



THE PRAIRIE FALCON

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

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APRIL 2000

Pronghorn in the Tallgrass Prairie

Elmer Finck

The presentation will summarize our understanding of the ecology of pronghorn in the tallgrass prairie of the Flint Hills. Discussion will revolve around reintroduction of pronghorn to the Flint Hills, territory size, fawn survival, and diet.

The pronghorn project involves several graduate student theses: Arn W. Eccles, use of tallgrass prairie during the winter and spring; David T. Ganey, the diet of pronghorn in tallgrass prairie; Shannon L. Rothchild ecology of pronghorn fawns in tallgrass prairie, and Bradley D. Simpson. We have monitored the ecology of pronghorn in tallgrass prairie since 1991. The pronghorn were reintroduced into an area with 46 pronghorn that survived previous introductions.

Dr. Finck is an associate professor of biology at Emporia State University. He has been at Emporia State University for the past 10 years. A graduate student of John L. Zimmerman, he received his PhD from Kansas State University and his MS and BS from the University of North Dakota. Dr. Finck also served as associate director of Konza Prairie for six years.

7:30 p.m.

Wednesday, April 19, 2000

Rm. 1014, Throckmorton Hall

Before each program we invite our speakers to join us for an informal dinner and discussion. Feel free to join us this month at Amarillo Mesquite Grill. We will meet for dinner at 5:45 p.m. The program begins at 7:30 PM. Refreshments are served after every meeting. Please bring your own cup. All meetings are open to the public.

Field Trips

BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING WALK

Join us Saturday, Apr. 8th and every second Saturday at 8 a.m. in the Ackert/Durland parking lot on the KSU campus. We will carpool to a local birding hotspot, and should return by about 11 a.m. 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.

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APRIL BIRDING

DAVE RINTOUL

“After the long spell of bad weather the birds, who were banked up, I fancy, somewhere in the Carolinas, are coming through in a torrent. There are so many that I can keep but the most delirious count of them. My records are carried away in fluttering confusion, like a wind gauge in a hurricane. Every time I approach the marsh I hear the warning cries of the herons, like the drop of an old chain on its own coils, and from beyond the cat-tail lances the snake neck and archaic head of the bittern is turned to look at me, with the astonished and disapproving gaze that Archaeopteryx might have turned on an anachronistic human... Now is the moment when the novice at bird-gazing needs a friend. Flowers are best identified, if one is a neophyte, by one’s self. The mere exercise of tracking them to their names will fix them in the memory. But with the birds, a guide, a friend by the side, to point out what you ought to have seen, is worth a shelf of books.”

*Donald Culross Peattie,
An Almanac for Moderns (1935),
G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York.*

April just may be the month that most veteran birdwatchers love the most, but as Peattie tells us in the passage above, the “torrent” of birds passing through this month can be overwhelming for a novice. Shorebirds, gulls, ducks, hawks, and passerines all are on the move in April, and merely thumbing through your field guide all morning long can become exhausting. So if you are just starting on birdwatching, take a friend with some experience, or come along on our monthly beginning birdwatching walks, just so you can get some hint of the magnificent life flowing past us all month long.

The best part of April birdwatching is the fact that most birds will be in their finest and freshest nuptial plumage at this time of year. But not all of them. Many shorebirds, which pass through Kansas marshes like Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira NWR, are still a tad dull, and may even be molting as they pass through the state. So be prepared to see birds in all plumage states if you are looking for dunlins, or most of the smaller “peeps.” A couple of the larger shorebirds, however, are very striking and are certainly worth looking for. Black-bellied Plovers (aka the grey plover in the Old World) move across Kansas in April, and in breeding plumage this bird is truly elegant. Look for them singly or in small groups in marshy areas or wet meadows, particularly on the north edge of the Cheyenne Bottoms refuge. American Golden Plovers (formerly known as Lesser

Golden Plovers) migrate from central South America to the Arctic marshes, and can also often be seen in Kansas in marshes and wet meadows. However, the most common stopover habitat for flocks of these long-winged long-distance migrants is a recently burned pasture in the Flint Hills. The sight of a flock of these birds alighting on a black prairie on an April morning in Kansas can be breathtaking, and won’t soon be forgotten by veterans or novices.

