



the prairie falcon

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MAY 2006

NORTHERN FLINT HILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY, P.O. Box 1932, MANHATTAN, KS 66505-1932

“SYMPHONY IN THE FLINT HILLS”

Paul Winter Consort and Kansas City Symphony and Chorus performing "Grasslands: Prairie Voices"
Concert begins at 6 p.m.

Activities all day. Enjoy a variety of natural and cultural history education programs, prairie bus tours, house tours, nature trails, the one-room school, and more.

Tickets available at the preserve in the ranch house bookstore. Call ahead for ticket availability 620-273-8494.

Located at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve
Saturday, June 10, 2006

For more information:
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FIELD TRIP

NO BEGINNING BIRDING THIS MONTH BECAUSE OF
MIGRATORY BIRD CENSUS
JOIN IN THE POTTAWATOMIE COUNT
OR JUST GET OUT AND SEE ALL THE MIGRATING SPECIES.
IT IS A GREAT TIME OF YEAR!

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UPCOMING DATES:

May 13 MIGRATORY BIRD COUNT
POTT Co. - Doris BURNETT
(537-2502)

JUNE 10 Symphony in the Flint Hills

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Mud is inevitability in spring, if the rains come, as they should in this season. Mud binds the hind end of winter to the chest of spring, oozing into the jagged seam of fair and foul weather days. We aren't sure from day to day which segment of the year it is, except for the presence of mud that defines the change.

Mud is more than wet soil, some combination of sand, silt and clay with water added. It forms on the cusp of the "Atterberg limit"* between plastic and viscous. As one author noted, the most "diabolical" mud is smectite, a clay mineral with a large surface area with an affinity for carbon compounds, hence, its fondness for passing feet. Mud is the stuff that gloms onto shoes, mires tires that venture onto unpaved surfaces (and sometimes paved ones, like the linear trail's low water bridges that cross Wildcat Creek). It is generally not highly thought of (mud-slinging, muddying one's reputation), although people have found innovative even artistic uses for it: adobe and plaster (the "enjarradoras," mothers and daughters in New Mexico who artfully apply plaster to icons and sacred places); pottery (fired mud that is culturally distinctive); and mud shirts come to mind. Textiles (like the terra cotta-colored shirt we bought in Kauai) gain their reddish hue from oxidized, dewatered iron in mud; yellow is obtained from the hydrated form. The "Mud Women" of Haleakala, sans shirts, decorate their bodies with festive colors, then obscure the designs with mud, ending their rituals with a cleansing rinse in a freshwater pool. This practice is akin to mud pie making: "Mud pies gratify one of our first and best instincts. So long as we are dirty, we are pure." (Charles Dudley Warner)

Some animals, too, find mud useful, even indispensable, in their lives: mud dauber wasps, mud-puddling butterflies, and wallowing bison and pigs. Sometimes wallowing ends badly. Years ago, my students and I joined Stan Roth in his research on

ferruginous hawks in the Castle Rock region in western Kansas. In crossing a rancher's land, we discovered a cow mired deep to her belly in a pond's thick mud. With our bodies forming a chain, we tried desperately to pry her loose, to no avail. The rancher, after contacting him, never came. Her bones have by now begun to turn to fossil in that dreaded pit. A more happy function of mud is the practice of white-breasted nuthatches who use it to modify the entrance to their nest cavities; they have even been observed storing it in the crevices of bark. Cliff swallows cement nest materials with mud – when walking the linear trail, check out the underside of the Blue River bridge to see a colony.

Last week, my husband decided to take me and the dogs "mudding" on the stretch of road north of our gate that is only minimally maintained by the county. After a rain, driving on it is more like sledding on pudding, and we slipped and slid for over a mile, the once blue truck's wheels whirling and wheezing. As I gripped the passenger seat, I cast a sideways glance at Mike, gleeful and grinning, gripping the steering wheel, vainly trying to straighten the truck on its careening course. Ecstatic when we finally reached the crossroad, we must have looked like crazed, bingeing teenagers – a spring ritual fueled by petroleum and impulse that we won't likely repeat again (this year).

The season is upon us, as we halter-break the foals and introduce the stallion to the mares. It is all accomplished in mud. We listen more closely to the phoebes and the red-wing blackbirds, as we pause, standing awkwardly on one leg, to scrape it from our boots. When we curse it, we do it softly, because it is a constant reminder that spring and its welcome rains have once again returned.

