



THE PRAIRIE FALCON

VOL. 28, No. 9

MAY 2000

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CONTRIBUTORS

- P. COHEN
- T. MORGAN
- D. RINTOUL
- B. TATARKO

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The Birds of the Great Missouri Valley

Daniel Bowen

The Army Corps of Engineers is restoring wetlands from agricultural land along the Missouri River. One mitigation site in Kansas, that was once owned by St. Benedict's Abbey, is now called the Benedictine Bottoms. Benedictine College students have studied the emerging biodiversity of birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, plants, invertebrates, and microbes since 1994. Changes in habitat have attracted over 130 species of birds, many associated with wetlands, notably White-faced Ibis, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Peregrin Falcon, Least Tern, White Pelican, and Bald Eagle.

The Benedictine Bottoms is on the mouth of Independence Creek, where Lewis and Clark's Corp of Discovery were the first U.S. citizens to celebrated the independence of our country west of the Mississippi on July 4, 1804. Lewis's description of White "Pillican's" is notable as is Clark's description of the Benedictine Bottoms, "One of the most butifull Plains, I ever Saw where nature appears to have exerted herself to butify the Senery by the variety of flous" which "profumes the Sensation, and amuses the mind."

Daniel E. Bowen, Professor of Biology at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, earned his PhD from Kansas State University in 1976. During his tenure at Benedictine College over 200 undergraduate research students have published or presented papers with him – primarily about wetlands restoration and wintering snow geese. As a Fulbright Scholar he designed biology curriculum in Thailand. He served as a Councilor on the Council for Undergraduate Research, 1992 to 1994, as President of the Kansas Academy of Science in 1988, and as Director of the Benedictine Bottoms Missouri River Biodiversity Assessment Program since 1994.

Before each program we invite our speakers to join us for an informal dinner and discussion. Feel free to join us this month at Marco Polos. 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.

Wednesday, May 17, 2000

5:45 p.m. Preprogram Dinner with Guest Speaker - Marco Polo's

7:30 p.m. Program, Rm. 1014, Throckmorton Hall

BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING WALK

Join us Saturday, May 13th 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.



MAY BIRDING

DAVE RINTOUL

“On the horizon I can see the village of Wilburton hull-down three miles south and the grain elevator at Rolla to the east. But the attention invariably snaps back to the chickens - that weirdly orchestrated and organized gathering. Something rooted in the grasslands and the sage, yet social, floating just above the earth as well. An electrical current in the zany meat-life zone. A parallel, a reminder, and even a model. Dance and strut and feather bustle. The Lakota word for flute (an important courtship instrument) means, literally, great (as in powerful) prairie chicken. I sit there for an hour, letting the pores open, the music register, and the trees fall and rot where they may. I was basking in a High Plains constant, a sound as elemental as dripping water.”

Merrill Gilfillan, “Magpie Rising - Sketches from the Great Plains,”

1988, Pruett Press, Boulder CO

As elemental as dripping water. An interesting simile, since lesser prairie chickens and dripping water are both getting more and more scarce on the High Plains of Kansas. But enough birds remain to make a pilgrimage to Elkhart a useful adventure, this month, where the Forest Service (in Kansas?) maintains a blind near a busy lek. After hearing, absorbing and watching this elemental show, you can walk out to accompaniment of the sky song of the Cassin’s sparrow. Take this opportunity to look for this sage/grassland sparrow, because unless he is singing he is nearly impossible to see. If there is only a single bird in the territory, he will usually sing from the top of a sagebrush or other low bush. But the presence of another singing male nearby will trigger the sky song in both birds, a beautiful reminder of the infinitely subtle qualities that make the Great Plains a special place indeed.

Closer to home in the Flint Hills, you can find another equally invisible sparrow, the Henslow’s sparrow, singing his mincing song from the dead understory of the tallgrass prairie. If the prairie fires don’t consume all of the standing dead grasses, look (or listen) for this big-billed sparrow in unburned pastures. But don’t

bother if the wind is blowing hard (in Kansas?), because these birds hate the wind, and their feeble song won’t compete with more than a light breeze. You will also find upland sandpipers, grasshopper sparrows, eastern meadowlarks, dickcissels, eastern kingbirds and the ubiquitous brown-headed cowbird (buffalo bird) in these same haunts; most of these are much more cooperative and visible than the rodent-like Henslow’s sparrow. Be on the lookout for hawks as well, you should see red-tailed hawks, Swainson’s hawks, and perhaps even a lingering northern harrier.

