



# Canyon Wrenderings

The Journal of the Black Canyon Audubon Society

Representing Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Montrose, Ouray, San Juan, and San Miguel Counties of Western Colorado

Fall 2020

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## Fall Migration Has Begun!

By Don Marsh

It's already late summer and you may have noticed that birds have already started the process of heading to their wintering grounds.

Reasons for birds to start their migration early are mixed. Most of the earliest migrants are those that failed to successfully secure a mate or those who experienced nest failure. Some, like the Arctic breeders, take advantage of the long daylight hours and abundant food resources to accelerate their breeding cycle. By early- to mid-July, shorebirds like Western, Least, and Baird's Sandpipers have raised their young to the point that the young can fend for themselves. The adults leave their young, and the young must rely on innate instincts to make it to their wintering grounds on their own. Adult shorebirds start being reported in Colorado by early July, and the pace picks up as the season progresses and the young birds start arriving.

Shorebirds are not the only birds that start heading south early. In July, you may have noticed an increase in hummingbirds at your feeders. Southbound Rufous Hummingbirds arrive in July and commandeer feeders from the resident Broad-tailed and Black-chinned Hummingbirds. Rufous Hummingbirds follow an elliptical migration pattern (north one route, south a different route), leaving their wintering grounds in Mexico and heading up the Pacific coast as they follow warmer weather and its associated bloom of

*continued on page 5*

## President's Message

We continue to live in trying times, with COVID-19 (or Corvid). Your Black Canyon Audubon Society board of directors was very disappointed to cancel in-person Audubon activities for this summer. Hopefully, we can start those up again soon.

Susan and I are spending more time at home and working in our garden, but we are getting out for some birding in the area while social distancing. Maybe things will be a little better by the time that you read this. Luckily, we have lots of good birds near our home south of Montrose.

Fall migration is happening, with or without us! Nature goes on. I hope you are seeing some of our favorite birds that are migrating south already. Some species started heading south in early July. Bullock's Orioles have all headed south. Hummingbirds are moving south too. The four hummingbird species that pass through our area are on the move. If you see some at your feeder, I am betting that they are different ones each day—a wave of them moving south. The adult males head south first, so you should be seeing fewer and fewer of those.

Remember that under new rules, Colorado Parks and Wildlife now requires a fishing or hunting license, if you want to use a State Wildlife Area. There are 350 SWA's in Colorado. Some of the nearby State Wildlife Areas that we often use are Billy Creek near Ridgway, Woods Lake near Telluride, Escalante near Delta, and Centennial and Gunnison near Blue Mesa Reservoir. If you are 65 and over, you can buy a resident fishing license online or in person, for just \$10 for 12 months. If younger than that, it is \$35.

<https://www.cpwshop.com/purchaseprivilege.page>

I hope you are staying healthy. Please feel free to email me your bird sightings, maybe with a photo, and we'll post them on our web site or feature them in the next newsletter.

Bruce Ackerman

## From the Editor

This newsletter endeavors to represent the interest of local members. Want to see something different? Want to write a book review or submit photos? Maybe you want to share an interesting birding experience you've had? Please send ideas, articles, and photos to me for including in future newsletters. See contact information below.

Mary Menz

### ***Canyon Wrenderings***

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Sabine's gull © Don Marsh.

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Montrose County Fair—**OPEN**

Bird Banding—Carrie Krickbaum (see above)

Christmas Bird Count Team—Arden

Anderson, Adam Petry, Amy Seglund,

and Missy Siders (see page 3 for contact information)

Eckert Crane Days—Dian Torphy

**A note about email addresses in this newsletter: All emails have an extra space before the @ sign to discourage webcrawlers from spam activities.**

# BCAS Annual Birdhouse Fundraiser

By Jon Horn

For the past six years, the Montrose Woodworkers Guild has constructed birdhouses that have been displayed and then sold at silent auction at the Montrose County Fair for the benefit of the Black Canyon Audubon Society. This year, there was no fair, but the Guild still constructed and donated birdhouses to BCAS to offer to our membership and the general public for donations to benefit our educational



**An example of one of the whimsical birdhouses crafted by Jim Norfleet.**

This year, the Woodworkers Guild made 23 birdhouses, but we only saw 16 of them because several were sold by the Guild on our behalf. Jim Norfleet is an extraordinary woodworker and makes very detailed birdhouses that are real works of art. Jim really went above and beyond this year, making six figural birdhouses, of which five were acquired by his relatives for donations of \$100 each. BCAS sold the remaining 16 birdhouses plus was given an additional \$15 donation (Thanks Fred and Marilyn!) for a grand total of \$1,135 to benefit BCAS educational programs.

