



Eagle Day - JAN. 7th, 9-12n

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Tuttle Creek hosts speakers from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, a live bird program presented by The Milford Nature Center, a children's activity, and eagle spotting tour! Free!

Programs begin at the Manhattan Fire Headquarters (corner of Denison & Kimball Avenues) at 9 a.m.

Afterwards we'll travel by bus to the lake for eagle spotting. We return to the station just after noon. No registration required. Space is limited to a first come, first served basis. The tour includes an outdoor stop-dress for the weather! Bring binoculars & scopes if you have them, a limited number will be provided. All ages welcome!

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



prairie falcon

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Newsletter

Vol. 45, No. 5 ~ January 2017

Inside

pg. 2 - Skylight Plus

Pete Cohen

pg. 3 - Winter in Bloom

Du Clarke

pg. 4 - Photos by Donna Roper

pg. 5 - Manhattan CBC summary

Brett Sandercock

Upcoming Events

Jan. 7 - Tuttle Creek Eagle Day 9-12

See above.

Jan. 9 - Board Meeting 6 p.m.

Home of Tom & MJ Morgan

Jan. 14 - Sat. Morning Birding

8 a.m. Sojourner Truth Park

Jan. 14 - Milford State Park Eagles Day

9 a.m. to 4 p.m.



Skylight plus

Pete Cohen

Another January coming up, and by writing ahead one naturally wonders what our prolonged Indian summer, now turned to steadily sub-freezing, will conjure next.

To the far north, where at least one blizzard has already had its say, we can be fairly certain that groups of feathery snowflakes known as snow buntings will be flying about in search of seeds sticking above the snowdrifts, having to themselves the countryside in the harshest conditions while other creatures seek shelter.

Southward, groups of humans will be debating how to manage the 100 or so Mexican gray wolves that have been re-introduced from captive stock. Sue and I take a particular interest for one night, camped alone southwest of Reserve, New Mexico (referred to as “Reverse” by some of the locals) we heard a few of them (that is, the wolves) voicing, which added quite a bit of flavor to an evening’s experience.

Further south, in the lower Arizona valleys, and in one especial California county (Kern), a fungus named *coccidioides* will be keeping itself available in the surface soil to infect people and pets with “valley fever”, a potentially fatal respiratory condition. The Center for Disease Control reported over 8000 cases in 2014, while suspecting many more go unreported because its symptoms include the usual suspects.

A large dust storm that hit the Phoenix area in 2011 is believed responsible for a report of over 22,000 cases that year. There are expensive treatments and a long story in the Tucson Star for October 18th described a current large effort to find a vaccine or cure. Meanwhile, a lot of people seem to prefer to run the risk rather than spend the winter with the snow buntings.

When our children were growing up here, we learned to expect six weeks of serious winter each year. I remember snow caves, and a drift-blocked road that even a bulldozer could not be cheered to force its way through. And we learned to ice skate uphill and down when the water under the pond and creek-ice drained away, and the frozen surface tilted one way or another, staying intact.

More recent experience leads one to anticipate rather sporadic activity this year, yet each new season here presents a bazaar of possibilities. Going forward is like entering a large marketplace without knowing what will be on offer, or a large arena unsure of what game one will be asked to play. The most certain thing being that we will be informed, if sometimes with little notice ahead.

Overhead, one certainty involves the meridian, that invisible line that at any moment is crossing the sky passing north-south directly overhead. At midnight on New Year’s Eve, Sirius, the brightest star in the sky will be shining upon it, about a third of the way up in the south. And for a few early evenings thereafter a different bright star may or may not be sparkling in the same position. It was named “Mirá” (i.e. miraculous) in the 1600s when its variable appearance was quite a subject for discussion. Considered part of the constellation Cetus, it locates the mid-point of the Whale’s neck, with its long body to westward, and head northeast.

More uncertain than the moods of Mirá is the Quadrantic meteor shower that may or may not be worth watching for the night of the 3rd. It’s named for a replaced constellation called Quadrans Muralis that was regarded as depicting a picture of a quadrant, in the area between the Big Dipper’s handle and the present constellation, Bootës, marked by the bright star, Arcturus.