*Atterberg limit - a scaled devised for the cohesiveness and liquidity of soils. Non-plastic, plastic, and viscous (or liquid)



During the month of May, a woodchuck inhabited my yard that was just one block from the west edge of Kansas State University. This was during my bachelor days, when I would wash my forks and spoons so I could have a utensil to eat one of those so called TV dinners. Anyway, when I was out of necessary utensils, I would wash a fork at the sink, looking out the kitchen window at a creature that used no utensils as it grazed on violet leaves. I tried to imagine what it tasted while munching on this delectable vegetation, so I followed behind it one day and tasted one of the violet leaves. It wasn't bad. Now that my bachelor days are over, however, I know that a meal does not consist of violet leaves.

Woodchucks are known as groundhogs (*Marmota monax*), since they feed on lush vegetation at ground level. They also have a fondness for woody vegetation, particularly during the spring breeding, when they gnaw on trees and rub their muzzles on the freshly exposed wood, transferring their scent into this substrate where it may remain for a relatively long time. Slowly, the wood's surface releases the woodchuck's message to the spring breezes.

While most people associate woodchucks with

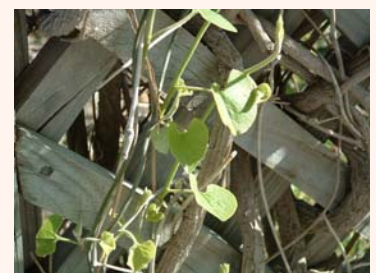
a trundling, nosing gait, they do have a fondness for woods. They locate their winter den within a woods, and most surprising, they do climb trees. I've always wanted to see one climbing a tree, and I did glimpse one sitting on a low-lying limb. Two of my friends saw woodchucks high in trees, here in Riley and Pottawatomie Counties. Zoologists have actually reported seeing woodchucks in hackberry and mulberry trees browsing on the leaves. According to one study of captive woodchucks, they prefer mulberry leaves to hackberry leaves. They even liked the mulberry leaves about as well as red clover or dandelions, which are among their favorite vegetables.

A woodchuck can weigh as much 14 pounds, becoming heavier as it prepares to survive the wintertime on its stored fat. It is a fast eater, having no need for silverware. It often spends only a few hours eating in the early morning and late in the day as it finds vegetables oh so tasty. As I write this, my wife is cooking. The aroma of incredibly wonderful things is taking over my motivations. By wintertime, I may be chubby enough to survive.

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PULL FOR THE BUTTERFLIES

The butterfly garden is well on it's way to being established for this year. (The butterfly garden is in Sojourner Truth Park which is across from the recycling center.) I was rewarded for pulling weeds with the appearance of three different kinds of butterflies and a big black wooly caterpillar. You are welcome to join us in maintaining the garden. Susan Blackford is coordinating the gardeners. You can decide with her which part of the garden is your turf to maintain. When and how long is up to you - all help is appreciated. It can be as little as 1/2 hour every other week at your convience. Just coordinate with Susan so that we won't be stepping on each other's toes. Duties would include keeping the unwanted grass and other plants out of your sector (some require a little effort and some hardly any) and reporting the butterflies that you see. Remember it is good that caterpillars are eating the plants, this is what the garden is for - therefore no pesticides can be used. Hand pulling weeds is the best way. You might say we could use some "grassroots" help. So drop by the garden once every couple of weeks and pull for the butterflies. Susan Blackford can be reached at 537-6252.





As with the multiluminous Harvest Moon, that particular relationship between the Moon's orbit and the Earth's tilt will have another effect this coming month. But instead of soaring high and apparently full for several nights in a row, this May, around its full period, the Moon will be notably low in the sky. The *Old Farmer's Almanac* adds that in parts of northern Alaska and Canada it will not show itself at all, and folks there will have, in effect, several New Moons in a row.

Meanwhile, and in general, the Moon is facing increasing competition. A feature article in *Science News* for March 18th highlighted, so to speak, the increasing encroachment of man-made illumination into the night sky and some of the carom effects it can have at ground level.

