

## TOUR Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Properties and/or Sanctuaries

Nov. 17th 1-3 pm. Meet at Butterfly Garden in Sojourner Truth Park.

### Butterfly Garden

Sojourner Park

### Praire - Northeast Park

Avery St.

### Cecil Best Birding Trail

Near Northeast Park

### Michel-Ross Audubon Preserve

Stagg Hill

### Alsop Bird Sanctuary

17th St. and Laramie



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



## prairie falcon

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Newsletter

Vol. 48, No. 3 ~ November 2019

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### Upcoming Events

Nov. 5 **TUESDAY 6:00** Board Meeting  
Friends Rm. Manhattan Public Library

Nov. 9 Beginning Birding Sat. morning 8:00 am  
Depart from Sojourner Truth Park

Nov. 17 Tour of NFHAS properties (see above)

Save the Date: Dec. 15- Manhattan Christmas Bird Count



## Skylight plus

Pete Cohen

Last month Uranus offered viewers a challenge to spy something beyond normal naked-eye range. This month an ap-

parition requiring a projection from a solar telescope is worth mentioning. On the 11th, starting about 6a30 till noon, Mercury will become discoverable making its way across the face of the Sun, in the guise of a little black dot.

Such events are no longer headline news. What's significant here is that Johannes Kepler, who died in 1630, had been able to predict that on November 7th of 1631 a specific one of our planets would be visible through the then relatively new device, the telescope, transiting between us and the Sun. Not only that, it seems notable that at that time there was enough learned and communicative ability to make it the first transit ever known to have been scientifically observed.

It was not just a sightseeing opportunity. The hope was that by timing the passage, observed from different locations, triangulation would provide the answer as to how far away Mercury was. By then scientists could figure celestial objects were very far, but not how far. Somehow that admirable effort failed of its aim, and the answer had to await observations of a transit of Venus. (Now our instruments tell us that the average distance to Mercury, depending on the relative positions on our orbits, is about 48 million miles.)

It reminds me of the story of the eyewitness whose testimony was being questioned during a trial by a skeptical attorney. "Tell me, sir, just how far can you see at night?" "I dunno. How far is the Moon?"

On another historical note related to the sky: Manhattan, Kansas, is currently discussing paving the parking lot at its airport and increasing the number of parking spaces from 600+ to 900+. Meanwhile other people are likely preparing to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first municipal airport, the Tucson Flying Field, established November 20, 1919.

Eight days later, Lady Astor became the first female member of the British House of Commons. And for some other random historical perspective: Hernando Cortés, having transited the waters from Spain, discovered and conquered his way into what we call Mexico, and captured the Aztec chief, Montezuma, on November 8, 1519.

As indicated last month, for Cortés Polaris would've been located a little west of due north, with the rest of the lights shifted a bit counterclockwise relative to now, yet the night scene for the different latitudes would've been pretty much the same.

We left off last month describing Pisces as we see it: two separated but connected fish swimming, one under Pegasus and one to the Flying Horse's west. They're rather dim, as are their neighbors who occupy a broad area known as the sky's "south sea" because of those neighbors' connection with water. For nearest is Cetus, sometimes referred as a savage sea-serpent, sometimes as a jovial whale. Like Pisces he consists of two thinly connected loops, one chunky and a little smaller than a raised closed fist (below Aries and east of the fish), the other a distorted rectangle (not quite two fists wide under the fishes' connecting cord). East of Cetus is a somewhat larger bulbous loop with a wiry 'tail' extending convexly eastward: Aquarius the Water-bearer. Next eastward is, mythically, a goat/fish combination named Capricornus. It's also known as "the smile in the sky" for from our angle it presents the outline of a shallow bowl (two lips, if you will). It's not quite a fist and a half wide and in November sets mid-evening.

Below this stretch of constellations will be, above low horizons, a miscellany of stars, part of more southerly figures, though briefly in the southwest evenings a solitary star will shine brightly. This will be Fomalhaut, the mouth of Piscis Austrinus, the Southern Fish, whose body lies faintly to the west.

