



the prairie falcon

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FEBRUARY 2002

FEBRUARY PROGRAM
Feb. 20

**“Conservation of
Grassland Birds”
Brett Sandercock**

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

CONSERVATION OF GRASSLAND BIRDS BRETT SANDERCOCK

Population numbers of grassland birds are declining range wide, and apparently faster than many other avian communities in North America. Survey data from the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) program during 1966 to 1996 show negative trends in Henslow's Sparrow (-8.8% per year), Sprague's Pipit (-4.7%), Grasshopper Sparrow (-3.6%), and Eastern Meadowlark (-2.6%). Lek counts show that Greater Prairie Chickens are declining in many areas.

The proximate factors driving declines in grassland birds are poorly understood, but habitat destruction and fragmentation are thought to be important. Some grassland birds may be affected by brood parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds or by exposure to pesticides and control programs in neotropical wintering areas.

Innovative conservation programs are needed, particularly in Kansas and other states where there is little public land. Brett K. Sandercock is a new faculty member in the Division of Biology at K-State. He is an ornithologist with interests in population biology and behavioral ecology. His past research projects have ranged from shorebirds in western Alaska to parrots in Venezuela, and he is currently studying Common Nighthawks and Upland Sandpipers at Konza Prairie.

Before each program, we invite our speakers to join us for an informal dinner and discussion. Feel free to join us this month at the Gold Fork at 5:45 PM. The program begins at 7:30 PM, 1014 Throckmorton, NE corner of Denison and Claflin. Refreshments are served after every meeting. All meetings are open to the public.

Field Trips

BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING WALK

Join us Saturday, Feb. 9th and every second Saturday at 8 AM in the Ackert/Durland parking lot on the KSU campus. We will carpool to a local birding hotspot and should return by about 11 AM. Birders of every age and interest level are welcomed. Children are especially encouraged to attend. Call Dave Rintoul, 532-6663 or e-mail him at drintoul@ksu.edu for more information.

INSIDE

- 2 BIRDING
- 3 PLANT OF THE MONTH
- 4 SKYLIGHT
- 5 TAKE NOTE

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UPCOMING DATES:

- Feb 2** Ground Hog Day
Bird Feeder Tour
Leann Harrell
785-494-2556
- Feb 9** Beginning Birding 8 AM
Ackert Parking Lot
- Feb 13** Bird Feed Sale
ORDER DEADLINE
- Feb 20** Wed. 5:45 PM DINNER
7:30 PM - PROGRAM
1014 Throckmorton, KSU
NE corner Denison/Claflin
- Feb 23** Bird Feed PICKUP
9AM-1PM UFM,
1221 Thurston

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FEBRUARY BIRDING

DAVE RINTOUL

Cold now.

*Close to the edge. Almost
unbearable. Clouds
bunch up and boil down
from the north of the white bear.
This tree-splitting morning
I dream of his fat tracks,
the lifesaving suet.*

an excerpt from "Cold Poem"
by Mary Oliver,
from *American Primitive*,
Little, Brown and Company, 1983

February, at least here on the edge of the Great Plains, is usually the coldest, cruelest, and most life-draining month of all. Thankfully, early calendar-makers must have recognized this, since they cleverly made it shorter than any other month. And that is good, since the yearning toward spring would be even more unbearable if February had two or three more days. As it is, most birds (and most people) will be hanging on, watching for those few extra minutes of daylight each morning, and waiting for the year to turn the corner and bump into spring again.

If you live "in town", sparrows and finches will probably start to be more apparent at your feeders this month, as the crop of wild sunflower and other seeds gets depleted out in the countryside. Some goldfinches have already started to turn golden in January, foregoing the toast-brown plumage that serves them so well in the dun fields and weedy ditches of Kansas. Those that are making that transition at this time of year are

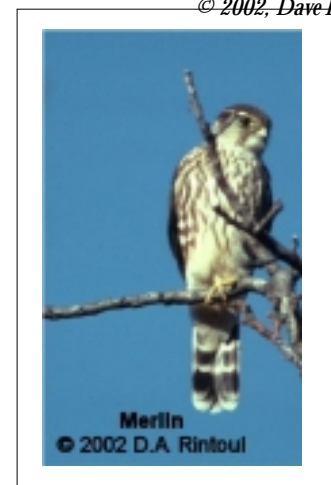
the older males, at least a year and a half old, hoping to get a head start in courting the females away from the younger, duller birds. Cardinals will also seem to be getting brighter in February, but this color change is due to an interesting feather wear strategy. The feathers worn by cardinals at this time of year are the same as those the birds wore in September. But those feathers, when newly grown in September, had brownish tips, which help to obscure the rest of the very red feather. As winter progresses, those brownish tips wear off, allowing the cardinal (and many other birds) to look brighter and brighter without the disadvantage of molting and growing new feathers in the dead of winter. Look for this phenomenon on the black throats of male house sparrows as well; the throats of these birds seem to get very black at this time of year, but it is again due to feather wear which removes the obscuring brown tips of the otherwise black throat feathers.

