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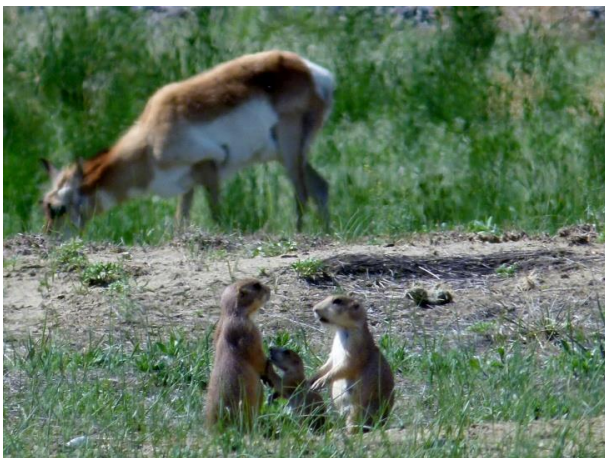
Montana Prairie Spring A Naturalist Journeys' Birding and Nature Tour Trip Report June 8-15, 2013

John Carlson and Woody Wheeler guides, with five participants: John and Mary, Christine, Graham and Ed. Sadly two of our participants had to cancel at the last minute for health concerns – we hope to see them next year!

Sat., June 8 Arrival in Billings

We launched our Montana Prairie expedition in the rim rock heights near Billings. It was a warm summer day with billowy cumulous clouds when we set out for Lake Elmo State Park. As we strolled among the lakeshore we heard the piercing call of an Osprey. Soon we found one perched high in a Plains Cottonwood. Then we looked skyward and found four more in flight at the same time; one with a fish. As "John A." said, it would appear that Osprey are "as common as milk." Yellow Warblers sang their *Sweet-Sweet- Sweeter than Sweet* song and perched cooperatively for us in vivid lighting.

Meanwhile in the lake, Graham spotted a group of Eared Grebes in full breeding plumage, showing off their fan-shaped eye adornments in bright summer lighting. Several Western Grebe came close to shore, affording good looks for all. A Lazuli Bunting sang and responded to guide John Carlson's (John C.) call, perching close by. Our short afternoon walk yielded some 20 species – a good orientation to familiar birds of the area.



From here John C. brought us to a small but thriving Prairie Dog town. Young and old alike perched on their haunches, chirped at times, "kissed," tumbled and wrestled on their mounds near their burrow entrances. Several Pronghorn browsed, creating a most interesting pairing of western wildlife. As a final afternoon stop, John C took us to Sword Park and the rim rocks overlooking Billings and the mountains beyond. The

Beartooth Mountains were especially prominent on the horizon. Our first day concluded after a pleasant welcome dinner at a local Pizza/Pub & Grill restaurant and a tally of the day's list, including 20 plus bird species and two mammals.

Sun., June 9 Billings to Fort Peck

We hit the road today, starting at Two Moon County Park in Billings. This riparian woodland park along the Yellowstone River was hopping with bird activity. Early on we encountered American Redstarts and Yellow-breasted Chats at close range. Then we had unusually good looks, including scope views, of a singing Ovenbird and a Least Flycatcher. Two Hairy Woodpeckers climbed up a Plains Cottonwood, and a Red-eyed Vireo flew overhead and emphatically declared its territory when Woody called him. Two White-tailed Deer pranced through a meadow where we also saw Bullock's Orioles and numerous Yellow Warblers. Along the river we found Spotted Sandpipers along the gravel bars.

Just before departing, John C. suggested that we look for owls in a dense grove of ash trees. At first, it seemed they were absent, until we heard the call of an Eastern Screech Owl. John C. found the adult, and soon after, three owlets all craning their necks to look at us through their oversized eyes. Everyone had scope views of this amazing spectacle.



Following lunch in Billings, we drove north through open range country and Ponderosa Pine and Juniper woodlands to the picturesque historic town of Roundup. Then we proceeded to Winnett where we took a stretch break as we watched Western Kingbirds fly catching and perching nearby. Our next rest break was at Jordan Town Park where the Green Ash and Plains Cottonwood trees create a bird oasis. Soon after we arrived, there was a commotion in the tree canopy as Tree Swallows mobbed a Great Horned Owl. It perched prominently in a Plains Cottonwood Tree where all enjoyed excellent views. Then John C. found one of its owlets perched low in an Ash tree. Everyone had outstanding looks at this downy young owl that peered at us languidly.



