

Boulder County Nature Association



"The Boulder County Nature Association is a private, non-profit membership organization committed to preserving the natural history of our region through research, documentation, and public education."

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Summer 2008

Steadfast Volunteers

In the fall of 1981 Mike Figgs, Dave Alles and myself met to plan the first Indian Peaks Christmas Bird Count. Little did we know what was about to begin. Mike and Dave were well connected with Boulder Audubon and rounded up volunteers to bird in the count circle. Probably the most exciting aspect of the first Christmas Count was dealing with the weather. Spending eight hours and observing only two mountain chickadees was less than exciting, but the skiing was great!

Some of the participants were just as curious about counting birds during the other seasons. So the count evolved into the Indian Peaks Four Season Bird Counts. Now in their 27th year, this might be the only four-season count in the nation. Long-term studies begin to show cycles and trends not apparent through shorter-term efforts. We now see that cone crops and crossbills, or the out-migration of Bohemian waxwings from the north, drive winter bird numbers. And we might be seeing the impacts of recent climate change on the numbers and distribution of birds during the breeding season in the count circle.

One aspect of the count that has not been cyclic is the involvement of the volunteers. Each count, somewhere between 25 and 35 volunteers will take part (the fluctuation generally dependent on how many people join Bill Kaempfer). During the early years of the count, when it occurred on a single day, we would meet after at a restaurant in Nederland to compile the information, get warm, and trade stories (like the time Alex Brown and his crew encountered a trapper who had just caught a fox; and watched the fox eventually escape, much to their joy). I don't have to do anything to keep the count going; just send out a periodic newsletter giving the count dates, and "poof" the participants go out and send in their results.

People have adopted areas within the count circle and continue to go back to them, count after count, year after year. This is truly one of the most amazing aspects: the steadfast commitment of the participants. I once even tried to end the spring and fall counts and

just keep the winter and breeding, but there was a significant outcry against this.

I want to give recognition and thanks to the following regular participants (if I have missed anybody, I apologize):

Participants for 20+ Years (* = all 27 years)

Barbara Bolton*	Jim Holitza*
Earl Bolton*	Steve Jones
Alex Brown	Bill Kaempfer*
Diane Brown*	Nan Lederer*
Lee Evans	Merle Miller
Virginia Evans	Sally Miller
Mike Figgs*	Carol Newman-Holitza
Dave Hallock*	Tom VanZandt
Paula Hansley	

Participants for 10-19 Years

Linda Andes-Georges	Elaine Hill
Bev Baker	Lynn Hoffmann
George Coffee	Jody Hovorka
Jack Coss	Joe Krieg
Andy Cowell	Dawn Kumkli
Marty Dick	Cherie Long
Fern Ford	Lisa McCoy
Jean-Pierre Georges	Naseem Munshi
Kathy Gibson	Mark Pscheid
Maddy Goldhawk	Michael Tupper
Susan Harris	

During the 27 years, over 250 people have participated. The thirty-eight noted above have regularly participated for over ten years; of these, 17 have done so for twenty or more years and nine have stayed with it since the beginning. This long-term involvement has greatly added to the quality of the information collected. You get to know the birds and the area better by conducting the counts over many years.

A psychologist could probably do an interesting study about the personality types of those listed above. We

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like to focus on a project and stick with it. We never get bored going back to the same place; in fact, we thrive on it. Each day, season and year is different in terms of what birds (or flowers or butterflies) will be there.

How long will this study continue? We are not getting younger. I no longer enjoy (well, actually never did) carrying skis for two miles until there is snow during the spring count. I have heard some grumbling along this line from others. And as our hearing ability starts failing, there is probably some form of observer bias developing (those high-pitched sounds from creepers and kinglets start being missed). We can try and recruit younger participants and pass along an area to them. Or this may end with us somewhere down the road. There is nothing wrong with that; it has been a heck of an effort. Maybe all four counts each year is getting to be too much. But I would like to keep some of the count going for a while as the bark beetles do their thing in the forests and we can see the changes in the avian community. We have 27 years of “before the beetles” information. I say let’s shoot for 30 years of four season counts and then consider some alternatives.

As always, thanks for your effort and happy birding.

—Dave Hallock



Snakes Alive!