We were sorry not to have the birdhouse display at the fair this year for a number of reasons (in addition to missing out on the ice cream booth nearby). One of the big reasons is that all of the hard work put into building the birdhouses by the Woodworkers Guild could not be seen and appreciated by the public attending the fair. Also, the birdhouses are usually part of a contest that is judged, and winners receive ribbons and cash awards donated, in the past, by Alpine Lumber. That did not happen this year.

Another thing that was missed was the interaction that BCAS members have with fair attendees who stop by our booth and

chat. In the past, the Fair gave us an opportunity to not only talk to the public about the eye-catching

birdhouses, but about BCAS and our educational programs. For me, being at the booth and talking to folks made me realize that everyone really likes birds and almost always has a story to tell about birds they have seen or something crazy they have seen birds do.

The birdhouses always make people smile, and kids get really excited seeing them. We are hopeful that things will return to normal for next year's fair so that we can do the birdhouse display and sale there. We can also hope that the ice cream booth returns, too. ■

## The Birding Skills of Harriet Tubman

By Sallie Thoreson

Owling at night is a special skill; to identify species by their calls is great fun. It was more than fun to Harriet Tubman in rural Maryland during the abolition years. Harriet was born and raised in the wetlands, swamps, and forests around Maryland's eastern shore, and she knew the natural history of the area. As a slave, she was sent out at age seven to check muskrat trapping lines.

Later she helped lead over 70 people to freedom from 1850 to 1860. She used the call of the barred owl (*Strix varia*) to let freedom seekers know if it was safe to come out of hiding. Her knowledge of nature helped her read the waterways, know what plants could be used for food and medicine, and how to navigate by the stars.

The call "who-cooks-for-you?! who-cooks-for-you-all?" is truly a call of freedom.

There is more about Harriet Tubman's life in an Audubon Society article <https://www.audubon.org/news/harriet-tubman-unsung-naturalist-used-owl-calls-signal-underground-railroad> and at the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park site <https://www.nps.gov/hatu/index.htm>. ■

## Learn to ID Five Owls by Their Calls

Check out this fun resource for leaning just five owl calls <https://www.audubon.org/news/learn-identify-five-owls-their-calls>. ■

# A Look Inside the Nest: Monitoring Bird Nests

By Carrie Krickbaum

It's such a rewarding experience to observe the special world of a nest. Several volunteers got to do that this year at Ridgway State Park. The Bluebird boxes that were monitored by Terry Ryan for over 17 years needed new eyes on the job after he passed away.

There are now 34 boxes within the park that were monitored once per week starting the beginning of April.

As of August 17, nesting attempts had been completed. Using the Nestwatch website, we kept track of adult pairs building nests. If eggs were laid, we observed the hatchlings as they grew. Following is a summary of what activities took place during the bluebird nesting season at the park.

There were a total of 49 nesting attempts. Of those, 186 eggs were laid. There were 155 young and around 100 known fledglings. There was also a predated nest of eggs and one abandoned nest with eggs that another bird attempted to build a nest over.

Of the nests, 19 were Mountain Bluebirds, 19 were Violet Green Swallows, three Western Bluebirds, two Tree Swallows, and one House Wren.

Many of the boxes saw more than one nesting attempt with the swallows coming in after the Bluebirds. The boxes are now being cleaned out and we'll see what next year brings! ■

## Do You Monitor Nests on Your Property or on Public Land?

Be a part of the Nest Watch team! Visit [www.nestwatch.org](http://www.nestwatch.org), take a short quiz to get certified, and log your observations in this nationwide citizen science effort.



Life cycle of a nest. From left to right: a clutch of bluebird eggs not quite complete (bluebirds typically lay 5-7 eggs before beginning incubation), hatchlings, and nestlings. © Carrie Krickbaum.