After a visit to the upland prairies to find (or miss) the Henslow’s sparrow, you might want to wander down into the gallery forests of a prairie creek to look for warbler migrants. On the way down listen and look in the dogwood thickets for Bell’s vireos and Bewick’s wrens, which are much more common here than most anywhere else. Listen for the bouncing song of the field sparrow, and see if you can find this tiny songster with the bright orange-pink bill. Once you get to the gallery woods, these birds will be unlikely. In woods further east in Kansas (e.g. Marais des Cygnes) May will bring avian jewels such as cerulean warbler, yellow-throated warbler, black throated green warbler, Blackburnian warbler, or even the occasional blue winged or golden-winged warbler. Alas, in the Flint Hills you will be very lucky to find one of these every decade or so. But you can expect yellow warblers, Nashville warblers, Northern parulas, Tennessee warblers, yellow-rumped warblers, and the ubiquitous orange-crowned warblers. You can also find Louisiana waterthrushes warbling along streams and common yellowthroats witchetywitching anywhere near water in the, Flint Hills. The gallery forests are home to year-round residents such as tufted titmouse and red-headed woodpecker, as well as summer residents such as great crested flycatcher, yellow-billed cuckoo, warbling vireo, red-eyed vireo, blue-gray gnatcatcher, and indigo bunting. All of these breeding birds will be

hustling to make nests, lay eggs, and raise the next generation who hopefully will grace the Flint Hills with their presence next year.

If you can stay on the Konza prairie until evening, you might get lucky enough to hear and/or see four of the nine North American species of goatsuckers (nightjars). Common nighthawks arrive in early May, and their booming courtship flights are common sounds during prairie hikes this month. Common poorwills frequent the upland sites, and often congregate on ridge-top trails in the evenings. The chuck-will’s-widow and the whippoor-will can be heard calling from the gallery forests, giving you a goatsucker grand slam, a feat that is not likely to occur anywhere else in North America.



© 2000 Dave Rintoul

April 19 through the end of May:
KTWU will air:

“Birdwatching with Don and Lillian
Stokes” at 1p.m. Mon-Thur.

The Flint Hills Audubon Society will
be listed in the credits before and
after this program.



The white-lined sphinx moth (*Hyles lineata*) has long narrow wings. This moth drives its three inch wingspan into a blur, as it hovers above a blossom. If you happen to be near a blossom, when the moth arrives, you can hear the fascinating hum of its wings. When the moth visits blossoms in the middle of the afternoon, it exhibits a boldness that seems derived from a knowledge of its own abilities. Indeed, I doubt that any bird that would want to eat moths can catch this unusually skillful moth. I have no intense memories of observing this moth during the afternoon, but I do have memories of white-lined sphinx moths that visited blossoms in the twilight, when I was about eight years old.

Mom, Dad, and my sister were sitting on the front porch, and I was walking towards the front fence. My orange and black dog ran with her body stretched out low. With each stride she appeared to bring her hindpaws in front of her nose to begin her next stride. She was filled with an intensely joyful energy which I have only witnessed in creatures that remember their own wildness during such magical moments. Her joy meant more to me than if it had been my own.

When I chased after her, she lengthened her stride with a joy that I would have to be blind not to see. Since I knew I could never catch her, and we both simply wanted to share the joy. When I was out of breath, I stopped beside the honeysuckle that grew all over the fence. The honeysuckle covered the fence and screened our home from the white gravel dust that floated down our road. A white-lined sphinx moth was darting from blossom to blossom on the flowering honeysuckle with a speed that was supernatural. Then it hovered and I heard the hum of those wonderful wings. Then

the moth uncoiled a long tongue, which I could barely see in the twilight, and it slipped it into a yellow blossom. Then it darted away and I smelled the yellow blossom.

Many years have come and gone since I last smelled the traces of dust mixed with the fragrance of that blossom, but when I smell a hauntingly similar fragrance, I also smell the gravel dust of that country road. I am transported back to the moment when I loved the orange and black dog as much as life itself. In my heart, I will chase after her spirit as long as I live.

The sphinx moth guards my memory of her spirit. This wild guardian is seen from April to November. In the December of my life, I will remember that the name of the dog was Princess. She was a purebred English shepherd, although she wasn't registered. She arrived in a wooden crate at the railroad station in Parkville, Missouri. My father opened the crate, and she frantically licked my face, expressing, in part, the incredible joy that she felt on being released from the crate. I felt, in my heart, that I had magically met the companion who would stay beside me forever. When I turned five, kindergarten was still optional, and I got to stay home and play with Princess. When I went off to first grade, she tore up my "Dick and Jane," the reading book with statements such as, "See Spot Run." She apparently did not want me to read about another dog named Spot that was running. She certainly never wanted me to leave the woods down by the creek. Every moment in that woods, there were more wonderful sensations than our young minds could absorb, as the light played through the leaves, shifting a dappled pattern of light and shadow back and forth on the ground, as the breeze rustled the leaves

and brought rich scents of the plant growth and wild creatures. She was reluctant to leave, even after we had overstayed the allotted time for such non-productive pursuits and she herself had become tired from activities such as splashing in the shallow water of the creek.

