



Photo by Dave Rintoul

Friday, March 13, 2015

A day trip to Kirwin National Wildlife Refuge,

where the tall grasses of the east meet
the short grasses of the west.
Wildlife common to this mixed grass prairie
are found on the Refuge.
There could be cranes, migratory birds,
deer, badgers, quail, etc.
Check out their website:

<http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kirwin>

Trip is three hours, one way. Tentative schedule is to leave Manhattan about 10:00 am, eat lunch in Phillipsburg, tour the refuge, see visitor's center, and head home toward sunset, approx 7:00 pm. Probably have supper in Beloit. Contact Carla Bishop, carla.kay.bishop@gmail.com, 785-539-5129, if you are planning on coming. Will need a headcount by March 6 in order to make arrangements for drivers, vehicles, etc.

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society,
P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan, KS 66505-1932



prairie falcon

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Newsletter

Vol. 43, No. 7 ~ March 2015

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Upcoming Events

Mar 2 - Board Meeting 6 p.m.
Tom & MJ Morgan Home

Mar 13 - Kirwin National Wildlife Refuge
Day trip - see above

Mar 28 - Michel-Ross Preserve Clean-up
1-3 p.m. see page 4

Apr 6 - Board Meeting 6 p.m.
Tom & MJ Morgan Home

Apr 11 - Saturday Morning Birding
Meet at 8 a.m. Sojourner Truth Park

Apr 24-25 - Wings N Wetlands Festival
see page 4



Skylight plus

Pete Cohen

We awoke to find a headless blackbird busily dipping within the bustle around our feeder. A second look showed it was really a nominal blackbird, but white feathers made its head at a glance invisible against the snow, despite the tiny black dots of its eyes. Those black, instead of red, dots indicated there was no albinism involved. A few pecks on the computer keyboard revealed it was a case of leucism, a failure of pigmentation to appear according to the norm.

It seems not common, but not so rare, either, for there are pictures of blackbirds with streaks of white across their bodies, plus information that it can occur in other species, too.

There was also a comment that such a condition puts the individuals affected at greater risk of predation by interfering with their natural blend-with-the-environment appearance. But there were also male cardinals and a woodpecker rather prominently noticeable, even when they flew off to the trees.

And it seems to me that predators that are accustomed to assault their prey at speed and by visual guidance would as likely ignore or even avoid items that did not have the accustomed conformation, or which might seem like some darker-and-white mesh. In any case the anomaly seems to be occurring faster than predators can eliminate it.

In my personal experience individual creatures can be really obeyant to certain foraging habits. Late one night in northern Minnesota we heard a loud clashing outside our cabin door, and discovered a black bear battling the trash can. Unable to overcome the lid's hasps, he or she left tooth marks in the metal like bullet holes and started downslope toward the landlord's tethered goat that soon panicked. We immediately got ready to intervene, to no need, for the bear simply sauntered close by the bouncing goat and attacked another trash can.

Similarly during the twenty years we had a farm flock of sheep it was not unusual to see a coyote or a pair of them out among our ewes and lambs, busily pouncing on what I presume were mice, and perhaps grasshoppers before frosts. And once our sons and I interrupted our biking to interfere with a race that featured a husky calf in the lead, two coyotes close behind, and the udder-heavy cow struggling along last, while our sheep munched unbothered just across the road.

We always promptly incinerated any lambs that died, and during that time we were able to haul larger bodies to offal bins at the local locker plant. Ours were the only sheep, at least on pasture, in the area, so there was no other such "restaurant" around, and with plenty of more natural and acquired tastes (i.e. bovine meat) available, there seemed little inclination for the coyotes to try something new.

KSU took an interest in this, with interesting results—for another time.

Meanwhile in March Earth will reach its perihelion, its annual point closest to the Sun (though with our northern half coolly tilted away) on the 3rd, with four of the naked-eye-visible planets notably on stage at one time or another. Jupiter and the Moon rise together in the evening twilight of the 2nd, then the Moon creeps closer to Leo's Regulus on the night of the 3rd.