## Remember to vote National, state, and local candidates and issues are important

Check your registration status—and check to ensure your ballot was counted—at <https://www.sos.state.co.us/voter>. Worried that the ballot won't be delivered on time if using the US Mail? Save money and drop off ballots at county-wide drop boxes.

Turn your worries into votes. Vote as if the earth depends on it; it does! ■

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## Fall Migration Has Begun *continued from cover*

wildflowers. They breed north of California all the way up to Alaska. In fact, Alaskan-breeding Rufous Hummingbirds engage in the longest known avian migration (if measured by body lengths). The males depart the breeding grounds as soon as the females start incubating their eggs, because the male's job is done. Females are solely responsible for the care of the young. Again, following the bloom of wildflowers, the hummingbirds head south through the mountains of the West back to Mexico. Females and young follow the males several weeks later.



Western Sandpiper © Don Marsh

Many ducks, gulls, and most passerines (song birds) begin the process of molting their feathers as soon as nesting completes and before migration begins. Large numbers of them will arrive in Colorado from late August through early October. If we are fortunate, not all individuals will follow these patterns. On August 11, an adult Sabine's Gull was sighted at Ridgway Reservoir, which is quite early for this species to appear in Colorado. These gulls typically nest in the high Arctic and winter in the subtropical and tropical oceans. Most migrate off the coast, but a few Sabine's Gulls (see cover photo) fly over the interior of the US and Canada. This particular gull remained in the park for at least three days and fed on crayfish at the south end of the lake.

Fall migration can be challenging and rewarding due to the number of plain young birds and drab-colored adults and very little singing or calling compared to spring migration. It can test your bird identification skills. Without the bright colors and exuberant song to make identification easier, instead focus on more subtle field marks and behaviors. What is it that distinguishes the bird in front of you as a warbler instead of a vireo, a thrush instead a blackbird, or a sparrow instead of a finch or bunting? You will be forced to

notice size and behavior, bill size and shape, tail length, and pattern to identify the bird.

Fall migration is challenging, but if you take time to study a bird closely it will boost your knowledge of our local and migrant birds. Plus, because there are so many young birds attempting their first migration, some will show up in unexpected places, much to the delight of bird watchers. Take time to get out and enjoy the fall and study the birds that add so much to the season. ■

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## Bird Names for Birds Campaign

By Susan Chandler-Reed

In May, a Twitter campaign #BirdNamesForBirds was launched asking the ornithological and birding communities to "simply say no to all eponymous common names." A letter with 182 signatories and a subsequent petition signed by 2,555 people was sent to the American Ornithological Society requesting that its committees on Classification and Nomenclature (NACC and SACC) come up with a plan to change the English common names of the roughly 142 birds now named after people.

The [Bird Names for Birds](#) group asserts that birds should not be named after people, especially after certain white men as an honorific. In their view, eponyms are essentially "verbal statues" that reflect a racist, colonial attitude that instills importance on a particular person who may not be deserving of that honor. They point out that, unlike scientific names, the common name of a bird can be replaced with no ill affect to science.

Robert Driver, whose proposal to rename the McCown's Longspur was accepted this August by the NACC, states that he has received confounding responses to his proposal—the first being "We need to preserve the history contained in these names," followed by the statement that "No one had any idea who any of these people were until you brought it up."

The NACC [guidelines for English bird names](#) acknowledge that "some eponyms refer to individuals or cultures that held beliefs or engaged in actions that would be considered offensive or unethical by present-day standards." They make a distinction between eponyms that are purely honorific and those that either commemorate the individual who first discovered or collected that species or recognize individuals who contributed substantially to advances in ornithology. The NACC gives the latter category of eponym more merit for retention. ■

# The Life Cycle of the Gunnison Sage Grouse

By Sallie Thoreson

Quick, when I say Gunnison sage-grouse, what do you visualize? Is it the resplendent males strutting on the lek (mating area)? That's the iconic image, but the complete lifecycle is fascinating and picturesque.

If the behavior on the lek is successful, the females will move nearby to find cover for nesting. The females eat sagebrush, but look mostly for forbs (flowering or green plants) and insects that supply calcium, protein, and other essential nutrients for egg-laying. Highly valued forbs include dandelions, hawksbeard, salsify, milkvetch, sweet clover, balsamroot, lupine, Rocky Mountain bee plant, alfalfa, and globemallow. (Yum!)