My father had purchased her to train her to help herd our livestock, since we kept both cattle and hogs for a while, but she proved to be too nervous for such work, and was always simply my companion. Although this delicate dog could never have survived in competition with wolves, she remembered her wild heritage every time she drew breath. Like many predators, she was not born with an instinct for killing, but she was born with an intense desire for the chase. I can hear those breathless yelps of hers, as a long ago memory, as she ran with every last bit of strength in her light-framed body. She was faster than any rabbit that was ever born, but I did not care whether she ever caught the rabbit. I did care that she was doing something that validated her existence in her own mind.

I loved my Princess much more than a fictional dog named Spot, ... but when the end finally came, I betrayed her. She was kicked by someone who was prowling around the house when we were gone. She was too old to recover, and we took her to the city to receive a lethal injection. She was terrorized when we took her into the building, and I turned my back when she was cringing in fear. Then I walked away. That has caused me much regret. I should not have let her face the terror alone, especially not in the unnatural world of that city.

© 2000 Thomas D. Morgan



Birders' Exchange is a collaborative program by the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences and the American Birding Association that collects and distributes equipment and books to benefit bird conservation, education and research in Central and South America. **Dusty Becker** is the local contact. Donations are accepted any time at **1606 Throckmorton Hall**, and at the Dept. of Horticulture office, as well as at our NFHAS monthly meetings and Bird Seed Pick-ups. Besides donating equipment, if you would like to become more involved - you can serve as a courier for the equipment, organize an equipment drive, help promote Birders' Exchange or simply make a financial donation, contact Dusty for more details.



SKYLIGHT

PETE COHEN

We can keep track of the days from May 15 to June 15 by watching the Gemini twins, Castor and Pollux. They'll be discovered up on their feet in the west each evening, and their feet will soon disappear as they sink lower, sooner and sooner, till by mid-June only their heads will still be above water as the long summer mid-year twilight darkens.

Depending on clouds and your horizon, you could lay bets on which stars you'll see first these evenings. Arcturus (in Bootes) is the second brightest star that comes into Kansas skies, but it will be overhead in a more sunlit part of the twilight, while the blue glow of Vega (the sixth brightest) will eagerly shimmer low in the darker east.

Vega is at the edge of a small constellation of weaker stars all composing Lyra, the Lyre. Moving westward of this group is a somewhat larger arrangement of four stars at the center of Hercules.

They're known as the Keystone because they form a wedge-shaped square, like the vital piece used at the crown of a stone arch. The narrow dimension is to the south, and midway along the western side binoculars will reveal a globular cluster known as M13. The M is for Charles Messier (1730-1817), a French astronomer who began an orderly classification of such things.

Also coming back into view will be the husky part of the Milky Way, which crosses the sky north-south this season. This density of stars, I'm told, represents our view toward the narrow edge of our galaxy. I used to think the dark areas were merely the absence of stars but have since been

informed they are merely slowly shifting clouds of opaque cosmic dust.

Bright amid the Milky Way, and near Vega, are the stars of Cygnus the Swan, a/k/a the Northern Cross. The tail of the Swan, at the top of the Cross, is marked by a giant star called Deneb. The name, Deneb, is sort of the Smith or Jones of stardom. I've found other, though lesser, Denebs in the Eagle, the Goat, the Dolphin, and the Whale – not surprising, for it comes from the Arabic word for 'tail'. The star at the Swan's head, or foot of the Cross, is musically named Albireo, which aided eyes should see as two particularly pretty stars, a dimmer one blue, and a brighter one, yellow. I know of no other Albireo. The name appears in a Middle Ages Latin translation, and I've yet to find its meaning.

Further south in the Milky Way is a triangle, slightly stretched to the south, representing Aquila the Eagle. At the angle of the two shorter sides is Altair. Vega, Deneb, and Altair form the larger Summer Triangle, and if you can't locate north these evenings, rising Altair should tell you close enough where east is.

But if you can see Polaris, our current North Star, imagine a circle that passes about one degree (one-tenth of your outstretched fist) east of Polaris, curves away just short of the Hercules' left arm (reaching up from his Keystone), then comes several degrees short of Vega before swinging just past the tip of Cygnus' left wing to arc back to Polaris. You will thus have a diagram of a cycle that's known as the Platonic, or Great, Year.