If you lived in Florida or Texas, you could watch many birds start courtship and nest-building in February. But even in Kansas, some species will be pairing up, courting, and making plans to lay eggs soon. Great horned owls will begin to incubate eggs this month, and eastern screech-owls begin to explore nest sites in February. Red-tailed hawks can be seen in pairs more frequently this month, and nest construction by this species starts in earnest in March. But for

most birds in Kansas the progress toward the next reproductive season is a bit more measured, and behavioral changes are more subtle. Birds which occur in large feeding flocks in the winter (e.g. Eastern and Western meadowlarks), start to de-flock and form pair bonds late in February. Many birds will be singing their territorial songs; especially on bright warm days it will become more common to hear cardinals, chickadees, and titmouses practicing in the woods.

As February turns to March, pairs of eastern bluebirds will check out old snags and new nest boxes, and the first flycatchers of the season, the hardy eastern phoebes, will venture back into most of the state. But that is another (short) month away; February is still here to contend with. Survival is paramount at this time of year; in order to get to the breeding season the birds have one more month to wait out the weather, out-wit the predators, and find those last bits of food. One more month to go, and life on the edge will slowly change to life's renewal and rebirth.

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Merlin © 2002 D. A. Rintoul



"We lived on a street where the tall elm shade was as green as the grass and as cool as a blade that you held in your teeth as we lay on our backs staring up at the blue, and the blue stared back. I used to believe we were just like those trees, we'd grow just as tall and as proud as we pleased with our feet on the ground and our arms in the breeze under a sheltering sky."

Lyrics of "Only A Dream,"
by Mary-Chapin Carpenter, 1992

In late winter, a squirrel ventured out onto the twigs of an American elm and ate some of the blossoms. It paused as it remembered the taste of a stale acorn that it had forced itself to eat that morning. Then it closed its eyes and savored the spicy taste of the blossoms.

Most elm blossoms escape the attentions of squirrels and produce seeds. Seed production by an American elm is a joyful event

that seemingly confirms the ability of this elm to survive. But a few of the seeds must become mature trees, and that has not been happening for the American elm.

New cultivars of this species are resistant to Dutch elm disease. More than one of these cultivars should be planted to increase the genetic diversity of the seedlings that will be springing up to be tested by new varieties of the disease. In Asia, the Asiatic species of elms have participated in a long war with Dutch elm disease in which victory is a temporary thing.

In a pasture east of my childhood home, there was an American elm that had long stood sentinel on a knoll above a spring of clear, cool water. As I remember that ancient tree, I can feel the roughness of the loose bark on the massive limbs that fell from that tree. It died before my memories begin, but I remember

the incredible variety of insects that it nurtured, including iridescent, green, buprestid beetles. I've never found another dead tree that was such an inspirational source of life (even though I've searched for many years). I've kept a bowl that I carved from a burl of that tree, although I treasure the vibrancy of life more than the relics of life.

The last mature, wild, American elm may succumb during my lifetime. Will this species ever return to our landscapes? I believe so. This species has proven itself, many times over, as a versatile and practical tree in both urban and residential settings. It has also been a source of dreams. Its graceful growth form resembles that of children holding up their arms to feel the breath-taking excitement of a moisture-laden wind.

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Just for Fun NAME THAT FLOCK
Hoogy Hoogheem

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. A_____ of crows | 8. A_____ of peacocks |
| 2. A_____ of geese | 9. A_____ of pheasants |
| 3. A_____ of quail | 10. A_____ of wildfowl |
| 4. A_____ of falcons | 11. A_____ of mallards |
| 5. A_____ of coots | 12. A_____ of nightingales |
| 6. An_____ of larks | 13. A_____ of snipe |
| 7. A_____ of woodcock | 14. A_____ of oilbirds |

Answers on page 5



To take old business first, a lesson there was to be learned from the heralded Leonid meteor showers last November: Come early!