The eggs are laid, usually at the base of a sagebrush, in May to June in wetter areas where sagebrush, grasses, and forbs provide cover for the eggs and the chicks when they hatch after three weeks. Almost immediately, the chicks start feeding themselves on insects and other invertebrates (spiders, worms, snails), while staying hidden in the sagebrush and surrounding shrubs. Females may move their broods to take advantage of the best food and cover. At about four weeks, the juveniles switch to a diet of forbs and venture out from cover.

How quickly they grow up! By fall, immature Gunnison sage-grouse join adults, both males and females, in eating primarily sagebrush, with some forbs and insects. They are already looking for places to overwinter. In winter most Gunnison sage-grouse inhabit drainages and slopes with south or west aspects, but sagebrush is key to their survival from November to April.

The birds are continually looking for food, the right amount of sagebrush cover to avoid predators, and protection from snow and wind. This can mean that birds travel widely on an annual basis. Individual Gunnison sage-grouse have been found up to 35 miles from a lek site, and 10-11 miles is common. Travel in fall and winter may exceed 20 miles.



Gunnison Sage-grouse © Christopher Lazo

It's not easy being a Gunnison sage-grouse, even when it seems there is a lot of sagebrush out there. ■

# Varied Bunting Becomes Colorado's 513 Official Bird Species

Staff report; Photo by Don Marsh

The Varied Bunting found in Ridgway (Ouray County) on June 22 became the state's latest official bird species. It is the 513TH bird seen in Colorado. Don Marsh, a BCAS board member, noticed the bird fly into a thin line of willows behind his house as darkness fell at 8:00 PM. His description and photos (including the one below) were submitted to the Colorado Bird Records Committee, and the addition to the list was announced during the Colorado Field Ornithologists annual meeting on July 25.

According to the Birds of the World website hosted by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, "Varied Buntings occur from the southern borders of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, through Mexico, including Baja California, to Guatemala. They occupy habitat characterized by arid thorn brush at



riparian edges, thorn forest, scrubby woodland, and overgrown clearings, and are absent from human residential areas."

The Ridgway bird apparently did not read the memo. The bird was observed briefly passing through a residential neighborhood in town to destinations unknown. The bird was only seen for approximately one minute and heard for an additional minute as it moved further up the string of willows lining an irrigation ditch.

This isn't the first Varied Bunting to get lost this far north of Mexico. Three records of the bunting have been reported by eBird even further north than Colorado:

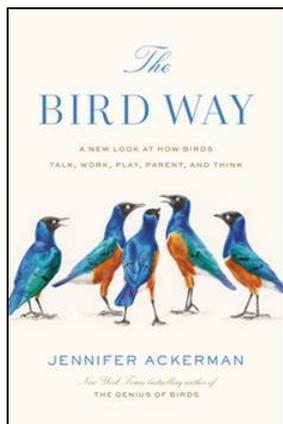
- An adult male was collected at Locke, Michigan May 18, 1874;
- A female or young male was caught at a banding station at Long Point NWR in Ontario, Canada May 7, 1995; and
- A male Varied Bunting stayed two days in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, May 6-7, 2018.

Obviously, traveling great distances to encounter unusual birds is not always necessary. Just keep an eye out your window. You never know what might turn up. ■

## Book Review

# *The Bird Way: A New Look at How Birds Talk, Work, Play, Parent, and Think*

Reviewed by Laura Mah



Are you book lovers like Don and I? We try our best to support small business bookshops and have our list of regional favorites. For its eclectic selection, Townie Books in the historical district of Crested Butte is the newest addition to our favorites list. On our last visit, I bought Don a copy of *The Bird Way: A New Look at How Birds Talk, Work, Play, Parent, and Think* by Jennifer Ackerman.

Most of the books and articles that Don reads are more technical than I have interest in. He shares with me an abbreviated synopsis and I store this away as a sound bite of bird fact. Occasionally I can recall them on demand and that surprises the both of us.