An Orchard Oriole moved through the canopy, providing good looks, as did our first Red-breasted Nuthatch of the tour. From Jordan, we forged on to Fort Peck through an often changing landscape of cattle ranches, badlands, and rocky remnants of the former ocean floor that this area once was. Along the way we saw numerous Pronghorns, a large Black-tailed Prairie Dog town, and several Ferruginous and Swainson's Hawks.



The guides

After settling in to the cozy, historic Ft. Peck Hotel and enjoying a pleasant dinner there, we went out for a sunset birding tour. Right out the hotel door, we saw and heard Chimney Swifts as they flitted across the sky. A short distance from the hotel, we encountered our first Eastern Kingbird and Red Fox of the trip as we watched the sun set in glorious fashion. At this point we settled into our hotel for a restful

evening in this remote, unique and bird and wildlife-rich setting.

Mon., June 10	Glasgow/Fort Peck Area
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The tune “Wide Open Spaces” characterizes the atmosphere we had for much of the day. In addition, we encountered a lot of birds and wildlife in a remote yet beautiful prairie landscape. Starting with hearty, or as they were described on the menu “Dam Big Breakfasts,” we headed to the small High Line railroad and agricultural town of Glasgow to obtain lunch items, then we crossed the flooded Milk River,



where we soon encountered a Bobolink, perched in good lighting for all to see on power lines. As we departed civilization and entered a large expanse of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands including an Area of Critical Environmental Concern to protect Mountain Plovers, we soon came across a nice assortment of waterfowl on a vernal pond, including: Lesser Scaup, Blue-winged Teal and Northern Pintail, along with Wilson’s Phalarope and Willett. Heading further down the quiet country roads, we stopped to watch and wait for two species of Longspurs: Chestnut-collared and McCown’s. Much to our delight they sang, performed aerial displays, and perched on rocks

where we could see and photograph them!

Atop a high hill we had a picnic lunch with expansive views in all directions. John C. told us about the status of Greater Sage-Grouse and its habitat. He is the key person for BLM in Montana working on this issue, so we learned a lot about current efforts to protect this iconic western species.

After lunch, we found a soaring Golden Eagle, flying lazy loops in the bright blue sky. When we stopped watch this beautiful scene, a Swainson’s Hawk came over to drive the eagle away by stooping on it and making close passes, causing the eagle to do several complete barrel rolls in mid-flight each time it made a pass in an attempt to snare the hawk -- an amazing aerial show!



Within a half mile, another Golden Eagle appeared in the sky, this time harassed by a Long-billed Curlew. In the same general area, John C. found two Mountain Plover in plain view on Sagebrush Flats. Everyone had scope views and opportunities for pictures. By the end of the day, we had spotted a half-dozen Mountain Plover.

On the final stretch back to Glasgow, John C. pulled us over to look for Burrowing Owls, and we found several in excellent lighting and relatively close range.

To top off the day, we had close views of Loggerhead Shrikes, Mule Deer and Pronghorn. Northeastern Montana does not receive enough credit for its amazing birds, wildlife and scenery. As Mary said, "I knew it would be Big Sky Country, but this is immense!"



After dinner, most of the group accompanied John C. to search for Common Poorwills. As so often happens with birding and other nature watching, you encounter pleasant surprises along the way. At first, John C. took us to a spectacular vantage point called the Milk River overview where we watched the sunset illuminate the confluence of the Milk and Missouri Rivers in a crimson glow. Then at dusk, he successfully called out a Common Poorwill that perched on a fence post 30 feet away from us. This put the

cap on an extraordinary day.

Tues., June 11 Fort Peck to Malta

Our day began with a visit to guide John C's parents' who live in Ft. Peck, his childhood home. They fostered their son's interest in birds by feeding them in the backyard, providing a natural history library and most important, by sharing their deep interest in nature. While drinking coffee and eating homemade baked goods they made for us, we saw a variety of interesting birds in their backyard, including: Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, Blue Jays, Brown Thrashers, Black-headed Grosbeaks and our first Pine Siskins.