I’ve had a couple of neat encounters with snakes this week (early June), and they’ve whetted my appetite to learn more about the behavior of local herps. (Best book: *Amphibians and Reptiles in Colorado*, by Geoffrey A. Hammerson.)

The first encounter came on a brilliant day at Sawhill Ponds. I’d gone to check for early-season dragonflies. I was scanning the first lake from its high bank when I saw a Northern water snake undulating along the shallows, barely making ripples in the inches-deep water. I must have startled the snake by my footsteps as I stepped down the bank to try for a photograph—no luck with that!

I was able to watch the snake for about ten minutes as it rested, motionless, under the water. Its head and first six inches of body stretched across a sandy and sunlit break in the weeds. Five or six fish—sunfish or bluegill, I’m no fish expert—seemed interested in the snake, but not fearful. Perhaps they knew they were too big to make a snake snack, or they were not aware of what lurked there? The fish persistently nosed against the snake’s head and body. I waited, holding my breath, wondering if the snake would strike.

The second encounter occurred in my natural garden pond, short hours after I had stocked it with goldfish in the hopes the fish would help control the algae. I’d deliberately been cheap and bought the 12 cent fish, thinking they’d be too small to eat the damsel and dragonfly larvae I know I have in the weeds. The immature garter snake must have been on the spot, waiting, when the fish went in . . . for minutes later it was making the most of the disoriented, newly-released goldfish that did, indeed, live up to their PetsMart category of “feeders.”

I must conclude that the size of fish is very critical in determining whether or not they are eyed by snakes as part of the natural scene, or prey.

—Ann Cooper

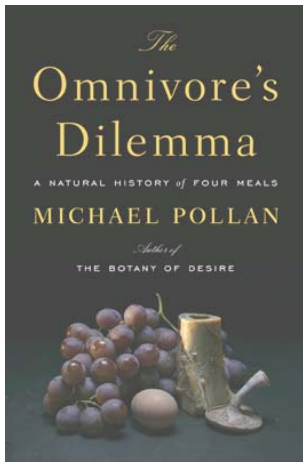
What is that clicking in the trees?

Listen to the July Nature Almanac at:

bcna.org/almanac7.html

Photo Credits Current Page: Putnam’s Cicada, Steve Jones; Page 4: Northern Harrier chicks, Steve Jones.

Seeking Sustainability and Reason in What We Eat



Michael Pollan. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: a Natural History of Four Meals*. Penguin Books, London, 2007. \$16

If you eat food, this would be a good book to read. Also, if you care about animal welfare, air and water pollution, sustainability, and emotional well-being. As in his first book, *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan focuses on a common daily

event--eating--and sheds brilliant, often ironic light on the state of our civilization.

Each chapter of the book focuses on a food source and culminates with a meal derived primarily from that source. In "Industrial: Corn," Pollan explains how this highly subsidized cereal grain has insinuated itself into most of our foods, from beef to soft drinks to salads. He purchases a steer and follows it all the way through its short life, from the pasture where it is born, to a gruesome, unhealthy feedlot, to the killing floor. The chapter culminates with a family meal at McDonald's. For \$14.95, he, his wife, and son get a Big Mac, french fries, a large salad, and an order of Chicken McNuggets. Pollan sends samples of the meal off to a Berkeley Lab and finds out that it was 52% corn.

Chapter 2, "Pastoral: Grass," explores the differences between factory farms and smaller, sustainable operations. Pollan spends a week working on a Virginia farm where everything is recycled and practically the only input is sunlight. Then he contrasts this farm with giant, industrial "organic" operations. We learn that the "free range" in "free range chicken" is often a small strip of grass outside a packed warehouse/henhouse, where one of several thousand chickens, if lucky, may spend a few hours of its seven-week life. We discover that the mystique of the produce offerings at Whole Foods stems more from creative writing ("Supermarket pastoral") than from homegrown food networks. Organic has become big business, and most of our organic produce comes from factory farms.