Ackerman covers in her newest book, many of my stored sound bites on bird behavior. Through a narration of her research trips with well-known ornithologists, Ackerman interweaves evidence-based bird facts with a researcher's passion for understanding bird behavior. Ackerman's narrations create pictures in my mind of the bird's behavior and make it feel as if I am participating in the conversation with the researcher alongside her.

A new stored sound bite: Cowbirds lay their eggs in other (host) bird's nests, and the young are raised by the host birds as their own. Ackerman's writing echoes my feelings on this despicable behavior. "Prowlers and cheats, they stalked the hard-built nests of the "good" birds I loved—vireos, warblers, finches and fly catchers—sneaking through the woods and thickets searching for an unguarded nest in which to dump their eggs..." I can now visualize why cowbirds are called "brood parasites."

This odd cowbird fact makes me wonder how cowbirds become cowbirds, and why don't they become vireos or warblers? According to *The Bird Way*, my question was actually studied by Mathew McKim Louder at the University of Illinois. The brown headed cowbird mother does not ditch

her eggs for another bird to totally care for. She lives in the background watching the nest, and waiting for her young to hatch. Before her offspring can imprint on the host mother and learn the host's behaviors she intervenes.

"A mother cowbird tells young cowbirds who they are and what they should become—a brood parasite rather than a member of their host species." The cowbird mother uses a special "chatter call" to unlock the self-knowledge the young cowbird has stored away in its brain. Hearing this special call changes the auditory region of the young bird's brain and from then on it is guided to learn from the cowbird mother and not the host. I would have never suspected that birds had that much self-knowledge.

In this book, Ackerman presents a survey of research from the last two decades on bird behaviors for talk, work, play, love and parenting. Her entertaining presentation of bird facts will appeal to both the layperson and the knowledgeable birder who wants to expand his or her understanding of bird behaviors.

Ackerman is a *New York Times* bestselling author who has been writing about science, nature, and human biology for more than three decades. ■



Yellow Warbler feeding a Brown-headed Cowbird.  
© Don Marsh.

### Learn more about Brood Parasites

Visit <https://www.audubon.org/news/the-brilliant-ways-parasitic-birds-terrorize-their-victims> to read "The Brilliant Ways Parasitic Birds Terrorize Their Victims." It tells the tale and provides photos of other host nests—a story that may fill you with both wonder and dread!

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# Generating Conservation Conversations

By Sallie Thoreson, Conservation Chair

Let's start out with a WIN!

## **The Great American Outdoors Act**

The GAOA was signed into law on August 4, 2020. This law addresses backlogged park repairs and permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Senator Gardner was a primary sponsor.

Much happening around critical federal conservation legislation. There have been multiple reports on how the current administration has been making changes to rules and regulations to weaken protections for animals, plants and whole ecosystems. Many of us have spoken up by providing comments directly and supporting comments through groups such as the National Audubon Society ([www.audubon.org/takeaction](http://www.audubon.org/takeaction)). Keep it up!

Other avenues are to use the courts and legislation to force changes and request that certain actions be voided. Here are a couple of examples:

## **The Migratory Bird Treaty Act**

The US Fish and Wildlife Service published a Draft Environmental Statement around their legal opinion to end the enforcement of incidental take under the MBTA. This would mean that projects or actions leading to the death of migratory birds (such as oil spills, impoundment ponds, transmission lines, wind turbines, etc.) would not lead to any fines or liability for restoration costs. However, on August 11, in response to a lawsuit from conservation groups including the National Audubon Society, a US District Court Judge ruled that "the legal opinion which serves as the basis for the Trump administration rollback of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act [on incidental take] does not align with the intent and language of the 100-year-old law. The National Audubon Society further states, "...the administration should abandon the regulatory process it started to make this illegal bird-killing policy permanent."

(<https://www.audubon.org/news/victory-federal-judge-rules-administrations-bird-killing-policy-illegal>).

The US House of Representatives has also proposed the Migratory Bird Protection Act of 2020 (H.R. 5552), which would reverse the administration's recent interpretation of the MBTA's incidental kill provision.

## **The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)**

A group of environmental and justice organizations have sued the administration to reverse nine changes made to this landmark environmental act. The provisions would reduce complete environmental reviews and restrict community input (<https://www.audubon.org/news>).