The earth wobbles slightly as it spins – a result of the motion of its paunchy middle and the gravity of the sun and our circling moon. So its north-south axis is always shifting to point toward a different part of the surrounding sky. In about a hundred years it will be pointing directly at Polaris, instead of being the one degree off it is now. Caesar's legionnaires had to guide on much dimmer Thuban in Draco the Dragon (for which look halfway between the bowl of the Little Dipper and the middle star of the Big Dipper's handle), which wasn't exactly on the mark, either. Yet it was closer than Vega will be as a north star in a little less than 13,000 years from now. The aim will be right at Polaris again in about 25,800 years, another cycle complete.

Other things to look for in this period include the usually furtive Mercury which will be distinctly bright just northwest of Mars in the WNW dusk on May 18th. It will rise higher each evening – composing a duet with the crescent moon on June 3rd and 4th – till around June 6th it will be visible for a couple hours past the sun's departure. After which evening by evening it will grow lower, passing between the Gemini legs on the 10th. Interestingly, it will be displaying phases like the moon, with less and less of Mercury reflecting, yet because it'll be simultaneously moving nearer to us its brightness will remain. So it'll likely take a telescope to discern the phases.

Also, Jupiter and Saturn will return as morning "stars". The moon will be full May 18th and June 16th.

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This Migratory Bird Count is held on the 2nd Saturday in May (May 13) throughout the country to obtain a snapshot of the status of migratory birds in North America. Counts are organized by county, and this is the sixth year a count will be done in Riley County. Last year we had 28 people on the count. ALL are invited and inexperienced birders are matched with those who are more experienced – major experience isn't critical. State compiler: Dave Rintoul Riley County Compiler: Hoogy Hoogheem

The KOS website pages for the North American Migration Count have been updated, and are accessible via an obvious link from the URL <http://www.ksbirds.org/>. Check out the instructions, and NAMC checklist form.

MAY 13, 2000
NORTH AMERICAN
MIGRATION COUNT



The Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society recently was the benefactor of an additional parcel of land adjacent to the Michel-Ross Preserve from Harold Ross. This is a continuance of the partnership between Bill and Joann Michel and Harold Ross for green space in Manhattan. This was initiated in 1997 with their generous donation to the chapter of the acreage along Stag Hill Road. The additional portion of land, which is a continuation of the road coming in off Canyon Road, complements the uphill westerly portion of the canyon rim. The utility easements of these additional eight lots will be considered for release at a later time.

We again want to thank Mr. Ross for this generous contribution to our Land

MICHEL -ROSS AUDUBON SANCUTARY

Also, a big Thank you to the following people who volunteered for Clean-up duty on Earth Day. Thomas Morgan, Judy Roe, Jan Garton, Larry Patton, and John, Sara, Anna, and Peter Tatarko. Larry Patton generously provided the truck and took over 200 pounds of collected trash to the landfill. THANKS again to you all!

Partnership for Kids

This year the NFHAS worked with Wonder Workshop to get more kids involved in outdoor adventuring and birding. During parent teacher conferences this past spring (March 16-17) eight NFHAS volunteers lead tours with children ranging from 1st to 6th grade. A total of 30 children participated. Outdoor adventuring took place at several local spots including Tuttle Creek Lake and Konza Prairie.

Education

WONDER WORKSHOP

Chris Otto from Milford Nature Center started with live demonstrations of feathered friends from Milford. The kids kept track of outdoor animals and critters, talked about animal tracks, looked under rocks for wiggly friends, and watched birds. The weather was chilly but the kids learned some new things about birding and the outdoors and were introduced to Northern Flinthills Audubon Society. NFHAS will be planning more partnerships with local groups to reach young kids. Beth Tatarko

Audubon Activist to Sign Copies of New Book

Audubon activist and former Kansas Audubon Council president Christopher Cokinos will sign copies of and talk about his new book "**Hope Is the Thing with Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Vanished Birds**", published this spring by Tarcher/Putnam. The book has been featured on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" and reviewed or featured in many newspapers and magazines, including "Scientific American", "USA Today", "The Boston Globe" and "The Chicago Tribune".

The signing and discussion is scheduled for 7 p.m. Friday May 19 at the Topeka Barnes and Noble. Copies of the book will be available for sale. "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers" tells the dramatic stories—human and avian—of the Carolina Parakeet, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (which may not be extinct after all), the Heath Hen (which may be "reborn" on Martha's Vineyard), the Passenger Pigeon, the Labrador Duck and the Great Auk.

Book Signing CHRIS COKINOS



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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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Nebraska (statewide): 402-292-5325

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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>