The final chapter, "Personal: The Forest," imagines a

world where we are responsible for and know the origins of everything we eat. It culminates in a meal gathered, hunted (his first and only hunting experience), and prepared by the author. He describes it as "the perfect meal," not for its taste or nutritional value, but for its transparency. "Scarcely an ingredient in it had ever worn a label or bar code or price tag, and yet I knew almost everything that there was to know about its provenance and price. I knew and could picture the very oaks and pines that had nourished the pigs and the mushrooms that were nourishing us. And I knew the true cost of this food, the precise sacrifice of time and energy and life it had entailed."

After reading this book, I will never eat quite the same. Look for me this summer at the Boulder Farmer's Market or Munson's. I'm growing to understand that much of the cheaply-priced food (including organics) at our local supermarkets comes at far too great a cost.

—Steve Jones

Spring 2008 Banding Notes at Lykins Gulch By Maggie Boswell

- High spring count for Swainson's Thrush as far back as 1999
- High spring count for Orange-crowned Warbler—usually a fall bird for us.
- Most Virginia's Warblers since Fall 2004
- Most Yellow Warblers since spring 2005
- Most Yellow-breasted Chats in spring since 2000 (records groups prior to 2000)
- At 44, Chipping Sparrows at all time record spring or fall, nearest is 20
- No Brown-headed Cowbirds were banded, usually 3 - 6 banded.
- Most Lazuli Buntings since spring 2001

Half as many net/hours as last spring, but one more species caught, and twice as many individuals. Two new species banded: Violet-green Swallow and White-eyed Vireo. We had two really busy days.

Sign Up for BCNA Classes

As part of your "Staycation", why not register for these great BCNA Summer-Fall classes to learn first-hand about the natural world in Boulder County? Note: Partial scholarships are available.

Pika Encounter

Explore the amazing life of this Alpine Mammal

with Chris Ray

Thursday, July 24, 7-9 p.m., indoor class

Saturday, July 26, 8 a.m.-3 p.m., field class.

Tuition: \$65 (\$60 for BCNA members).

To register: Call Chris at 303-459-0176, or email her at cray@colorado.edu

Dragonflies of Boulder County

Dazzling Winged Acrobats of the Insect World

with Scott Severs

Wednesday, August 13, 6:30-9:30 p.m., indoor class

Sunday, August 17, 8 a.m.-1 p.m., field class

Tuition: \$65 (\$60 BCNA members).

To register: Call Scott at 303-684-6430, or email him at rostrhamus@aol.com

The Natural World of the Arapaho

Native Perceptions of Flora and Fauna

with Andy Cowell

Tuesday, September 2, 7-9 p.m., indoor class

Thursday, September 4, 7-9 p.m., indoor class

Saturday, September 6, 9 a.m.- 12 noon, field class

Tuition: A minimum donation of \$65 is required. Your donation will go to The Endangered Languages Fund at the CU Foundation and is 100% tax deductible.

To register: Call Andy at 303-543-7504, or email him at cowellj@colorado.edu

Quaking Aspen and Bugling Elk

Fall Colors and Rutting Bulls in the High Country

with Joyce Gellhorn

Monday, September 22, 2008, 7-9 p.m., indoor class

Tuesday, September 23, 2008, 2-9 p.m., field class.

Tuition: \$60 (\$60 for BCNA members).

To register: Call Joyce at 303-442-8123, or email her at jggellhorn@mac.com

Summer Field Trips

Saturday, August 2, 7-11 a.m.: Steve Jones (303-494-2468) will lead a bird and butterfly-watching trip down Chapman Canyon. Bring close-focusing binoculars and your field guides. Meet at the Realization Point parking area, 3.7 miles up Flagstaff Mountain Road and opposite the turnoff to Flagstaff Summit.

Saturday, August 16, 6:00p.m. Potluck picnic and evening hike at Heil Valley Ranch Open Space with Sue Cass (720-684-6922) and Jim McKee. Please bring your own table service and drinks.

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Committees and Contacts

-*Avian Species of Special Concern:*
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 Steve Jones (stephen.jones@earthlink.net)

-*Ecosystem Stewardship:*
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- *Publications:*
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- *State and Regional Wildlife Issues:*
 Jim McKee (303-651-2414)

- *Website:*
 George Oetzel (303-543-3712)

- *Wintering Raptor Survey:*
 Sue Cass (303-494-5345)
 and Jim McKee (303-651-2414)



Northern Harriers Barely Hanging on at Boulder Reservoir

by Steve Jones

For the fifth consecutive year, 20-30 volunteers are helping Boulder Parks and Recreation staff track nesting success of birds of special concern at Boulder Reservoir. During recent decades, wetlands and prairie dog colonies around the reservoir have supported small nesting populations of American bitterns, northern harriers, and burrowing owls, all listed as "rare and declining" on the Boulder County Avian Species of Special Concern list (Hallock and Jones 1999).