April still provides lots of opportunities for learning the ducks, all of which should be looking good this month. Stylish pintails, with their long necks and blue-gray bills, might still be found, although most of these birds will pass through the state in March. Early in the month you should still find some Canvasbacks on deeper lakes and ponds, and the stark contrast of black chest with white sides will be evident even from a great distance. Strikingly bizarre Northern Shoveler drakes, with their emerald-green heads and outsize bills, are hard to miss on

any wetland trip in April. Diminutive Blue-winged Teal, fresh from the Texas Coast, will stage frantic courtship flights over the marshes of central Kansas, where they will remain as breeding birds for the summer. And the improbably-plumaged Cinnamon Teal, with their chestnut bodies, sky-blue wing patches, and blood-red eyes, will wander into the state as well. Look for these wetland jewels primarily in the western half of the state, but be aware that they can turn up just about anywhere this month. And be prepared to have your



breath taken away when your binoculars or spotting scope catches a male Cinnamon teal in full sunlight; this is truly one of the most striking ducks on the entire planet!

In most years the bulk of the passerine migration occurs in May, so look for a discussion of that next month. A few early birds hit the state in late April, and this year they may have already occurred in March, however, so be alert

when you venture into the woods. Sometimes in April the last lingering Harris’ Sparrows will be whistling to the first pioneer orioles, and the Eastern (red-eyed) Towhees will be wondering about the weird songs of their western (Spotted) cousins, so it is an interesting month in the auditory sense too. So grab your binoculars, call a friend, and get out there to see and hear “what you ought to have seen” this month. Bird-gazing doesn’t get better than it will be this month in Kansas.

© 2000 Dave Rintoul



A ripe buckeye husk splits. It reveals the shining brown sphere inside only partially, as an eyelid only partially discloses an eye's sphere. The nut so revealed looks like the calm brown eye of a buck ...

-Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*, (1987) Harper & Row, New York

Attraction to a Scent

The Ohio buckeye tree has a poisonous alkaloid in its leaves. This tree is native to our part of Kansas, and sometimes poisons our non-native sheep, cattle, and horses. After ingestion, the affected animal may develop symptoms such as trembling and coma. The seeds are poisonous to livestock including non-native hogs, but native squirrels eat them with no ill effects. People have also eaten the seeds. After cooking them, a starving bachelor would cut buckeye seeds into thin slices and wash them in running water for a few days. Then he would invite an enemy over for a special dinner. After watching his guest carefully for symptoms of trembling, the bachelor would taste his food.

The buckeye tree is one of the first to unfold its leaves in the springtime. The miniature, waxy, yellow-green leaves seem extremely delicate as they unfurl their palmately compound structure. Five to seven leaflets radiate from one point like the delicate ribs of a small umbrella that is held by an unusually beautiful woman. The leaflets unfold with such gracefulness that I have to wonder whether it is sacrilege for me to remember the beauty that was indelibly etched in my memory of that instant of time. The miniature leaves expand into relatively large structures which efficiently harvest sunlight, allowing this tree to survive in the shade of larger trees.

The Ohio buckeye (*Aesculus glabra*) blooms in April, and its large clusters of yellow blossoms have a delicate scent that cause the roughest, most hardened man to dream of the finer things of life. Several years ago, I sniffed the blossoms of the red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*) in southeastern Texas. The opening of these blossoms coincides with the migration of ruby-throated hummingbirds which pollinate these blossoms. Farther west, there is a subspecies of *A. pavia* which has yellow

blossoms. Eastward-flowing rivers wash down some seeds of the yellow subspecies into the range of the red subspecies, where they sprout. These invasive individuals with yellow blossoms occasionally hybridize with the residents that have red blossoms, but hummingbirds only visit the red blossoms, and each time a hummingbird pollinates a red blossom, it enforces a reproductive isolation, gradually creating a species which is molded for its relationship with the hummingbird.