To sum up, with the exceptions of the several bright stars in Perseus, and the single sparks of Hamal in Aries and Fomalhaut, the autumn scene overhead is not aglow. Yet it is framed by the brightnesses of the Summer Triangle of stars departing in the west, and the vibrant members of the winter show crowding up in the east. And the zig-zag throne of Queen Cassiopeia above.

Meanwhile this month begins with Saturn above the Moon at day's end the 1st. Then Mercury does more than transit the Sun. During the last half of the month it will be a companion to Mars through the early hours, staying below the red planet, with the Moon above them on the 24th, then below them on the 25th with Virgo's Spica above all three. Before then Mars will be next to Spica the 11th and 12th. Venus will be side-by-side with the Moon in the twilight of the 23rd and 24th, and the Moon will be above her on the 28th, with Jupiter to the lower right.

The Moon will be full the 12th at 7a34, new the 26th at 9a06. Daylight Savings Time ends the 3rd.

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## Avian Mystery: could they be...?

Dru Clarke



During chores one morning in early October, we heard a repeated “Yawp!” “Yawp!” \*coming from the trees around our west pond. The pond is a watershed pool, created to slow runoff from the surrounding pasture and woodland. It is girdled by tall trees, mostly cottonwood and chinquapin, that provide shelter and perches for birds. Puzzled by the raucous sound, something like a weak squawk of a raptor, I crept through the undergrowth as quietly as I could manage to see if I could discern what on earth was creating such a racket. (We were hoping it wasn't something caught in a snare or a trap.)

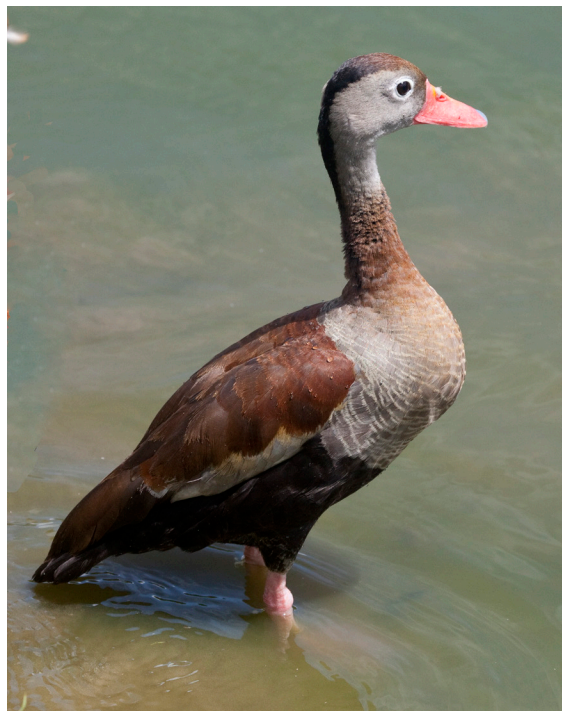
On a tall cottonwood on the dam perched about half a dozen gangly-looking birds that resembled poorly nourished geese. On the pond were about two dozen more, gliding silently in a loose flotilla. I was able to observe them for a minute or so and noted their dull brownish grey plumage with white thin markings on the wings. Startled into flight, these pale streaks on the wings were more visible. The ones perching in the trees called as they flew. I couldn't tell bill color, but it was not bright or light, but was rather dark and unremarkable. They circled above the trees then headed east and have not returned.

The next day a pair of mallards were observed on the same pond (we have three of varying sizes, but this one is the only one surrounded by trees). A week later, the unusual flock of birds has not returned.

But we're pretty sure they were whistling ducks, more than likely fulvous rather than black-bellied, but we have no photo or video proof to firmly establish their presence here. Checking range and sighting maps both black-bellied and fulvous have been seen in Kansas, although both are considered

subtropical and tropical birds. Long and lean and rather large, whistling ducks are a rare find here and while we can't 'prove' that's what they were, we feel gifted that we saw something quite unusual and special. The true birders among us may have something to share in regard to them, and we'd like to hear from them.