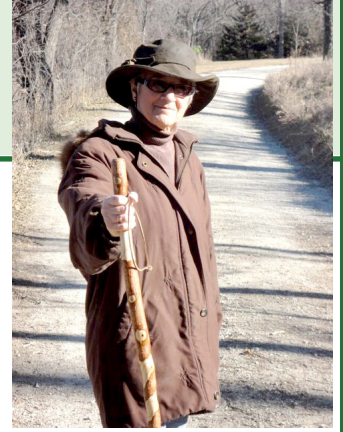
Venus, the queen of brightness, will be aglow in the evening skies, with Mars still showing to its upper right, then moving closer, then retreating through the first half of the month, the two of them forming a triangle with the Moon the 31st. Jupiter, the regent of brightness, these nights reigning in Virgo, will be high above the half Moon on the 19th, leaving Saturn to show up in the pre-dawn in Ophiuchus, above Scorpius’ red star Antares, with Mercury briefly above the horizon, in the wee hours of the 26th.

As usual the winter sky generally will be brightly decorated with the constellation Orion, above Sirius, facing the backing-up Taurus the Bull whose horns reach high northeasterly, one of which connecting with the pentagon shape of Auriga the Charioteer whose main star is Capella. The Gemini Twins will be sliding along, above the lone-seeming star Procyon and behind Orion, while up north Perseus will be glittering below Cassiopeia in the Milky Way. Contrarily the Milky Way will appear dim for at night this time of year we gaze upward toward the scattered edge of our galaxy, unlike in the summer when we gaze toward its denser center.

The Moon will be full the 19th, new the 28th.

Winter in Bloom

Dru Clarke



A familiar symmetry caught my eye as I clambered up the south-facing slope on a narrow trail cut by our horses. A white flower, nestled amidst a rosette of shiny metallic-looking leaves, dozed in the early sun. A wild strawberry, normally a late spring bloomer, was blooming, and it was the second of December. There were more on this slope, tucked into the thatch, catching the light, gathering the warmth radiating back from the ruddy soil. A friend quipped, there might be fruit by Valentine's Day!

There were more, subtle anomalies in these days approaching official winter. Our lilac's leaves clung to branches until the very last days of November, and dandelions bloomed in niches in our yard. In the understory of our woodland, however, the only bright green was that of the leaves of a persistent invader, Japanese honeysuckle. The prickly ash, coral berry, and wild raspberry had already responded to the shortening days and shed theirs. But, curiously, it – the honeysuckle- is only in the woods where we suppress fire, as it is close to our house, while the distant woods have none, perhaps because fire has crept through, inexorably, and kept this invader at bay.

Our animals, too, have put on heavier coats: Our Jersey, Iris, feels bristly, like those mats you scrape your boots on, and the Highlands' hides, with their long shaggy hair, have filled in with a dense undercoat, soft as down. A feral cat, who this summer looked wraith- thin and scraggly, has grown a bushy pelage of velvety black, making it look much bigger than it is. As long as it keeps the mice out of the machinery wiring it is welcome to shelter in our implement shed.

The wintering birds are easier to see now, with the leaves gone, but many of them have been here all year long. The white-breasted nuthatches – with their 'nasal wha-wha-wha' calls- are relentlessly territorial, and the downy woodpeckers, with their tiny festive red mini-caps, are residents. The pert titmouse, with its eye a chip of onyx, and the ebullient chickadee, constantly cheering us up: chickadee adults don't migrate, but the youngsters, when abundant, 'irrupt' and move to new habitat. We've had an elegant red-headed woodpecker all tricked out in its tuxedo at our suet feeder, so there must be plenty of acorns stored for winter or it would have moved on. (This summer, a pair had a nest in our south woods, near the spring-fed creek.) Red-bellied woodpeckers are dependable year 'round and can be seen, especially in other seasons, rocketing crazily through the tree stands, and heard, churring loudly. Interestingly, the male's tongue – which can protrude 2 inches beyond the end of the bill – is forked and wider than the female's, possibly allowing mated pairs to utilize different food sources in the same territory.