The mourning cloak and gray hairstreak are known to sip the nectar of the California buckeye (*Aesculus californica*), and last April, I noticed an olive hairstreak sipping the nectar of the Ohio buckeye in Riley County. Butterflies may be important pollinators of buckeyes. Honey bees are feveously attracted to the blossoms, but their attraction can be fatal, as they sicken from a poison in the nectar, and yet try to reach one more blossom. Perhaps the poison discourages native insects that are unsuitable for pollinating the blossoms. The introduced, non-native honey bee evolved on other continents where the species of *Aesculus* have a greater respect for the pollinating services of this creature. Several internet sites on Ohio buckeyes mentioned that the blossoms are poisonous to honey bees, but all the research articles that I found in journals were about the effects of the California buckeye on honey bees. Instead of accepting a technological representation of the buzzing of bees and the scent of the blossoms, it may be more meaningful to visit the woods this April as the bees buzz about blossoms which have such an intriguing scent.

In Riley County, KS, buckeye trees grow near Pillsbury Crossing. The floods at this rocky ford subside quickly and do no harm to the trees on the banks of the creek. However, after the '93 flood of the Big Blue River, I wondered what effect the flood had on the plant growth. The following summer of '94, there were

many buckeye seedlings in the flood plain. I was puzzled as I wandered among the groves of cottonwoods searching for the mature buckeye trees that gave rise to the seedlings. The only mature trees were several hundred yards upstream on a wooded knoll above Pheil Creek which is a picturesque tributary of the Big Blue River, and I found no seedlings upstream of the little knoll, so the knoll seemed to be the source of the seeds. These seeds are round and fit comfortably in one's hand, so that it has been customary to carry such a seed in one's pocket to ward off the discomfort of rheumatism, while touching the surface which fits one's grasp like a "worry stone" which has been polished by human touch and provides comfort. The smoothness allows the seed to roll down hill, where it often collects in ravines, especially following a rain. Perhaps the flood currents rolled the seeds downstream in '93 or perhaps the seeds can float on the surface of the flood water. I'm curious about this detail, and I'll drop a seed in the river next fall to discover the truth. Dispersal by floods appears to be an excellent strategy, because buckeye trees need fertile soil with adequate moisture.

In the nineteenth century, people often built their homes beside a buckeye which grew on a little knoll above a river. The tree is unable to tolerate prolonged flooding, and this vividly preserves a record of the powerful effect that a wild river has on vegetation. Factors such as flooding that create patterns in nature can create strong emotions in those who observe a tree growing precisely where its characteristics are suited for it to grow with a gracefulness that is visible to all who will reach out to it. Long may a buckeye bloom profusely in the Spring, liberating its scent on a knoll where the young at heart may be attracted to its great mystery. Other intense relationships within the natural world may develop over unimaginably long periods of time, like the fine-tuned relationship of a hummingbird with a red blossom.

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In 1842, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, no doubt emerging from a birdwatching mood, wrote, in Locksley Hall,

In the spring a fuller crimson comes upon the robin breast;
In the spring the wanton lapwing gets himself another crest;
In the spring a livelier iris changes on the burnished dove;
In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.

Now, suppose he'd been, instead, in a stargazing mood. We might've had:

In the spring the largest Dipper swings up-side down at e'en;
While the head and hips of Leo rise full upon the scene;
In the spring a Crow named Corvus will appear, though dark the sky;
In the spring a world of fancies will greet the upturned eye.

Isn't it a shame that poets aren't more inclined to be stargazers, and vice-versa. Instead of these lines from Omar Khayam:

Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring The Winter Garment of Repentance fling;
The Bird of Time has but a little way to fly – and Lo! the Bird is on the wing.

Edward Fitz Gerald might, in 1859, have translated:

Look, see the Crown, and Virgo, Maiden of Spring.