The bitterns appear to be doing fairly well; last year volunteers found four breeding territories. Burrowing owls teeter on the brink of extinction in Boulder County, and there has been only one successful nest near the reservoir during the past five years. This year, a single burrowing owl was seen beneath the Dry Creek osprey nest (across N. 51st Street from the aeromodelling runway) on May 3.

As for the harriers, they have nested in cattail marshes on the west side of the reservoir each of the past five years, and in the wetlands west of Coot Lake during 2004-05, but with very poor results. No other nest sites have been documented within Boulder County during this decade. Harriers are polygamous, and during some years we have seen a single male and several females tending as many as three nests west of the reservoir. But these nests invariably fail (Figure 1).

This April, harriers built nests in both the Little Dry Creek and Dry Creek wetlands. The Dry Creek nest appears to have been abandoned early on, and the Little Dry Creek nest was active until mid June, with both adults observed bringing food items to the nest. But this nest failed too. Since nests at the reservoir have fledged no young since 2004, the failure of these two nests leaves a cloudy future to whether the northern harrier will continue to persevere as a breeding species in Boulder County.

We suspect that fluctuating water levels and predation by urban-adapted carnivores may be contributing to the recent series of nest failures at Boulder Reservoir. Should you see any fledged young

in the Little Dry Creek wetlands this summer or any evidence of predation on young, please let us know immediately. The foraging harriers are often visible from the Eagle Trail and from N. 51st Street. The cattail marshes where they nest are closed to public access.

Why are harriers doing so poorly locally? Ironically, this species was described by Junius Henderson (1907) as a "fairly common" breeding species, but uncommon in winter. Now harriers are commonly seen coursing over local wetlands and grasslands in winter, but rarely observed in summer.

We suspect that preservation of grassland open space has benefited foraging harriers, while fragmentation of the few remaining suitable nest sites has harmed them. With few nest sites available, harriers become more vulnerable to detection and predation by carnivores; as well as to flooding, overheating of young, and other hazards. The same principle applies to burrowing owls. During the past three decades, Boulder County's nesting burrowing owls have fledged fewer than two young per nesting attempt, not nearly enough to sustain a local population.

Let's hope for a change of fortune at Boulder Reservoir. Meanwhile, thanks to all the volunteers who have submitted reports so far this spring: Chris and Deb Abrahamson, Elizabeth Akana, Larry Arp, A.D. Chesley, Linda Cooper, Sharon Daugherty, Chuck Klomp, Adam Massey, Christine Pacheco, Linda Palmer, Mark and Sue Ponsor, Charley Rosicky, Gary Stevens, Tony Wilk, Curtis Williamson, Nan Wilson.

Thanks also to Parks and Recreation environmental specialist Joy Master and volunteer coordinator Mary Malley for organizing these important surveys.

Literature Cited

Hallock, Dave, and Stephen Jones. 1999. Boulder County avian species of special concern list. Boulder County Nature Association.

Henderson, Junius. 1908. An annotated list of the birds of Boulder County, Colorado. *University of Colorado Studies*, 6: 220-242.

Figure 1.	Location	2004	2005	2006	2007
	Coot Lake	4 fledged	active		
	Dry Creek			nest failed	
	Little Dry Creek	4 fledged	active	2 nests failed	nest failed

Support the Boulder County Nature Association

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Type of Membership:

_____ Student/Senior (65 or over)	\$15
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_____ Supporter	\$40
_____ Founder	\$100
_____ Life Member	\$300
_____ Corporate	\$500
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_____ Donation to General Research Fund	

The membership year is January 1 to December 31. Those who join after October 1 are considered members in good standing through the following year. All members receive this quarterly newsletter. Supporter-level members and higher also receive a complimentary copy of each BCNA publication.

Please make checks payable to "Boulder County Nature Association" or "BCNA" and mail to:
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