Auto Tour of our Properties
Saturday, Feb. 11, 2012
8 a.m. - 12n

Join us at the United Methodist Church on 1609 College Ave. at 8 a.m. for breakfast. Then we will car pool to a tour of our project properties - Mitchel/Ross, Alsop and NE Park. If there is time and interest we may also go to Mt. Michel south of Wamego that Audubon of Kansas had a hand in establishing.

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

prairie falcon
Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society Newsletter
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Feb 6 - Board Meeting 6:00 p.m.
Tom & MJ Morgan home

Feb 11 - AUTO TOUR see above

Feb 17-20 15 th Annual Great
Backyard Bird Count

Mar 5 - Board Meeting

Mar 10 - Saturday morning birding
meet at Sojourner Truth park 8 a.m.

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Skylight plus

Pete Cohen

Here we are again in the keystone month of another leap year in the Gregorian calendar; a month that has been occurring with 29 days almost every four years since the year 4 c.e. The Julian calendar established by Julius Caesar in 45 b.c.e was in effect then, and had an extra day every three years until that error was corrected to four. That revised four-year sequence has been only slightly affected by the calendar adjustments authorized by Pope Gregory XIII on March 1st, 1582, some three centuries after a monk, Roger Bacon, began annoying the establishment by pointing out continuing shortcomings in the general revised arrangement. However, one effect was to exclude February's extra day from century years not divisible by 400. Years that don't "leap" are called "common."

All of which can make one wonder when and how we first started inserting into the river of time these highly permeable, variously shaped segmented boxes we call calendars. There is disagreement among scientists as to whether several bones, dating from 11,000 to 30,000 years ago, each containing notch sequences that can be equated with Moon phases, are the first known human-made recordings of time passing. The expressions "eveningtide" and "morningtide" suggest that these shoreline movements were once more utilized to partition time to govern a range of activities.

But the natural divisions of time with the most impact on sighted beings (as well as on some plants and other organisms) would be the alternation of sunlight and night, though the word "day" seems derived from the Sanskrit "*dah*" meaning "heat," not "light," which is not surprising since such a source is located in a hot climate, and for some societies and occupations a "day" begins at noon, or at sunrise or sunset. The calendar on my wall measures off 24-hour "solar days" that begin at midnight. Astronomers keeping watch on when the Earth rotates around to again face certain stars (rather than the Sun) go by a "sidereal day" that's about four minutes shorter because of the Earth's wobbling.

Apparently the concept of "hour" has worked itself into languages gradually, meaning various spans of time before being fixed at one-twenty-fourth of a day. "Minute" and then "second" have followed, becoming specific in regard to time, aside from geometric arcs and circles, with the precision that became available with the invention of clocks.

But whether we start with notches in a bone, or boxes on a wall, we have been for various applications creating and/or discovering time frames ever smaller, well shorter than our conscious senses can discern, and discussing cosmological time frames so lengthy as to stretch our comprehension, still without impeding or altering time's flow. And it seems that within us our bodies respond to various time frames we are not necessarily ever aware of. Whether those responses are affected by our responses to the Gregorian calendar, which, I read, is still 25.96 seconds awry per year, I wonder. (See "The Calendar" by David Ewing Duncan, published by Fourth Estate in London, 1998).

Now in the month-time ahead, during the Gregorian February, from west to east, Venus, Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn will be literally highlights. The first two will gradually be closer together while setting sooner after sunset as the month progresses. On the 9th binocs may help to see the small bluish blur of Uranus to Venus' left. Reddish Mars, getting ever brighter, rises into the evening sky amid Leo. Saturn rises in the wee hours with the Moon and Spica in Virgo moving above. The Moon's other visitations include being below and right from Mars (and Uranus) on the 9th, and appearing just above reddish Antares in Scorpio just before dawn on the 15th, and then as a waxing crescent skimming by Venus on the 25th, Jupiter on the 26th. On the 28th it will be below the Pleiades of Taurus with the Bull's reddish eye, Aldebaran, to its upper left. Mercury is off behind the Sun.

