



the prairie falcon

Vol. 31, No. 06
FEB 2003

FEBRUARY PROGRAM:

**BUTTERFLY GARDENS &
BACKYARD GARDENS
FOR BIRDS**

LARRY COSTLOW

**FEB. 19, 7:30PM
1014 THROCKMORTON**

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

Butterfly Gardens & Backyard Gardening for Birds
Larry Costlow, Blueville Nursery
Feb. 19, 7:30 PM - 1014 Throckmorton

Just in time for spring planting and just before the Garden Show! What plants are best for butterflies and birds in your backyard? Come hear tips from the expert.

Larry Costlow is the Plant Materials Manager for the garden store at Blueville Nursery. He has lived and worked in the horticulture business in this area for over 20 years. He also hosts the popular radio show "Blueville's Horticulture Hints" with Lesa Sailor on KMAN radio Saturday mornings.

Before each program, we invite our speakers to join us for an informal dinner and discussion. Feel free to join us this month at Texas Star at 5:45 PM. The program begins at 7:30 PM. Refreshments are served after every meeting. All meetings are open to the public.

Field Trips

BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING WALK

Join us Saturday, Feb. 8th 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.

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CONTRIBUTORS:

DRU CLARKE
PETE COHEN
CHUCK OTTE
THOMAS MORGAN
DAVE RINTOUL
PAUL WEIDHAAS

UPCOMING DATES:

- Feb 1 STORY TELLING
- Feb 2 GROUND HOG DAY
Bird Feeder Tour
(Patricia Yeager 776-9593)
- Feb 5 NFHAS BOARD MEETING
- Feb 8 BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING
8:00 AM
Ackert Hall Parking Lot
- Feb 8 Third Birdfeed ORDER
- Feb 19 "Butterfly Gardens &
Backyard Gardening
for Birds"
Dinner 5:45 -Program 7:30
1014 Throckmorton, KSU
Corner of Claflin & Dennison
- Feb 22 Third Birdfeed PICKUP
9-1PM UFM 1221 Thurston

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MANHATTAN, KS



The Uncommon, Common Crow

Dru Clarke

Two days before spring equinox, I checked the seeps, creek, and pond in our south pasture. The pond was still disappointing, the creek eutrophic in short reaches, but the seep still gave enough water for the mares. I climbed up the strawberry slope to the upper meadow, and looked up toward the buffalo wallow on even higher ground. There, two crows, one in a tall shrub, the other hovering, called and cawed in the most heart-wrenching manner I had ever heard. I walked slowly, “lost wallet” style, toward the crows, wondering what could be the cause of such anguished sound. The hovering one seemed beside itself, flying erratically back and forth: I thought if it could wring its wings as we do our hands when distraught, it would have. By the time I got to the rise where the crows had been displaying, they were gone, and the dogs were nosing something on the ground. It was the remains of a crow, dead from some unknown.

In almost six decades of contact with the natural world, I had never seen a dead crow, and if I had ever seen parts of one, they were unrecognizable to me. Never even a road-killed one. Never a nestling, although I know they must get blown from their nests on windy days. Crows seem to be “in the world,” and, when departed, seem to vanish.

My brother once told me about a crow that he shot. It had been sitting atop a silo when he had taken aim and let loose the bullet that took its life. Evidently it had been a pretty important crow because after he shot it, crows poured out of the sky from every direction - a virtual whirlwind of

birds. They swirled and settled and called and chastised, raising an incredible row, giving my brother pause in his show of fatal accuracy. Catherine Feher-Elston, in her book “Ravensong,” alludes to the phenomenon of “King Crow,” a dominant bird in the clan. It is thought to be a dominant male among males, but as there is little or no sexual dimorphism in crows, this is a guess. What is known is the mournful wake that accompanies the death of such a bird.

Crows are understated, socially successful birds. I’ve seen them stage on varying heights of tree limbs, having, what seems, crow conversation, like old folks taking their morning coffee in the local café. They are smart too, capable of problem-solving. They have been observed outsmarting other animals at a kill, taking the most delectable parts, most notably the eyes. And playful, indulging in behavior for fun, amusement. After a snow, Russian crows would slide down the Kremlin dome, leaving disfiguring scratches on the gold dome. The Russians did not find this amusing. Avian citizens of other northern countries, crows do the same on snow-covered slopes, reminiscent of skiers and snow boarders, although they take this behavior further, “bathing” in the loose powder. They have been observed hanging out and playing with wolves, another notably social animal. The rare orphaned crow, growing up with a human family, has become “babysitter” and constant companion to the youngest child. They also may be sentimental and capable of showing grief. Anthropomorphic, yes, but any

more so than “smart” or “playful”? What other explanation exists for their behavior in proximity to the dead crow? You can decide, but I prefer this one.