Starting higher and so setting later, Venus keeps brightly above Mars, that's in Pisces, as they sink westward through the month's evenings. Saturn, Antares, and the Moon make a trio on the 12th and 13th, with Saturn first above, then beside, the reddish star. The Moon sinks with Venus the evening of the 22nd with faint Mars leading the way well below; then the Moon visits with Taurus' Aldebaran the evening of the 24, and with Jupiter again the 29th, then appears above Jupiter as Regulus shows close to the Moon's left the 30th, and that star becomes the light above the Moon the 31st.

Daylight Savings starts at 2a00 the 8th, the spring equinox occurs as 5p45 CDT the 20th, while the Moon is full the 5th at 12p05 and new the 20th at 4a36.

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A Cracklin' Good Saint Patrick's Day

Dru Clarke



The year was 1996, and St. Patrick's Day fell on a Sunday. As an excuse for a long walk on a sunny day with a gusting breeze we looked for shed deer antlers. Any drops had probably been collected already by the seasonal trespasser who turned them into knife handles or had been recycled by cotton rats. We found a lot of rubbed places on cedar trees about 30 inches high and a small patch of deer hair, but no antlers. We don't begrudge the trespasser his found treasure as we have neither the interest in nor the skill to create carved objects. And the cotton rat certainly can benefit from the antler's cache of minerals.

Across the barbed wire fence onto our neighbor's ground (we, too, lose track of property lines but have tacit permission when keeping an eye on our dogs), in the open canopy woodland we found a dead coyote: young, it seemed, with an abundance of fur beneath the body. Perhaps it was a female who died giving birth, or was fatally wounded, then died in the clearing next to an abandoned filled-in well. (Last fall I found the remnants of another coyote who had died in a snare.) Close by, the remnants of a dilapidated stone foundation lay covered by fallen leaves. These two structures lay close to the Louisville-Juniata cutoff, a wagon trail that branched off the Fort Leavenworth-Fort Riley Military Trail, and may have been used by travelers to water and shelter their animals along the route. Not far from here, the story goes, lie the graves of Eliza, a young pioneer woman, and her Indian girlfriend. Both may have succumbed to small pox, typhoid, or cholera, altogether too commonplace causes of death a century ago.

We walked from the trees into a luminous and lush patch of tall grass – big bluestem and switch grass – and heard an extraordinary crackling sound. It was the grass, snapping, crackling, and popping! It sounded like a grass fire when the blades and stems ignite, but there was no fire and the grass stood tall and still in the bright sunlight. We speculated that the heat was causing the moisture in the stems to move, expand and escape, somehow, maybe at the nodes? I pulled a few stems, held them closer to my ear, and heard the sound again. It was a celebration like the fourth of July, but on another festive day, and on a more humble scale, the scale of grass waving its flags of leaves and exploding its own subtle version of 'fireworks.'

Physicists are studying the mechanics of 'crackling.' A crumpled sheet of paper, Rice Krispies in a bowl of milk, spreading earthquakes all reveal crackling noises. Their models show that, for example, when small droplets, say, of water, coalesce, a crackling noise occurs. When larger droplets coalesce, an even louder crackle is made. Impurities in the material seem to cause the staccato nature of the noise. 'Growth spurts,' be they in water droplets, creases in crumpled paper, or seams in an earthquake, depending upon whether they are tiny or large, create a herky-jerky pattern of quiet and loud crackles. It seems that the grass we witnessed crackling was undergoing such changes, aided no doubt by restive water droplets and the heat of the sun.

In the journals of Lewis and Clark they wrote of the strange and mysterious sounds like rifle shots from the mountains in spring: while they never identified the source, I believe it was the breaking up of river ice, an avalanche of crackling that echoed from the high valleys and across the plains. Physicists could have a heyday studying that!

We walked out of the grass and into a hollow where a pond lay surrounded by tall trees. Our neighbor had put up four nest boxes for wood ducks, but from one peeked a small owl. It looked like a grey screech owl, or perhaps a saw-whet, but we were too far away to tell for sure. We've had wood ducks scout our big pond but no big trees- just indigo bushes- are close enough to entice them to nest.

My husband is of Irish ancestry and we sometimes celebrate St. Patrick's Day with corned beef and cabbage, wear green (or orange), repeat some Irish proverb, and listen to "O Danny Boy." But today we celebrated with the cracklin' of the grass, and wondered if on the Emerald Isle the grass was cracklin' too.