And Winter Stars into the Sunset fling;
Leo the Lion has but one season to reign – and Lo! the Lion now is King.

A. E. Housman made fun of such versification, with a section in *A Shropshire Lad* that begins "Terence, this is stupid stuff..." and later gives as an example:

The cow, the old cow, she is dead;
It sleeps well, the horned head.

Whereupon he comments:

While we poor chaps, it's our turn now To hear such tunes as killed the cow.

Poets can be so snide to each other. Better perhaps if he'd also been a stargazer, whereupon, being English, he would likely have regarded the Big Dipper as depicting a plough, and written, more modestly:

The Plough, the Plough, high overhead;
Always circling, ne'er to bed.

While readers here with straining eyes, Would rather be out, scanning skies.

The skies right now, in main, provide a rather modest view. As mentioned last month, the passing constellations are rather pale, with mainly one bright star in each, in distinct areas of the sky. The Big Dipper is high and bright in the evenings, but the Little Dipper puts clearly most of its shine

in Polaris, our north star. And while Cassiopeia's rocking chair seems lit by candles, it fairly scrapes the Arctic tundra, low in the evening.

Nonetheless there are some special effects to watch for. Mars and Saturn are keeping close company in the west on the evening of April 16th; Venus and Mercury will be close in the eastern dawn sky of April 28th.

The Lyrid meteor shower peaks April 21-22, with the best time to watch at 5 a.m. when the constellation Lyra will be high overhead. Of course that "peak" will be well-lighted by a gibbous moon rising about midnight, just three days past full. If you see any shooting stars, they'll have to be bright ones. Even if nothing shows, Vega, the gem-like blue centerpiece of Lyra, will be worth looking at. Lyra will be just a little westward of the Milky Way where the long cross of Cygnus the Swan is flying.

The Eta Aquarid meteors will be streaking through the neighborhood occasionally from April 19 - May 28, climbing their "peak" on May 4th. The moon's scheduled to be renewed on the 4th so the sky should be dark when the faint stars of Aquarius appear through the early hours. As in April, May's full moon will be on the 18th.

(c) 2000 Peter Zachary Cohen

Starry Night on the Prairie at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve

Kansas Astronomy on the Cutting Edge

Comets, asteroids and deep sky galaxies are readily available for viewing with the use of powerful and new technologies in the field of astronomy. Gary Hug and Graham Bell are notable asteroid hunters. They will demonstrate the new tracking techniques for finding astronomy objects in real time using the tools of GO TO telescopes, CCD cameras and computers.

Bring your own telescope and/binoculars. Some telescopes will be available for viewing. Bring flashlights – with red lens – or covered with a red paper or a double layer of cellophane attached with an elastic band. Mini MAG flashlights with red lens can be bought at discount stores. This is important so viewers night vision is not impaired. Dress appropriately.

Cost will be \$5.00 per person, payable at the barn (children under 14 and accompanied by an adult free). Optional donation to the speakers' non-profit organization, Northeast Kansas Amateur Astronomy League (NEKAAL). Arrangements by Salina Astronomy club and Smokey Hills Audubon. Contact for questions 785-825-7889, email streckfuss@informatics.net Or 316-273-8494 TPNP Park Rangers. *Marjorie Streckfuss, Salina, KS*

Saturday Night, May 6, 2000

Gary Hug, Director, Graham Bell, Far Point Observatory, Harveyville KS
Kansas Astronomers,
Discoverers of the Hug-Bell Comet

On Comet, Asteroid and Deep Space Explorations
In the barn at 8 p.m.

Real Time Asteroid Tracking
Level 1 9:30 p.m. thru evening behind the historic home

Planet & Constellations
Level 2 9:30 p.m. thru evening on top of hill on nature trail



Conservation Committee Report

The Conservation Committee would like to thank everyone who supported our efforts to amend the Growth Vision Statement of the Comprehensive Land Use Plan this month. The City Commission adopted many of our recommendations at their meeting of March 7th, creating a much more balanced document than that forwarded to them by the Manhattan Urban Area Planning Board. I think all the calls prior to and bodies at the meeting really made a difference.