## **The Endangered Species Act (ESA)**

US legislators in both the House and Senate have bills to void three administration rule changes made in 2019 to provisions of the ESA, another key conservation law. The bills also call for future ESA actions to consider the impacts of climate change and to limit the use of economic impacts in the decision-making process. The House version (HR4348) is called PAW & FIN Conservation Act. The Senate version is S2491.

## **Keep watching the CORE Act**

The Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act (CORE Act) and the Protecting America's Wilderness Act (Rep. Degette's Colorado Wilderness Act) are included in amendments to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) passed by the House on July 21, and a Senate version passed on July 23. The bill now goes to a House-Senate conference.

## **Opportunities to join the work**

It is rewarding to get involved in some local and national issues. Sometimes that requires attending meetings, reading documents and preparing some letters. It can be a short-term project. Please let Bruce Ackerman or Sallie Thoreson know if you are interested in any of the following projects. Their contact information is on the masthead of the newsletter. Thanks!

## **GMUG Forest Plan**

BCAS would like to prepare a letter to the US Forest Service asking them to include clear conservation protections for the Mule Park Important Bird Area in the Grand Mesa-Uncompahgre-Gunnison Forest Plan. The Mule Park IBA is of extreme importance for cavity-nesting birds, in particular western purple martins.

## **ESA critical habitat**

The administration has yet another proposal to redefine the word "habitat" in the Environmental Species Act. The proposed definition adds some layers to designating critical habitat and could make it easier to deny habitat protections. Also there could be some limits to habitat designations as the climate changes. The BCAS is looking at preparing some comments on this ruling. Those comments are due September 4.

## **County mountain bike trail plan**

A group is spearheading a Regional Trail Plan to provide a framework for the development and improvement of multi-use trails in Ouray County. The website <http://www.copmoba.com/ridgway> has more information and a place to complete an online survey (by Sept 12). BCAS is looking for more people to be part of the planning process over the next year. ■

# Want to Attract Birds? Garden for Moths & Caterpillars!

By Dian Torphy

Wow! I was recently inspired via a webinar presented by Doug Tallamy, author of *Nature's Best Hope*, who believes that we can (and must) remedy species decline in our own backyards.

We can all help increase bird habitat. To do so, we need to plant our yards with plants that birds can use. Habitat is important: think thorns and evergreens for protection and shelter and plants of different heights to increase cover and provide habitat for a greater variety of species. Year-round food is important (seeds, berries, bugs), too. But, to get the most bang for your buck and make for better bird watching, Tallamy says to garden for moths and butterflies.

Although all insects contribute proteins and fats to birds' diets, caterpillars are one of the best foods for breeding birds and nestlings. They are soft and, therefore, easily digestible. They are large, which saves time and energy gathering food. They contain low amounts of chitin, which is not digestible. And they contain very high amounts of carotenoids, which provide provitamins, antioxidants, and pigment for beautiful plumage. Tallamy regards caterpillars to be a keystone species when building an ecosystem.



Garden Tiger Moth caterpillar on Parry's arnica © Mary Menz

Caterpillars are largely plant-specific, meaning that a Colorado caterpillar may not be able to live in a yard planted with plants native to the Eastern US or Europe. Studies have shown that to attract the highest number and species of caterpillars your yard should be planted with 70% native plants. But there is no need to get rid of your favorite lilac or spirea. Start with one native plant and work your way up.

In general, the top plants for attracting moths and butterflies are oaks, plums/cherries, pines, and willows. See the list of resources at the end of this article. Websites for the National Audubon Society

and the National Wildlife Federation allow users to enter ZIP codes and come up with a list of native plants for a specific geographic area and the Colorado Native Plant Society has plant lists to help you with species selection.



Police Car Moth on *Senecio* sp. © Mary Menz

You can also check with your favorite nursery this fall and see if they can order some of these plants if they do not already carry them. Alternatively, there is also a native plant vendor list on the CoNPS website.

The pandemic has provided some great time for both webinars and reading. I gleaned additional inspiration from *Wilding* by Isabella Tree, which chronicles the return of the author's farm to a native ecosystem. It was amazing to read how quickly new species returned to their property.

