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## Montana Prairie Spring Trip Report

**June 3 – June 10, 2012**

*Guide Peg Abbott, with participants Peter, Hazel, Lynn, Pat, Tony, Mary and Craig. Guest speakers Dennis Jorgensen and John Carlson*

### Sun., June 3 Arrival in Billings / Two Moon Park



It was such a gorgeous day in Billings, with bright sun showing off the tiers of green decorating the landscape on this spring day along the Yellowstone, that we scrapped plans to see a local museum and headed right to Two Moon Park for an afternoon of birding. The park was alive with others enjoying a sunny weekend afternoon, but swimming teenagers, dog-walkers, and fisherman did not deter us from seeing a good mix of riparian birds, several of which range into Montana from the East, not getting much further than this lush park that aligns itself with the river. We had a glimpse at a White-tailed Deer but otherwise the action was avian: Red-eyed Vireo, American Redstart and Ovenbird among those from the East, mixing here with Lazuli Buntings and Black-headed Grosbeaks of the West. Yellow-breasted Chats were a nice surprise. There were 15 or more singing, and several giving us good looks. One was next to another normally-furtive species, the Common Yellowthroat. Along the river we had a fly-by Great Blue Heron and a

Spotted Sandpiper trying to cope with raging spring water levels. Plants had an early start here this year in April so several of the currants and the chokecherries had buds; pink blossoms of Wild Roses were prolific as well. After seeing a blitz of species including Catbirds and Cedar Waxwings at the start, we walked a couple-mile loop, soaking up the sun on such a lovely day. Dinner at the Rex, in historic downtown, was fun.



### Mon., June 4 Miles and miles of Montana

Today was largely a travel day; we made our way north and east to Fort Peck with stops along the way. Our first



stop was on a ranch road atop a sandstone bluff with lots of Ponderosa Pine, where we had grand looks at Red-headed Woodpeckers and Mountain Bluebirds, and a glimpse of a group of Red Crossbills flying by. We saw our first Pronghorns at sixty miles an hour, and a very close Ferruginous Hawk flying parallel to the road, carrying prey.

Pie and coffee in Winnett at the Kozy Corner was a mid-morning treat, and lunch in the park at Jordan provided some good birding respite, with good looks at Brown Thrashers, Orchard Orioles, Yellow Warblers, a Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and other species. At a scenic stop to photograph an old one-room schoolhouse, Hazel spotted a den of Striped Skunks; the young kits scurrying around the mound were adorable! We ended the day with a couple-mile walk along some colored bluffs, where Lark Sparrows, a Brewer's Sparrow and dozens of singing Western Meadowlarks were the highlights, along with a grand sense of space, and a bit of history at the Red Store, a once-lively spot now fading into its perch on the hill. John described



the tough winter of two years ago, when three or more feet of snow stood for weeks in the park we'd had lunch at, on this walk, and thousands of pronghorn died – explaining the presence of so few of a normally very common species. We had our first glimpse of the lake from this walk, and marveled at the water line of last year's legendary floods. We settled into the historic Fort Peck hotel, described by its owner Linda as "a grand old lady" and enjoyed pizza, salad (our contribution) and various bar food entrees around the fireplace at dinner. Tallying our bird list ended the day.

## **Tues., June 5 South Valley Prairie Foray**

As we pulled out of the hotel, a Northern Flicker was present on the lawn, posing for photos. We left Fort Peck bound for the prairie, and first stopped at a small lake just outside of town. On the road in, we saw numerous Chestnut-collared Longspurs, which were trying to display and sing in flight despite the gale force winds. We found Pronghorns and myriad ducks, and learned how rich and vital the prairie pothole lakes are for species such as Wilson's Phalaropes, which we saw in good number, whirling around as they fed. We enjoyed seeing so many Lark Buntings, learning that this year had exceptional numbers. A highlight was stopping on a knoll with a 360 degree panorama with no sight of man influencing the landscape. A picnic lunch seemed nigh impossible, but sixty miles or more from any restaurant, we took refuge by a corral, and while Peg and Lynn set lunch





John led a walk out on the prairie, finding a Vesper Sparrow nest, a White-tailed Jackrabbit, and Marbled Godwits in flight. Several abandoned ranch buildings stood like a beacon; having weathered a hundred or more Montana winters, they appeared now to be melting into a sea of grass. We followed a matrix of dirt tracks, up and down valleys, with wide views, and great sightings of one of our most sought-after species, McCown's Longspurs, that were everywhere!

We returned to the hotel, where owners Linda and Carl had fixed us a nice dinner which we ate in the dining room; an Italian meatloaf with sautéed vegetables and garlic mashed potatoes. Though Common Nighthawks zipped about the parking lot, it was too windy to try for Poorwill so we called it a night.



### Wed., Jun 6 North Valley Prairie Foray



Today we headed north from Ft. Peck, first enjoying a stop at John's family house, where his parents had a great spread of fresh fruit, muffins and other sweets set out for us as we watched the bird feeders. They had peanuts scattered on the porch to which Bluejays came in readily. Behind them, Baltimore Orioles fended grape jelly away from Brown Thrashers and American Robins, and we focused on good looks at House Wrens, Catbirds and more.