It was heartwarming to see everyone who showed up for us - such a diverse, intelligent, interesting, and dedicated group! We were successful in reinserting references to minimizing sprawl and support for cluster development, as well as adding protection of environmentally sensitive areas and providing appropriate park space in neighborhoods and all future development. I think the resulting document is a reasonable compromise between the business community and the environmental community. And

that's the way things are supposed to work. So I'm pleased with the way it turned out.

It's just the beginning, however - the city will begin reviewing the entire Comprehensive Land Use Plan next year, so we need to stay on top of this issue. Special thanks go to Leann Harrell and Jan Garton for all their help with the wording and the phone calls. What a team!

*Janet Throne, Conservation Committee
Chairperson*

NFHAS Birdathon – April 22, 2000

For more information Call Hoogy Hooghem (539-7080) or Clyde Ferguson (539-4856)



**CLEANUP of the Michel-Ross Audubon Sanctuary
Saturday, April 22 1:00 p.m.**

Bring a trash bag and gloves, and meet at the Elks Lodge parking lot, 2605 Stagg Hill Road. We'll pick up litter and perhaps marvel at the growth form of the native hop hornbeam trees, as one way of celebrating Earth Day. In the event of inclement weather, the cleanup will be postponed to the following Saturday. Call Tom Morgan at 539-8106 for more information.

**February
Bird Seed Sale \$1,326.71
Donations \$77.50**

There is almost never any instance when the word perfect applies to a practical endeavor. The late February bird seed sale was perfect. For fund raisers like the Bird Seed Society the numbers were award winning, the biggest sale in my experience for the last sale between winter and spring.

The day started well with yellow and purple crocuses blooming. Walter Dodd, Erwin Hoogheem and Jan Garton greeted me upon arrival at the UFM house. The supplier arrived at ten past eight with his shining son of perhaps six. After unloading we filled the delivery orders and sent Hoogy on

his way. Walter left at about the time Tom Morgan arrived. Marge Muenzenberger appeared at 9:00 and the Seed Sale Store was arranged. While we were unloading, Don Yockey emerged from our history bestowing upon us eleven bird feeders and nesting boxes of his characteristic fine craftsmanship. He said we were to give them all away to eleven lucky patrons – which we did, happily witnessing eleven smiling faces.

The morning was pleasantly paced with filing orders and socializing. There were the usual topics

of conversation such as bird feeder pests and birding phenomenon spiced by Leann Harrell, Janet Throne, Stormy Kennedy and Jan Garton fomenting social change, gearing up for the almost endless March 7th City Commission meeting. Refreshments, as always, were provided by our perennial care giver Leann Harrell. It was an excellent conclusion to the Seed Sale Series. Thanks to everyone, volunteers and patrons. May we all meet again in October.

Michael Rhodes



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Subscriptions Information:

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 to Betsy Hax at the National Audubon Society (bhax@audubon.org).

Nonmembers may subscribe to the *PRAIRIE FALCON* newsletter for \$10 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.

RARE BIRD HOTLINE

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Kansas City area (incl. W.MO): 785-342-2473
Nebraska (statewide): 402-292-5325

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Write ✉ - or call ☎ (anytime)

Governor Bill Graves: 2nd Floor, State Capitol Bldg., Topeka KS 66612. Kansas Senator or Representative _____: State Capitol Bldg., Topeka KS 66612, Ph.# (during session only) - Senate: 913-296-7300, House: 913-296-7500. Senator Roberts or Brownback: US Senate, Washington DC 20510. Representative _____: US House of Representatives, Washington DC 20515. U.S. Capitol Switchboard : 202-224-3121. President Bill Clinton, The White House, Washington DC 20500. Information about progress of a particular piece of legislation can be obtained by calling the following numbers: In Topeka - 800-432-3924; in Washington - 202-225-1772. Audubon Action Line - 800-659-2622, or get the latest on WWW at <http://www.audubon.org/campaign/aa/>