For example, two researchers are reporting that light from Las Vegas, Nevada, reflecting off dust and moisture in the air reaches eight of 38 national parks in that part of the country. It does so somewhat selectively, for while it clearly makes an appearance over Great Basin National Park, about 180 miles southward, at Bryce canyon an equal distance eastward it is barely detectable. Meanwhile, other research in the area records a steady population of diurnal snakes, while there's a decline of other snakes who feed on the same sources, but nocturnally, suggesting that light pollution may be a cause.

From across the nation in Virginia studies have found that red-backed salamanders apparently depend on darkness for protection from predators and thus are being affected by artificial skyglow delaying their nightly feeding until that lighting dims, and there is concern that such shortened feeding hours could affect the individuals of that species growth and survival (which I suspect would have an affect on the predators).

The article also refers to a new book, "Ecological Consequences of Artificial Night Lighting" (Island Press, 2006) in which other examples are noted, including the disruption of bat predation on moths, and zooplankton feeding on algae.

I've noted here earlier of being camped in New Mexico's Manzanita mountains and having only half a sky of stars, the mountains occupying the western fourth of the sky and the shine from Albuquerque, 60 or 70 miles distant, filling the rest of the westward sky almost up to the zenith. Topeka certainly has a nocturnal existence in the sky to the east of these Flint Hills, and sometimes we can mark the presence of Emporia and Manhattan-Junction City as well. In fact, our nearest neighbor is a half mile away and out of direct view beyond a ridge line, yet, on some nights when certain kinds of clouds hang low the reflection from the single yard light there makes it easy to move about our yard.

Still, we are quite lucky when the sky is clear, in having pretty much a full panoply of stars to admire. But for many, many others, the word "nighttime" has no connotation or even denotation of "darkness," and in that way the loss of a synonym can reflect a great many other losses.

Undeterred, Jupiter plans to be at its brightest of the year on April 5th, moving in retrograde (i.e.: eastward) in Libra all night through the month, with the Moon for company on the 11th. The Moon's social schedule (courtesy of StarDate) also includes a visit to the lower right of Mars on the 1st, to the right of Saturn on the 3rd, and a conjunction with Spica (the bright star in Virgo) on the 10th. On the 29th a kind of lazy "T" appears with the Moon, Mars, and Saturn (from top to bottom) forming the vertically slanted crossbar, and Pollux and Castor, of Gemini, providing the stem to the right. On the 30th the Moon slips in between Mars and Pollux, the nearest of the Twins, while Saturn and Mars keep sidling closer together as they have been doing all month.

Focusing back on the 10th, *StarDate* reminds that though Jupiter and Spica will seem to be touching, Jupiter is 37 light-minutes from Earth, while Spica is 260 light-years. Which puts it six billion times further away than the Moon's 1.3 light-seconds. You can check their math if you wish. Full Moon, the 13th, 1a51; New, 27th 12a26.



Judy Roe
Jacque Staats

EARTH DAY - TREE PLANTING

THANKS TO MADDONNA STALLMANN & PAUL WEIDHAAS FOR DONATING THE 50 TREES.

Andrew with Dick Oberst



Dick Oberst, Jacque Staats



Ingrid Nietfeld, Bill & Donna Schenck-Hamlin, Sandra (Andrew's Mom)

KIOSK Posters are UP FINALLY!!

Come take a look.
Thanks to Wayne Corn, Steve Pfister, Scott Morrill, and Judy Roe for the installation.



NFHAS members interested in being notified of "Projects," i.e. road cleanups, tree plantings, creek cleanups, etc., via email, please send your email address to Jacque at staats@vet.ksu.edu

BRIDGE DEDICATION

Manhattan Mayor Bruce Snead



Special THANKS to WESTAR GREEN TEAM!!!

Eddie Eastes (Park Rec) and Brad Loveless (WESTAR)





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Introductory memberships - \$20 per year; then basic membership is \$35 annually. When you join the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, you automatically become a member of the National Audubon Society and receive the bimonthly Audubon magazine in addition to the **PRAIRIE FALCON**. New membership applications may be sent to NFHAS at the address below; make checks payable to the National Audubon Society. Membership Renewals are handled by the National Audubon Society and should not be sent to NFHAS. Questions about membership? Call toll-free, 1-800-274-4201, or email the National Audubon Society join@audubon.org.

If you do not want to receive the national magazine, but still want to be involved in our local activities, you may subscribe to the **PRAIRIE FALCON** newsletter for \$15 per year. Make checks payable to the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, and mail to:

Treasurer, NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan KS 66505-1932.

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