I’ve watched them being harassed by more diminutive birds who likely have had their nests raided, the crow lumbering away almost lackadaisically. These savvy tricksters always fascinate in their uncommon commonness. Not long ago, I was looking for stream inhabitants on the lower reach of Kings Creek, where it runs under McDowell Creek Road. On the other side of the bridge I heard water splashing. As I looked up, a crow emerged from beneath the water with some delectable morsel in its beak. On a stream side rock, it quickly dispatched and ate its catch, then flew away. An angler in addition to being a purloiner.

The dead crow’s pelvis and legs were intact, but the rest was missing. Its claws were slim scimitars that looked worn and well used, with a hint of dried soil on the inside curve. This had been an old bird, one who may have been esteemed and revered by its tribe. I took the remains of the crow back to the house, thinking to sketch what was left of it, but got sidetracked instead. When I remembered where I had laid it down, it had disappeared. Of this world, then gone. Some Native American tribes say the crow and raven are the only birds who can bridge the world of the living and that of the dead. A good way to regard the uncommon, common crow.

** Modern bird field guides refer to the common crow as the American crow. For the purposes of this essay, I preferred “common” to illuminate the irony of its name. dc*

STORYTELLING
WORKSHOP

Underwritten by Audubon. Richard Pitts and Dru Clarke at Possum Hollow (Clarke farm) on Feb. 1. The cost is \$35 (\$25 for Audubon members) and includes strategies, snacks, lunch and runs from 9 to 4. Meet at Wonder Workshop at 8:45. For more information / registration call 776 - 1234 or email <wonder@kansas.net>



The London plane tree (*Platanus acerifolia*) is a hardy ornamental tree in Manhattan, Kansas. This tree is a hybrid of the oriental plane tree (*Platanus orientalis*) and the American sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*). The original hybridization event might have occurred in about 1650 in the Tradescant nursery garden in London. The basis for this conjecture is merely the recorded presence of the parental species in the nursery garden, however. The hybridization event could have occurred anywhere in Europe that had ornamental specimens of the American sycamore and either ornamental specimens or native specimens of the oriental plane tree.

There are several different hypotheses about the origin of the London plane tree and some people don't believe that it's really a hybrid between the oriental plane tree and the American sycamore. These species do hybridize, however, producing offspring that are extremely similar to the London plane tree, and molecular techniques will probably be used some day to firmly prove or disprove the hybrid origin of the London plane tree.

The London plane tree is usually propagated asexually. The first cuttings from the hybrid were probably rooted and planted in London in about 1680. So far, none of the trees in London have become decrepit from old age. Based on the longevity of the oriental plane tree and the American sycamore, hybrid specimens may not begin to become decrepit until they have reached 500 years of age. Gradually, more and more specimens of the hybrid were planted in London until they accounted for over 60% of the trees in the 1920's. Part of the reason for its popularity was its ability to withstand severe pollution from the industrial revolution. The smooth surfaces of its leaves were well cleaned by rain and the outer layers of the tree's bark fell away in patches, shedding pollutants. It was also tolerant of heat reflected from the streets and was more tolerant of cold winters than the oriental plane tree.

A large proportion of the seed from this tree is not viable. This is fantastic news for people who are concerned about competition between non-native

and native trees. This tree can successfully cross with the oriental plane, producing forms that can gradually merge into the typical form of the oriental plane tree. I haven't found any information about its ability to cross with the American sycamore. However, I suspect that experts who recommend the London plane tree for planting in our cities may be right, and there is little chance that this non-native tree will influence the survival of our native trees. Now, having arrived at that opinion, I will be able to enjoy the specimens of this tree that much more.

In the future, as I walk past King Hall at Kansas State University, I will notice that the specimens of the London plane tree near Mid Campus Drive are similar in appearance to specimens of the American sycamore, but usually have more than one fruit per stem and have lobes in their leaves that are not much wider than they are long. I will gaze up at these large, beautiful specimens and wonder how much larger they will be when they reach 500 years of age.

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CATS INDOORS!
THE CAMPAIGN FOR SAFER BIRDS & CATS

Cats Indoors! The Campaign for Safer Birds and Cats, was initiated by ABC to end the unnecessary suffering and death of birds and other wildlife caused by free-roaming domestic cats. Cats Indoors! seeks to educate cat owners, decision makers and the general public that free-roaming cats pose a significant risk to birds and other wildlife, suffer themselves, and pose a threat to human health.