Following this pleasant start to the day, we visited the excellent Ft. Peck Museum which told the remarkable story of this huge public works project completed in the 1930s. Then we took a short walk on a nature trail through wetlands along Ft. Peck Reservoir. Here we enjoyed excellent looks at



Common Yellowthroats, Eastern and Western Kingbirds, nesting Downy Woodpeckers, a surprise appearance by a Western Tanager and a Muskrat that swam along the shore. On the way north to our lunch stop, we paused to enjoy excellent views of a Red headed Woodpecker.

Heading north toward Canada, we stopped in vast grassland areas and found both Baird's Sparrows and Sprague's Pipits. While John C. was listening for vocalizations from these species, he said that he had heard snippets of the Sprague Pipit Song. This inspired John A. to quip that "Mary was in the prairie and we heard snippets of Pipits."

Moving further north as spectacular storm clouds formed to our west, John C. brought us close to nesting Ferruginous and Swainson's hawks. We then saw Sharp-tailed Grouse near a lek and obtained good looks at a Sprague's Pipits on the road. What a remarkable assembly of rare species in a rare landscape of native grasslands! Under rainy skies, we pulled into Malta and settled into our hotel for the night.

Wed., June 12	Bowdoin NWR
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On a pleasantly cool morning, we set out for nearby Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge and its 15-mile loop through wetlands, lakeshore, shrub-steppe and grasslands. It wasn't long before the birding action began. As soon as we got out of our cars, we were serenaded by a noisy chorus of Marsh Wrens and Virginia Rails. Eventually, we got good looks at both – especially when the Virginia Rail walked out of the marsh and on to the refuge road.

Continuing into the Refuge, we encountered large colonies of gulls: first California Gulls, then later Franklin's Gulls. Two Terns were found along the loop: Forster's and Black. Our first Black-necked Stilts on a small rocky island shared by Forster's Terns and several Avocets. At one stop while the front end of our group was looking at Baby Killdeer, the back end was photographing a Chestnut-collared Longspur in perfect lighting atop a Silver Sagebrush. Graham was so excited following this episode that he did a little victory dance.



As we continued through this network of wet and dry habitats, including two large lakes, we also spotted wildlife, such as a stout-looking coyote, running at a fast clip along a nearby ridgeline, his tail flying conspicuously behind him. White-tailed Deer were on the edges of our views at various times, and periodically, Ring-necked Pheasants would call loudly and then burst suddenly into the air. This refuge was alive with sound and activity.



Rounding the next bend, we found Wilson's Phalaropes in the water below and at times hovering in the air directly over and around our cars. Our first pair of Cinnamon Teal for the trip were joined by many Blue-winged Teal. Northern Shovelers, Ruddy Ducks, Northern Pintails, Gadwalls, Lesser Scaup, Redheads and Canvasback were among the wide variety of waterfowl we encountered in the refuge ponds and lakes.

Not only did we see many birds and animals at close range in this refuge, but we also saw quite a few on their nests, including Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, American Coots and Marsh Wrens. In fact, by the end of the trip, Lori counted a total of 24 bird species on nests. Family units were evident too: Baby Coots, Canada Geese, and Killdeer among them.

Toward the end of our refuge loop we spotted an elusive American Bittern Flying across the marsh. We got out of our cars and after a short walk, saw the Bittern once again. This was a fitting grand finale for a great day at the refuge.

We then returned to Malta for a brief walk in the town park along the Milk River, where we found Cedar Waxwing, Western Wood Pewee, Western Kingbirds, House Wrens, and Richardson Ground Squirrels. We celebrated another fine day with an ample western-style meal at the Great Northern Hotel, followed by a visit to a local ice cream shop.