Our next stop was the Fort Peck Visitor Center, which we walked to via some ponds. There, we saw American Coots and, to our delight, a pair of Osprey circled close overhead, one with a huge fish in its talons. Outside the large glass windows of the VC we saw a pair of Common Loons. We had a bit of pavement in store today, about thirty miles or so, before turning west onto vast BLM lands, including the Bitter Creek Wilderness Study area. Singing Baird's Sparrows were a treat, along with scope views of Grasshopper Sparrows. The wildflowers were in bloom, with massive patches of pink and yellow decorating hills and swales. We were following the songs of Baird's, about to get back in the cars, when Peg heard a Sprague's Pipit, a notable find as the wind was howling! In quiet spurts, we got onto it while it was skylarking, singing its heart out HIGH above; a little whirlwind of wings beating against white clouds. As John predicted, the pipit zoomed back to Earth like a dagger, and we were able to get views of it running about the



grass like a mouse. With warm sun and a bit of a break from the wind, we settled into this lovely spot, finally pulling ourselves away.



Continuing on our loop route, views from an overlook of the Bitter Creek Wilderness Study Area were just stunning; an austere and complex maze of colored country, with odd soils carved by erosion. We finished the loop, sad to say good-bye to John, who had taught us so much in a short time, as we headed west to Malta.

Back on pavement, we stopped at the one-room schoolhouse that the famous newscaster Chet Huntly had attended, and again at a carved stone of buffalo figures, sacred to local tribes; this day decorated with tobacco and ribbons. It seemed a bit sad in its roadside stand and we learned that it

presently awaits a court decision on returning it to its place of origin.

#### Thurs., June 7 Bowdoin NWR / The American Prairie Reserve

After breakfast at the café, we headed east of Malta about seven miles to a world of wetlands, lush and green. We wanted to get out early to hear the sounds and catch morning activity, and it was well worth it. Our first stop was by the lake, at a boat ramp where we had expansive views. Western Grebes and a host of ducks were easy to view in the scope, along with numerous phalaropes, Franklin's Gulls in flight, and both Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds. A small marsh area with thick vegetation was adjacent, and to our delight we got good views, and



photographs, of two species of rails: Sora and Virginia. Yellow Warblers and Common Yellowthroats were vocal, along with several Marsh Wrens, the latter being bold and visible as they sang from perches atop the cattails.

There was so much to see at this refuge! At a water spillway where we had a view of a long, narrow canal we got views of an immature Black-crowned Night-Heron before driving into grasslands, where we had great views of Baird's and Grasshopper Sparrows. As we'd had such good luck the day before with Sprague's Pipits and





of fuzzy Ring-billed Gull chicks on a small island close to shore. The more distant islands held nesting White Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants – hundreds of them. White Pelicans put on a great aerial show in the morning light – lovely!

We spent the full morning at the refuge, then returned and had lunch at the local golf course before going to town to re-provision the groceries for our days ahead. Ice cream and espresso at the historic mercantile in town fueled us onwards, so by 2:30 PM we were back on gravel roads, heading down to the prairie. We stopped to check out several

both longspurs, we focused on the water birds here, reviewing our ducks at the various ponds and spotting White-faced Ibis flying out of thick bulrush areas. American Avocets and Black-necked Stilts were feeding, and a few of the avocets appeared to have settled onto nests. A couple of Mule Deer stood in grass so tall it almost hid them; here again Pronghorn were greatly reduced in number in comparison to previous years. Two male Wood Duck were at close range in the pond by the Visitor Center, and another highlight included scope views of dozens



raptors and a Western Kingbird nest, and to view a Long-billed Curlew, Willets and Marbled Godwits which shared gravel flats midstream with Painted Turtles.





We saw numerous Horned Larks, Lark Buntings and a few Chestnut-collared Longspurs en route and stopped for photos of Pronghorn and the “straw-bale” scarecrow that was one the landmarks on our set of directions. Finally we came over a rise to a view of our camp with its neat and distinctive yurts on the shore of a small prairie pond. Meg Nicolo of APR was there with her new intern, Lindsey, setting up, and we found the place to be quite lovely. People enjoyed some free time to wander, unpack, and relax, while Peg and Lynn fixed dinner – various meats on the grill

along with sweet potatoes, a big fresh salad, and a Mediterranean pasta salad and chocolate cake – not bad for the wilderness! Meg gave us a presentation on the APR, their history and goals in the region.

We sat out by a campfire and at one point Coyotes erupted in song. The moon was still full enough that between the almost 10PM twilight and it, star-viewing sort of fell by the wayside as we were tired from our full day. We thought we’d have another night to do so, but the weather gods had other ideas!

**Fri., June 8      Weather Forces a Move / Mountain Plovers, Prairie Dogs, and Long-billed Curlews**

The morning chorus trumpeting from the prairie was a treat to wake up to, heard through the mesh screen of our yurts. There was a slight mist off the pond early, and a pair of American Wigeons, several shorebirds, and Northern Shovelers in view. Dennis met us to drive out to a known Sage Grouse lek, and while we knew it was late to observe them dancing, we did find one male on the site. After he left, we walked around a bit, finding scattered droppings, feathers, and well-armored dark black caterpillars in the clearing. Brewer’s and Vesper Sparrows were common and vocal, and we had scope views of a singing Sage Thrasher. Upland Plovers, sneaking through the grass, were fun to find.