Cats Indoors! encourages cat owners to keep their cats indoors and advocates laws, regulations, and policies to protect cats and birds, including the humane removal of free-roaming cats from areas important to wildlife. The campaign promotes grassroots efforts to address the issue at state and local levels. For more information go to <http://www.abcbirds.org/cats/catsindoors.htm>



SKYLIGHT

PETE COHEN

Through the wonders of language we can speak of 'the silent stars' and mean either Charlie Chaplin and his cinematic colleagues, or Polaris and its cosmic companions. Of course, the early movies soon became not completely silent. Sheet music traveled with the films so that local talent provided musical accompaniment. And the evidence seems plain to me that it was the music, providing the emotional rhythms, that did the most to give the two-dimensional motions on the screen their emotional zing, as sound tracks do now. You can test this, for example, by sitting in a dark room and watching, say, King Kong without the music, and then listening to the music without the film, and seeing which rendition moves you toward the intended tenseness, and which moves you instead toward laughing.

With the performers overhead it's different. Imagine, to start, being at the helm of a 17th century sailing vessel beset by a night storm—the whole structure you depend upon is heaving and yawing and groaning, out in the foam-flashing darkness the ocean is growling and hissing, and suddenly there's an opening in the clouds and the familiar stars are seen silently, steadfastly in their accustomed places, unperturbed by the turmoil about you. Their

presence, even if for only a brief moment is like a steadying hand on your shoulder, an assurance that the struggle can be rewarded, that the world is not in its final throes. Modern sailors can come close to the same experience, except they are apt to have much more faith from the start that the world is not ending.

I think turmoils that blow up internally in one's thoughts can receive the same moderation. The celestial stars, our telescopes tells us, are constantly abandoning their positions, engaged in fiery births and deaths, but to our naked eyes they go so steadily sparkling and so confidently about a stage so extensive in space and time that they don't hurl back any catcalls which a person's angst might throw up at them. They simply absorb them and send down in return their own unaltered silent calming dialog. Of course, one could look at them quite differently. The stars, you might say, are just glittering irrelevant idiots; the Moon and planets just blank stares. But where's the profit in that attitude?

Yet it must be admitted that Venus, alas, while moving from Sagittarius to Capricorn, is beginning to lose the exceptional lustre that, like the girl in The Red River Valley song, "has brightened our pathway awhile". However, Jupiter and the Moon will be having brightness contests across the sky Feb. 15 and Mar.

14. Because of Jupiter's orbital speed compared to ours, he spends each year in one zodiacal constellation before moving on to the next. Currently he's amid the Crab, moving closer to the Beehive Cluster that's fuzzily visible to naked eyes.

Other brightnesses will be available: Orion setting after dark with orange-ish Saturn close to his upraised right arm, and the Gemini twins following down the slippery slope of evening. Sirius the Big Dog star will tag along just below and behind Orion, ever frightening Lepus the Rabbit, the spreading parallelogram below Orion's feet. Procyon, the Little Dog star who precedes Sirius on rising, will be trailing on setting, below Gemini. Jupiter will be following the westward progression next, then Regulus at the bottom of Leo's backward question mark. Then the bright orange Arcturus (reached by diving off the handle end of the Big Dipper). Soon after, more subtly and more to the south, Spica of Virgo starts to pass; then midway through the night, distinctly blue Vega rises in the NE, then in the wee hours Altair, in Aquila the Eagle, breaks the surface pretty much marking due E. Then still worthy Venus gets to shine awhile before appears the next bright star, the Sun. Full Moon, Feb. 16; new, Mar. 2.

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WEST NILE VIRUS in Kansas
Chuck Otte

West Nile Virus is transmitted when a mosquito bites an infected bird and then bites another animal or human. There is no evidence of direct spread from animals to humans. West Nile Virus may cause flu-like symptoms in humans, such as headache, swollen glands, and muscle aches, as well as a rash. Usually West Nile Virus only causes mild disease in humans, but in rare cases the virus may cause encephalitis and even death. People more than 50 years old are most susceptible to serious illness as the result of West Nile Virus.

"The fact that the virus has finally appeared in Kansas really comes as no surprise since it's been found in states bordering Kansas, including Nebraska, Missouri, and Oklahoma," said Hansen. "We knew the virus could be spread by migratory birds and we have increased our surveillance this year. We've been looking for first signs of the virus in Kansas in mosquitoes, birds, and mammals. KDHE has worked with KSU, KU, Department of Wildlife and Parks, the Department of Animal Health, USDA, zoos, physicians, and veterinarians to get information out. This just shows that our educational efforts have paid off. We anticipated that West Nile Virus would show up this year. Kansas has been conducting ongoing surveillance and will continue to monitor its occurrence and provide public health information."

Kansas residents can report dead birds and get information on submitting birds for testing by calling toll free: 866-452-7810. Information on West Nile Virus and Kansas activities can be found at: www.oznet.ksu.edu/westnilevirus. Mosquito control and protection is the best defense against West Nile Virus. KDHE recommends avoiding mosquito contact by wearing long sleeves and pants and using a repellent containing DEET as labeled. Outdoor activities in the evening, when mosquitoes are most active, should be avoided. People should check around their homes and empty any containers holding water such as tires, birdbaths, and buckets to minimize mosquito egg laying habitats.