Awaiting the first freeze I check my Arkansas black apple tree to see if the apples that survived this year are ripening, long after others have been picked and turned into cider, sauce, and doughnuts. Some still green I picked today (Oct. 10) and turned into sauce, along with the few hawthorn apples clinging to upper twigs in our hawthorn tree. We've had this tree for a dozen years and threatened to pull it out last year as it had not ever borne any fruit. But this year it produced fragrant white blossoms that developed into plump, plum-sized lime green pomes that made tangy hawthorn butter and sauce. The pollinators nectared on the blossoms so we got to share its bounty with other 'nations.' (Was that Muir who said that?) The last hawthorns went into the sauce with the Arkansas blacks today



Black-bellied whistling duck - Photo by Dave Rintoul

We don't know what happened to the ruddy duck hen with her half dozen ducklings on the south pond (the one big enough to paddle a boat on) but we wished her well on the one occasion we flushed her from a shore hideout. I really need to tuck a phone into my pocket so I can capture and share them with folks not as fortunate as we are living in our rural digs.

*\*Sibley describes it as a 'yip' but it was coarser or more raw than that*

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## Tour of NFHAS Preserves, Gardens and Sanctuaries



Butterfly Garden



Prairie - Northeast Park, suspension bridge in background, connecting to Linear Trail.

Cecil Best Birding Trail

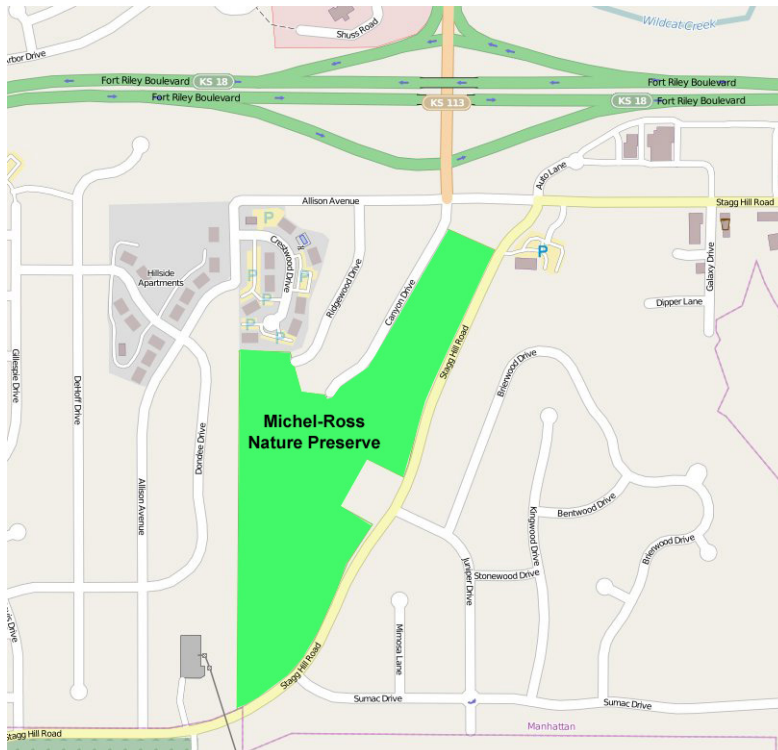






Alsop Bird Sanctuary - 17th and Laramie

## Michel-Ross Audubon Preserve





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

Return Service Requested

Non-profit Organization  
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The purpose of the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society is to teach people to enjoy and respect birds and their habitats. NFHAS advocates preservation of prairie ecosystems and urban green spaces thus saving the lives of birds and enriching the lives of people.

Also available online at [nfhas.org](http://nfhas.org)

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## WE NEED YOU!

PLEASE consider joining our NFHAS Board.

Contact Patricia Yeager if interested, and watch our website and newsletter for time and day of meeting.

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**Secretary**

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**Birdseed Chair**

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