Dru Clarke, written from a journal entry from March 17, 1996,
© 2015 Dru Clarke

SAVE THE DATES



Clean up date for the Michel-Ross preserve.

March 28th from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. If the temperature is below freezing (it may be 60 degrees-who knows) or raining, the clean-up date will be postponed to April 4th. Please feel free to help keep the preserve clean anytime, not just when we have scheduled a day.



FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY'S
**KANSAS WETLANDS
EDUCATION CENTER**

Wings N Wetlands Festival

The Kansas Wetlands Education Center, along with Kansas Department of Wildlife Parks & Tourism, The Nature Conservancy, and the Great Bend Convention and Visitors Bureau, hosts this 2-day birding festival every other year on odd numbered years.

The next WNW Festival is scheduled for **April 24-25, 2015**

The Wings N Wetlands Festival offers participants a unique opportunity to bird two of the best birding spots in the region, Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, as well as other area hot spots. Beyond the great birding, the weekend festivities also include fun workshops, relaxing socials, and opportunities to experience area attractions along the Wetlands and Wildlife National Scenic Byway.

The festival dates coincide with the historical peak of shorebird migration, and is sure to provide some excellent viewing of well over 150 species of birds. Paid registration for the festival includes three or four guided birding fieldtrips with transportation, workshops and seminars, breakfast, 2 dinners, and snacks. Events take place at the Kansas Wetlands Education Center at Cheyenne Bottoms and the Best Western Courtyard in Great Bend.

For more information and registration details contact the Kansas Wetlands Education Center at 1-877-243-9268.

Reason for Concern: 421 Million Gone

As reported in the science journal *Ecology Letters*, researchers note the steady decline in bird populations across 25 European countries, as calculated over the last 20 years.

Common species like sparrows and larks have seen the greatest dips in population. Earlier, in 2001, researchers reported a “severe decline” in European farmland birds. Population drop and loss of range were significantly greater in countries with more intensive agriculture. These countries tend to be in the European Union (EU) rather than in former communist countries, where farmland bird population decline is less.

Thirty-six farmland bird species have been impacted, with heavy declines noted among starlings, linnets, meadow pipits, corn buntings, grey partridges, turtle doves, whinchats, and yellow wagtails.

MJ Morgan

State of the Birds <http://www.stateofthebirds.org/>



COMMON BIRDS IN STEEP DECLINE

Northern Pintail	Horned Lark
American Wigeon	Bank Swallow
Cinnamon Teal	Verdin
Greater Scaup	Varied Thrush
Long-tailed Duck	Snow Bunting
Scaled Quail	Cape May Warbler
Northern Bobwhite	Blackpoll Warbler
Purple Gallinule	Wilson's Warbler
Franklin's Gull	Field Sparrow
Herring Gull	Lark Bunting
Black Tern	Grasshopper Sparrow
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Eastern Meadowlark
Snowy Owl	Rusty Blackbird
Short-eared Owl	Brewer's Blackbird
Common Nighthawk	Common Grackle
Chimney Swift	Pine Siskin
Loggerhead Shrike	



Northern Flint Hills
Audubon Society
P.O. Box 1932
Manhattan, KS
66505-1932

Printed on 100% post-consumer
recycled paper

Non-profit Organization
U.S. Postage Paid
Permit No. 662
Manhattan, KS 66502

ReturnServiceRequested



*Coming up:
Review of Dru's two books
in April newsletter.*

Published monthly (except August) by the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, a chapter of the National Audubon Society.
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Also available on-line at www.ksu.edu/audubon/falcon.html

Membership Information: Introductory memberships - \$20/yr., then basic, renewal membership is \$35/yr. When you join the National Audubon Society, you automatically become a member of the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society. You will receive the bimonthly Audubon magazine in addition to the Prairie Falcon newsletter. New membership applications should be sent to National Audubon Society, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235. Make checks payable to the National Audubon Society. Membership renewals are also handled by the National Audubon Society. Questions about membership? Call 1-800-274-4201 or email the National Audubon Society join@audubon.org. Website is www.audubon.org.

Subscription Information: If you do not want to receive the national magazine, but still want to be involved in NFHAS local activities, you may subscribe to the Prairie Falcon newsletter for \$15/yr. Make checks payable to the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, and mail to: Treasurer, NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan, KS, 66502-1932

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

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