Though media hyped the event for only the predicated maximum 3 AM to 6AM, on the 18th, they were listed here as other places for the 17th - 18th. In the first few minutes past midnight on the 18th, in western Kansas, we saw two large gleaming fireballs leave plowed-like trails of light nearly across the entire sky. One was entirely white, the other had a white and green “plowshare and moldboard.” Both lit up all the Arickaree breaks around us. That display made the winks and brief distant streaks of the “maximum,” when they began at 3 AM rather anticlimatic. Science News reported similar good fortune for others in the half hour before dawn. We were back in our sleeping bags by then; not for lack of interest, but because although we had outmaneuvered the clouds overhead, obscuring ground fog rose around us. So, if we hadn’t started early – there is nothing sure about showers – we wouldn’t have been so satisfied to get that extra sleep.

Nearer at hand is the Moon’s occultation of Saturn, Feb. 20th. The partial Moon’s dark edge will begin to pass in front of Saturn about 6PM CST. (Remember, the Moon’s traveling the same direction we are, we’re just turning faster.) So lengthening daylight bodes to interfere with our viewing that first act at our longitude; however, we might be able to catch Saturn emerging about an hour later from the bright side.

Astronomy points out a challenge for March sunsets, made possible by the steep angle of the ecliptic – the Sun’s apparent path through the sky – and the horizon in spring. There’s dust lingering out yonder in the inner Solar System, the debris from millions of years of comets that have passed through, and when the Sun sinks steeply that dust can reflect the Sun’s glow to produce the Zodiacal Light, or Pillar of Light, rising from the western horizon, a broad-twilight, especially if it lasts longer. The same effect can sometimes be seen to eastward when the autumn sun arises.

Elsewhere in February a big Moon and Jupiter will be shining arm-in-arm on the 22nd. On that night StarDate says binocs should pick out two of Jupiter’s moons in a line close to its west (our right); they are about the size of our Moon, only 2000 times more distant. The Moon will be both full and at perigee (its closest to Earth) on the 27th, bringing on large tides. Mars will continue fading early and Mercury will be lost in the morning twilight.

Venus, returning to the evening sky in March, will reappear a little higher each day and be the brightest glisten in the sky each night till it sets. It will be anchoring a notable nightly diagonal with Jupiter high to the south, Saturn far down to Jupiter’s right (with Aldebaran just off to its left) and dim Mars between Saturn and Venus.

The Moon is full Feb. 27th, new on Mar. 13th.

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2001 Bluebird
Nesting Box Count Addendum
John Wesley

In addition to the report in the January issue of the Prairie Falcon, Michael Rhodes reported that 51 Bluebirds, 12 Chickadees and 17 House Wrens fledged this year at Entwash, McDowell Creek Rd.

John & Jean Wesley



Konza Prairie Biological Station

The Konza Prairie is a wonderful place to bird in Kansas. What better way to learn about the special birds on the prairie than to become one of the elite volunteer staff at Konza. The 2002 Docent Class at Konza will have an orientation meeting on February 27 at 7PM in room 116 of Ackart Hall on the KSU campus. If you are interested in learning more about Konza and the sharing that knowledge with our many visitors, we hope you will become a Docent at Konza Prairie Biological Station.

Doris Burnett, Konza Prairie Docent Recruitment Chairwoman
785-537-2502, burnett@kansas.net

"NAME THAT FLOCK" ANSWERS

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. A murder of crows | 8. A muster of peacocks |
| 2. A gaggle of geese | 9. A nide of pheasants |
| 3. A covy/bevy of quail | 10. A skein of wildfowl |
| 4. A cast of falcons | 11. A sord of mallards |
| 5. A covert of coots | 12. A watch of nightingales |
| 6. A exaltation of larks | 13. A wisp of snipe |
| 7. A fall of woodcock | 14. A conflagration of oilbirds |
- (credited to Wayne Peterson)

Source: The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. 1992.
Third Edition. pp. 696-697 Boston: Houghton Mifflin

Thanks

Many thanks to Carla Bishop for putting on the dinner for the Christmas bird count. It was excellent, and set a high standard for future bird count dinners. Thanks also to everyone who brought food.

FYI: Submit Newsletter articles by 15th of month to Cindy Jeffrey, 128 Dole Hall, KSU, or 15850 Galilee Rd, Olsburg, KS 66520, or email to cinraney@ksu.edu MAILING: contact Carla Bishop 539-5129



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Subscription Informtion:

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. Renewals of membership 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

Nonmembers 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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