Chuck Otte

Geary County Extension Office, PO BOX 28
Junction City, Kansas 66441-0028

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cotte@oznet.ksu.edu
785-238-4161
FAX 785-238-7166



On December 21, 2002, 67 observers (and two feeder watchers) spent 164 total hours counting the birds for the 54th annual Manhattan Christmas Bird Census. These intrepid watchers counted over 70,000 birds from 97 different species that day. Three more species were seen during the three days before and after the count (count-week) species, indicating that at least 100 species can be found in the Manhattan area in early winter. For the complete list of species, along with the numbers counted that day, check our website <www.ksu.edu/audubon/falcon.html>

Although we did not add any species to our cumulative list (163 species seen on this count since it began in 1949), we did find some interesting birds, and some interesting numbers of birds, this year. Most notable might be the record number of American Crows (over 22,000), but this is no surprise for even a casual birdwatcher in the Manhattan area. We also counted a record number of Golden-crowned Kinglets; high numbers of this diminutive woodland species have been reported across the state this fall, and the Manhattan area is no exception to this trend. Among the waterbirds, two Western Grebes were counted this year, along with two American White Pelicans and two Ross' Geese. Although these numbers are not large; they do represent all-time records for these species on this count. We also had record-high numbers of Winter Wrens (11), White-throated Sparrows (60), and Common Redpolls (3). On the minus side, we were unable to find a Loggerhead Shrike in our count circle for the seventh year in a row; this species is increasingly difficult to find here on the northern edge of its winter range and may be declining as a breeding bird here as well. Two species which were at record-lows last winter, Northern Bobwhite and Carolina Wren, rebounded reasonably well this winter; a Carolina Wren is busily working over my suet feeder as I write this report at home! Among the more uncommon birds, a Savannah Sparrow was seen for only the 12th time. A lone Hermit Thrush was sighted; that species has been seen on only 7 previous Manhattan counts. And Ruby-crowned Kinglets, which normally winter further south, were seen for the 10th year in a row; this species has been sighted only 16 times in the in the 54 year history of this count.

Thanks to all the counters, and to the cooks and others who arranged the delicious chili dinner at the end of a long day of birdwatching. Thanks to Don Yockey for his generous donation of birdhouses and birdfeeders which were raffled off at the dinner. Please make plans to join us next winter for the 55th annual Manhattan CBC; we promise you a good time, a great dinner, and a feeling of a job well done as you contribute to this long-running "citizen science" project.

Benefit Concert Raises the Roof

Peony Sale Big Success!

Paul Weidhaas

Had someone been watching, a careful observer may have witnessed the newly-constructed Manhattan Arts Center roof being displaced a few inches the evening of November 16th.

The second annual benefit concert for the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society (NFHAS) Land Preservation Fund filled the Grosh Performance Hall at the center to overflowing with 200 enthusiastic music lovers, netting \$1400 in the process. Tickets sold out the day before, but Arts Center director, Penny Senften, graciously arranged thirty additional seats to be placed up front and lining the sides of the stage. Professional artists, Melissa Atchison, Connie Dover, Kelly Werts, and Ann Zimmerman rent the air with warbling wild (even if Connie was a bit less

vocal than usual, battling bronchitis).

Thanks go to volunteers Jan Garton, John Tatarko, and Patricia Yeager for attending to the myriad details of organizing an event of this caliber, including tickets, advertising, and scheduling the hall.

But that's not all. A silent auction garnered another \$450, thanks to donors Scott Bean, Ruth Kerr, Alicia Opheim, Kevin Snell, Vic Thomas, and Don Yockey. Hats off to Leann Harrell and Eloise Thomas for doing the legwork on this annual feature.

The ad-hoc concert committee isn't resting on its laurels, however. Plans are already being made for next year's shindig. Stay tuned!

Over \$330 was raised with the sale of heritage peony bulbs dug from the Michel-Ross Audubon Preserve on Stagg Hill. The preserve contains the Hook Peony farm, active until the 1950s, and hundreds of heirloom plants still grace the land, but are being shaded out. Auduboners Ann Feyerharm, Jan Garton, Joann Hablutzel, Tom Morgan, Judy Roe, and Paul Weidhaas spend two hours on a pleasant early November afternoon digging and bagging the bulbs, and arranging for their pick up by the dozens of people who had preordered. Proceeds pay for the property tax bill on the preserve, and combined with the benefit concert monies, help in the long term management of this and hopefully other special places.



**Northern Flint Hills
Audubon Society**
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Subscription 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. 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.**

RARE BIRD HOTLINE: For information on Kansas Birds, subscribe to the Kansas Bird Listserve. Send this message **<subscribe KSBIRD-L>** to this address **<listserv@ksu.edu>** and join in the discussions!

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