Although their 3,500 acres is in England and quite a bit larger than my own yard (.6 acres), I was motivated to see what changes I could make. With seven new shrubs planted, and seeds ordered, I look forward to watching for new insects, moths, and butterflies, more birds, and maybe the surprise of a new bird species. I chose Utah serviceberry, leadplant, native gooseberry, New Mexico privet, Englemann ivy, and wildflower seed. What would work well in your backyard?

## Resources

National Audubon Society  
<https://www.audubon.org/native-plants>

Colorado Native Plant Society  
<https://conps.org/gardening-with-native-plants/>

National Wildlife Federation  
<https://www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder>

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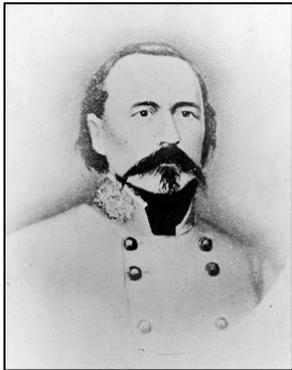
## Who Was that Bird Named For?

# McCown's Longspur is now Thick-Billed Longspur

By Susan Chandler-Reed

Early in August, my husband and I were intrigued to find an article in the *Washington Post* titled "[A Small Bird Sheds its Confederate Past with a New Name](#)" that told of the recent move by the North American Classification Committee of the American Ornithological Society (AOS) to rename the McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*).

Notwithstanding their initial rejection of Robert Driver's [2018 proposal](#) to change the bird's English name, AOS reversed their decision, expressing their commitment to anti-racism and addressing systemic racism. They issued this [statement](#): "Despite McCown's ornithological contributions, he is perceived as a symbol of slavery and racism because he chose to serve in the Confederacy." The bird's new name, Thick-Billed Longspur, is the literal translation of the genus name, *Rhynchophanes*. The species name *mccownii* remains unchanged.



John Porter McCown (1815-1879) was born in Tennessee. After graduating from West Point in 1840, he served in the west, including military campaigns to forcibly relocate Native Americans, the Mexican-American War, the Seminole War, and an expedition against the Mormons in the Utah War. While serving in Texas in the 1840s and early 1850s, McCown

collected for the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. His field notes tell of his discovery of the longspur, "I fired at a flock of Shore Larks [Horned Larks] and found this bird among the killed." He sent it to his friend, George Newbold Lawrence, who described and named it. McCown also published several papers on the birds of Texas in *Annals of the New York Lyceum* in 1853.

McCown resigned his officer's commission in the U.S. Army in 1861 to fight for the Confederacy in the Army of the West. Although quickly promoted to Brigadier General and later Major General, his career as a Confederate officer in Bragg's Army was fraught. He was court-martialed in 1863 and suspended for six months. McCown eventually disavowed the Confederacy, calling it a "damned stinking cotton oligarchy." Following the Civil War, McCown

returned to his home state of Tennessee and taught school. He later moved to [Arkansas](#) and farmed there until his death.

The [Thick-Billed Longspur](#) is a native of shortgrass prairies. It migrates through the plains of eastern Colorado on its way to summer breeding grounds, which include a small area of northeastern Colorado. It winters in Oklahoma, western Texas, and northern Mexico. Sparrow-like, the bird has a rounded head, short tail, and thick bill. The males have a distinctive aerial courtship display and call, repeatedly "parachuting" toward the ground with their wings outstretched and their tail fanned while singing.

The species has suffered a 94-percent decline in population in the last 50 years because of habitat loss.

### Additional references

Gruson, Edward S. 1972. *Words for Birds: A Lexicon of North American Birds with Biographical Notes*. Quadrangle Books, New York.

Thomasy, Hannah "A Bird Named for a Confederate General Sparks Calls for Change." July 21, 2020. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/bird-0975376/named-confederate-general-sparks-calls-change-18>



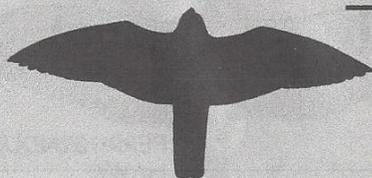
Photo credit <http://www.roysephotos.com/zzMcCownsLongspur8D.jpg>

## Sharpen Your Hawk ID Skills

### A GUIDE TO HAWKS SEEN IN NORTH AMERICA

These are migrants seen in most of North America. Because many species differ in appearance due to age and various light and dark morphs, especially in the west, only the adult of the most common form is illustrated.