We returned to a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs, and the news that we would have to move. A powerful thunderstorm was predicted to hit the area by afternoon or early evening, with a chance for up to sixty mile per hour winds and possible golf-ball sized hail. The yurts and camp would have to be secured, and arrangements were made for us to pull back to the ranch Headquarters where we could still be close to nature but with a firm roof over our heads.





We loaded up our gear, but spent the day touring as we would have. First a beautiful view of Fourchette Bay and the Missouri Breaks country of Charles M. Russell NWR, then on a faint two-track road to see the ranch's wild Bison herd. There, thirty calves were an addition to this conservation herd, carefully put together by selecting for pure genetics, from Wind Cave (USA) and Elk Island (Canada) National Parks. They were frisky, nursing, and trying to keep up as the herd worked its way over the undulating country, making a beautiful



sight  
as  
they

lined up under a backdrop view of the Little Rockies. Dennis explained how they worked the landscape, shaping it in turn. This herd, if all goes well, could number in the thousands a decade from now, part of the vision of a restored wild ecosystem on the Northern Great Plains. Horned Larks and Lark Buntings sang all around us; blooms of mallow and Prickly-pear Cactus lit up the ground.



Due to the time needed to move, we skipped birding at Box Elder Creek, as we'd encountered this mix of species quite well in Billings. But we also missed our date with Corey Lang, of Iowa State, here doing research under Dr. Stephen Dinsmore on Mountain Plovers. This project has been going for 17 years, looking at the reproductive success, mating systems, and ecological aspects of the species. With luck and quite a bit of persistence, we did find a Mountain Plover on one of the Prairie Dog colonies they'd used in past years, and we got very good looks with time to

watch its behaviors. We also watched the dogs, and a pair of Golden Eagles working the area. A coyote ran along the far ridge, then yapped and barked for some time. Curious, we walked over to the ridge, but could find no further activity. The ground was littered with polished stones, sorted as glacial meltwaters deposited them long ago. Clouds were starting to billow up, and by the time we left they had dark bellies, promising some sort of action. We ran into Corey at his homestead, so were able to learn more about the project, and to confirm that along one of the roads by the first Prairie Dog town we visited, we'd indeed found some Mountain Plover eggshell fragments.







We stopped to look at some juvenile Swainson's Hawks and an American Kestrel, Mule Deer and Pronghorn coming back to Headquarters, where we relaxed and watched clouds gather over wine, smoked salmon and crackers at the picnic tables. A Red-headed Woodpecker came to visit – catching our photographers off-guard! We had an easy to fix catered meal to which we added fresh asparagus and sweet potatoes – yum. By 10PM there was quite a show of lightning on the far horizons, but very little thunder. After some conversation and the bird list, we turned in, tired from a full day.

**Sat., June 9    Prairie Dogs / Burrowing Owls / Little Rockies /  
Return to Billings**

It rained quite a bit during the night, but overall the forecasted torment did not affect us, other than the move. We found the ranch house to be quite cozy, and woke to the bleating sounds of

Common Nighthawks as well as the trumpets of meadowlarks. We fixed a quick breakfast, watched Red-headed Woodpeckers just out the window, and soon headed out close to headquarters in search of Burrowing Owls, which Peg and Dennis had scouted the evening before. What fun! We tried to see them afoot with some success, but learned quickly that the cars were perfect blinds, and with them we got very close looks, and photos, of both species.



We could have spent much of the day here, but wanted to also explore the Little Rockies, so we headed west, driving into habitats of aspen and pine. We enjoyed seeing the local homes, gardens and historic church, then lunched at a picnic area where we were serenaded by Warbling

Vireos, Yellow Warblers and Cedar Waxwings. After some fresh salads with meats from our barbecue dinner, we took a walk around the campground, finding Red-naped Sapsuckers, furtive Ovenbirds, and Catbirds. Again, we could have stayed all day, but due back in Billings we pulled ourselves away.





Somehow the locally-famous pie-stop at Grass Range pulled us in like a magnet – did Peter really get the last piece of raspberry pie? We passed through Roundup, crossed the Musselshell River, and veered west a bit to stop at some ponds at Broadview, where Eared Grebes were starting to nest on their floating islands, and Yellow-headed Blackbirds sang practically at our feet.

Our final dinner was at Jake's, in downtown Billings, with good food and lively conversation.



**Sun., June 10**

**Two Moon Park**



We just had to get out for one more morning, so returned to Two Moon Park, close at hand, to sample what was there. The highlights were easy-to-see American Restarts and Yellow-breasted Chats, singing Lazuli Bunting, and a real treat – an Eastern Screech Owl of which we got great views, and great photos. Several of the group were to continue on to Yellowstone, but we had to say bon voyage to four. Until the next adventure!

