Creek and listened to Veeries singing good night, a pair of Steller's Jays, silhouetted at the tops of two fir trees, made #124. A few minutes later, as Larry drove carefully down the gravel road, windows still open, a Sharp-shinned Hawk flew from right to left in front of the truck! #125! Although we had stopped at many creek-crossings to look for an American Dipper,

we had never found one. At the final bridge we stopped again, and this time were rewarded with a Dipper on a rock on the far side of the creek! #126! We thought for sure we were done, and we were content. The sun had set, the windows were rolled up (most of the way), and we began reflecting on the day.

Larry put on the brakes quickly and exclaimed, "That's an OWL!" after it flew through the light emitted by our headlights. We watched it fly close to the ground around the perimeter of the field on the passenger side of the car, in the twilight of evening, and analyzed the bird until we agreed it was a Great Horned Owl. #127! The time was 9:41 p.m. It was a DAY!

THANK YOU for your support of Last Chance Audubon Society (LCAS) through your support of Birdathon! LCAS shares half of the funds with Montana Audubon for their state-wide conservation projects. We at LCAS use the funds for education – Bobcat Birders at the Helena Middle School, scholarships for graduating high school seniors – and for the Golden Eagle Migration Survey (GEMS), documenting the richest concentration of migrating Golden Eagles in the United States!

Please make your check payable to: **L.C.A.S.** and send it to me at:

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Thank you for your generous support!

The FLEDGLINGS

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