#### KNOW YOUR SILHOUETTES



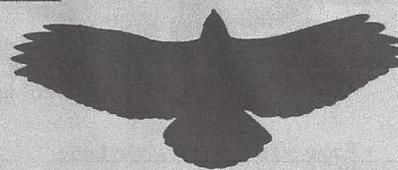
##### FALCONS

Streamlined - long, pointed wings; long, tapered tail; strong rowing wing beats; wings look less pointed and tail less tapered when not in direct flight.



##### ACCIPITERS

Short, wide, rounded wings; long tail; flap-flap-flap-glide flight.



##### BUTEOS

Broad wings and broad, rounded tail; often seen soaring in wide circles high in the air.

Looking to hone your identification skills? Studying silhouettes is a great way to make progress. Visit <http://www.rockfishgaphawkwatch.org/raptor-id-tools/> for a downloadable two-page *Guide to Hawks Seen in North America*.

## Book Review

### *A Season on the Wind: Inside the World of Spring Migration*

Reviewed by Sandy Beranich

*“Last night they were on the move. They had been waiting. Yesterday and days before they had been scattered in a million hiding places, biding their time. For four days, while cold rain pelted down, they had lurked unnoticed, waiting, resting, building their strength.”*



Thus begins Kenn Kaufman's newest book. In this book, Kaufman describes what happens during spring migration—who leaves first and how birds, some only three to four months old, know their route that takes them thousands of miles to their winter habitat. Do birds fly on 'bird highways' known to us as flyways? Are spring and fall migratory routes the same?

Today's technology provides some of the answers but how

do you explain a bird weighing one-half ounce flying thousands of miles nonstop? In addition to how birds migrate, Kaufman also describes what birds do that do not migrate but are our winter residents.

Kaufman uses Lake Erie with its southern shore of marshes and protected wildlife areas, including Magee Marsh and the nearby Black Swamp Bird Observatory near Toledo, OH, as the focus of his discussions on spring migration. However, this book is about more than bird migration. As an example, Kaufman also speaks to the benefits of welcoming diversity in the birding community and what efforts he and others have made to actively welcome people of color and of all ages to the birding community. Certainly topics of interest today. Or, another first in birding for the Magee Marsh area was the development of the 10-day event known as the *Biggest Week in American Birding*. This event attracts national and international participation and results in significant positive local economic impact. But wait, there is also a subplot that continues through the book.

A nearby army base proposes to install a wind turbine near the Magee Marsh area as an experiment in green energy production. The result would be devastating to migrating and local bird populations. The plot thickens when an environmentally-friendly congresswoman who represents their district is in favor of the project. Is it possible to get the US military to change their plan? And, is anyone still speaking to each other?

This is not a book of dry statistics and examples of who flies where. Kaufman's writing style makes this an inviting read. Available from the Montrose Regional Library. ■

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[www.blackcanyonaudubon.org](http://www.blackcanyonaudubon.org)

Due to the evolving COVID-19 restrictions, all field trips, programs, and even the annual banquet and bird banding are on hold. Watch your email and visit the website often to see when monthly programs start up again.

### Want to see the color photographs in this publication?

Help reduce the use of paper and lower BCAS expenses by receiving this publication in color via email. Send your request for electronic delivery in PDF format to [blackcanyonaudubon@gmail.com](mailto:blackcanyonaudubon@gmail.com).

### Please remember to renew your membership

Dues paid to the Black Canyon Audubon Chapter stay in the chapter and help fund activities, public outreach, and more!



#### Black Canyon Audubon Society (NAS Chapter D14) Chapter Membership Form

Local Audubon chapter members may participate in all chapter activities, receive the chapter newsletter *Canyon Wrenderings*, and vote on chapter issues. Annual membership dues are \$20 for individual and \$30 for family membership. These annual dues remain local.

(Check one)      Renewal     New Member

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (Optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Email (Required): \_\_\_\_\_

Enclosed  
 \$20 for individual membership  
 \$30 for family membership

Renew online or mail your renewal to: Black Canyon Audubon Society  
PO Box 387, Delta, CO 81416.