On our north creek, we occasionally flush a great blue heron, perhaps the one we've seen for a few past winters. Although not spring-fed like our south creek, the water there runs in most years all seasons, except when it is unusually dry. There are small fish in it, but are there enough to sustain this magnificent bird? It must, we imagine, be using other open water sources nearby. And, the pair of red-tailed hawks who live north of us are still here, gleaning the tall grasses of the open fields for rodents. One is usually aloft, kiting over the landscape, while the other watches from a perch in a tree on the edge of the grass. One wonders: are they communicating what they see?

Not to be eclipsed by other birds, the goldfinches rule the feeders. Native thistles and milkweeds are their mainstay, and we seem to have enough on our land to entice them to stay all year. While it is fun to see them at our feeders, it is a joy to see one clinging, upside down, to a nodding native thistle head, teasing out the seeds.

Of course, the juncos and Harris' sparrows have returned, welcomed back after a hiatus of several seasons. They join the brilliantly robed cardinal and bright blue jay who are at home here, all enriching our lives with their antics, their shapes and colors, their sheer numbers. They, like the wild strawberry flower so unexpectedly blooming, are a joy to behold in what could be otherwise a dreary season ahead.



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Photos by Donna Roper



68th Manhattan Christmas Bird Count

Brett Sandercock

The 68th Christmas Bird Count for Manhattan, Kansas was conducted on December 17, 2016. The climatic conditions for the day of the count were less than optimal: the warmest temperature for the day was 28°F/-2°C shortly after midnight, and then temperatures continued to drop over the next 24 hours, reaching a low of 1°F/-17°C by the end of the day. Snow flurries in the afternoon made visibility hard. Despite the inclement weather, the count had great participation with a total of 47 birders distributed in 25 parties: 17 groups in the field and 8 completing watches at feeders. The total effort for all parties included 95 hours of birding, and walking and driving 373 miles within the count circle. The final tally for the count was relatively low with 18,241 birds of 87 different species. By comparison, the median count for the Manhattan CBC in the past decade has been ~62,000 birds (range: 33,000 to 148,000) and 94 species (range: 83 to 103 species). Count week records include the three days before and after the count for birds recorded during the period of December 14-20.

Lewis's Woodpecker was added as a new species to the bird list for the Manhattan CBC. Unfortunately, the continuing bird at Pott 2 Lake was not seen on the day of the count but will be tallied as a count week bird since it was seen several times before and after the count day. A first-year Glaucous Gull that turned up at the Tuttle Tubes the day after the count was also recorded as a count week bird. The Rock Wren at Tuttle Dam was last seen on the weekend of December 10-11 and was not relocated during the count week, despite multiple attempts by several observers.

Highlights of the Manhattan CBC included 1 Trumpeter Swan at Tuttle Ponds, a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers at Tuttle, and 1 White-winged Dove at a feeder. None of these species had been recorded on the count in the past decade. Other good finds included 2 Pied-billed Grebes at Tuttle Reservoir, 1 Red-shouldered Hawk off of Wildcat Creek, a total of 6 Pileated Woodpeckers at different sites, 2 Bewick's Wrens, 2 Hermit Thrushes, 3 Lincoln's Sparrows, 2 Swamp Sparrows, and 1 Yellow-headed Blackbird at the K-State Dairy Units. Two Prairie Falcons were observed hunting over agricultural fields off of Zeandale Road, and 1 Merlin was found too. It was a good year for birds that depend on mast from oaks and conifers with totals of 24 Red-headed Woodpeckers, 123 Blue Jays, 17 Red-breasted Nuthatches, and 18 Purple Finches.

Counts of waterfowl were surprisingly low, with only 1 Northern Pintail, 1 Canvasback, 2 Bufflehead, 1 Ruddy Duck, and another four species only recorded as count week birds. Common birds that are usually detected on the count but were missed this year included Redhead, Greater Prairie-Chickens, Ring-necked Pheasant, Wilson's Snipe, Eastern Screech-Owl, Winter Wren, Northern Mockingbird, Field Sparrow, Western Meadowlark, and Rusty Blackbirds. Thanks to Alice Boyle, Doris Burnett, Clyde Ferguson, Mark Mayfield, and David Rintoul for helping to coordinate the different sections of the count circle. Thanks also to the Northern Flint Hills Chapter of the Audubon Society for sponsoring the Manhattan CBC and for hosting the compilation at a chili supper on the evening of the count.

Thanks to all those who ordered birdseed!



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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, 66505-1932
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