Birds of Bowdoin NWR: Wilson's Phalarope and Yellow-headed Blackbird

Thurs., June 13

Matador Ranch/Missouri Breaks/Billings



To start the day we had a tour of Dennis Lingohr's beautifully landscaped yard followed by his presentation about the American Prairie Reserve. A retired American Prairie Reserve employee, Dennis, until recently, helped manage the 250,000-acre reserve just south of Malta, Montana that is adjacent to the huge Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. The preserve, along with adjacent private, BLM, and The Nature



Conservancy (TNC) owned lands, is in one of the four largest prairie ecosystems in the world. It includes a herd of 300 Bison.

Following the presentation, we headed for the Nature Conservancy's Matador Ranch. Here the Conservancy is collaborating with ranchers to grow native grasses, graze cattle and provide habitat for a variety of species in the process. We saw several species here that prefer this type of moist short-grass

habitat, like the Long-billed Curlew and Sprague's Pipit. Nearby, we visited a large Prairie Dog Town inhabited by at least a hundred Black-tailed Prairie Dogs, with a Burrowing Owl sharing their "town."



From here we drove into the Little Rocky Mountains and birded in the Ponderosa Pine Woods with Chokecherry and Hawthorn meadows. Here we encountered four new species: MacGillivray's Warbler, Veery, Swainson's Thrush and Red-naped Sapsucker. As a rain squall moved overhead, we drove

into the historic mining town of Zortman, passing by fields of showy yellow-flowered Arrow Leafed Balsam on the way. At Zortman we had lunch at a classic 1950s-style American café and took group photos in front of the old Zortman jail.



Next stop was the Missouri Breaks, along the swiftly flowing Missouri River. At this spot, steeped in history from the Lewis and Clark expedition, we watched birds, including American Goldfinch and Northern Flicker, bathing in shallow pools and preening.

We continued south through the authentic western town of Roundup where we stopped for an afternoon coffee break, prior to pressing on to Billings to check into our hotel. A fine meal at an Italian Restaurant left everyone sated and satisfied following our northern prairie loop tour.

Fri., June 14



To wrap up our journey, today we visited two National Monuments that are rich in human and natural history. The first was Pompey's Pillar, a sandstone tower above the Yellowstone River where Lewis and Clark scouted their journey. Clark famously left his name inscribed in the rock on the Pillar, where it remains today.

At the base of the Pillar, Ed spotted our first Bald Eagle, an adult that soared majestically above the bluffs of the Yellowstone River and we also observed an obliging Yellow-bellied Marmot.

We climbed the steps up to the Pillar, where White throated Swifts soared all around us, sometimes zipping by at eye level. After descending from the Pillar, we walked a trail in the Plains Cottonwood riparian forest, where we had an excellent look at a Least Flycatcher sitting in its tightly woven, compact nest.



Our visit here concluded with time spent in the excellent visitor center, which showcased the Lewis and Clark Exploration through a movie and exhibits. All were impressed by this National Monument.

The second stop was Little Bighorn Battlefield where Custer's Last Stand occurred in 1876. Prior to entering this national monument, we stopped at a trading post and restaurant that featured Crow Indian food and gifts. The Indian Flatbread and Indian Tacos were outstanding!

Upon entering the Battlefield National Monument, first impressions included the lovely rolling hills and grassland landscape, combined with the grave stones -- a sad reminder of the many who perished here. We watched another well-done historic film about this battle and the historical context, and then drove and walked an interpretive trail that followed the same, ill-fated route that General Custer took.



Images from Little Bighorn Battlefield



While driving this trail and stopping at one of the signs, Christine inquired about a chicken-like bird hiding in the grass only a few yards distant from the cars. She had found one of three male Sharp-tailed Grouse!

At the next interpretive pull-off there was a pair of Bullock's Orioles, gleaming in the afternoon sun. We began to think that an amazing bird would be found behind each sign the rest of the way.

Eventually we wound our way out of the battlefield area and headed back to Billings for a final celebratory meal in the historic downtown district. Afterward, we tallied our list for the day which included a new bird species: Bald Eagle, and a new mammal: Yellow-bellied Marmot. The wide open spaces, the fantastic birds and wildlife, and the beautiful vistas of northeastern Montana will remain in our memories for a long time to come.

Sat., June 15

Today, everyone either headed back home or continued on with the Yellowstone Tour.

Photos by John Carlson and Woody Wheeler