Meanwhile, thanks to our latitude those bright winter constellations of Orion and his neighbors will be sparkling across the night sky at a convenient elevation for admiring. Moon full the 9th at 1a30, new the 23rd at 1a39.

Winter Blues

Dru Clarke

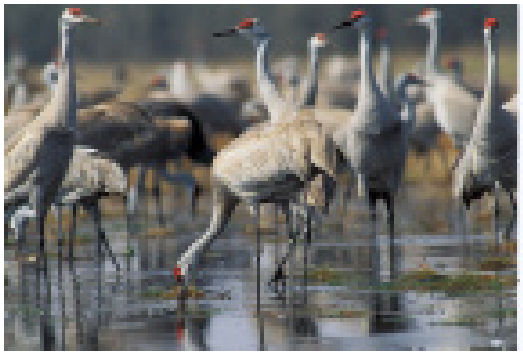
Seeking out the color blue in winter is an exercise in futility. We can get our blue fix by man-made artifacts, in clothes and decor, even our vehicles (I learned to drive on a '55 150 model powder-blue chevy: the color choice was a good one as it was calming to a 16-year old girl who never did learn to negotiate turns very well). But finding blue in nature in the dead of winter really stretches one's observational skills, and, yes, one's imagination.

Gone are the bluestems, now a dusty rose, and ruellia, tucked between tufts of grasses. Blue wild indigo is black and skeletal, its pods turned to pitch-colored rattleboxes, shaking like dry bones in the wind, and blue sage is a memory retrieved by burning its remains. Scurf pea tumbles across the prairie, its roots and those of wild alfalfa hosting, even now, those welcome bacteria that fix nitrogen in our soils. But their flowers are long faded. I did find a smear of lichen on a tree's trunk, but it was really more a washed-out greenish grey than a 'real' blue. And the water in the ponds and creeks was disappointing too, more an insipid flat lens that dully reflected the greys and browns of trees and shrubs on their banks. The heaviness of a pewter sky weighed it down even more.

The birds offer hope of a streak of blue in these dreary days. We come to appreciate the big, boisterous blue jays even more now. It is hard to believe that even their plumage coloration is not pigment but structural: the air-filled cells in the feathers scatter the light (much as our atmosphere does), making them appear blue. What little light passes through these cells is absorbed by a layer of melanin, a dark pigment known to strengthen feathers (and hair). Bluebirds are common too, but not so close to the house: we see them often in the treetops down the lane. They are especially striking when the backdrop is the rich complementary color of orange bittersweet whose fruits they enjoy. Even a resident great blue heron graces the creek where pools of waters have trapped the chubs and minnows who, in wetter times, swam leisurely up and downstream. Now they entice this great steel blue-colored creature to stay through less than ideal weather.

As winter storms come and go, patches of sky open up, that glorious, uplifting, endlessly deep blue we know as an invitation to fair weather, and venturing outside. But, maybe it is better not to have much blue in evidence during winter: we are more inclined to stay inside and contemplate our mortality and be glad for, at least, the anticipation of spring and a surfeit of blues, so many shades that the names range from A (Alice) to Z (Zaffre), missing only "q" and "x." (There is no "official" one for "j" but we all know jay blue!) So, my mission is cut out for me, to come up with a blue that begins with "q" and another one for "x." That will help me get through the winter.

42nd Annual
Rivers & Wildlife Celebration
March 15-18, 2012
REGISTRATION OPENS IN JANUARY
Any other questions about the Celebration? Email us or call 402-797-2301.
For crane viewing information, contact Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary, 308-468-5282 or rowesanctuary.org.
Looking for other things to do during your stay? Visit nebraskaflyway.com for help planning your visit to central Nebraska during spring migration.



Snowy Owls in Kansas

Daron Blake

Each January, bald eagles return to Tuttle Creek Lake and Milford Lake, soaring above the water and swooping down to the surface to snatch trout and other fish. This winter our skies have been graced with another powerful hunter: the snowy owl, *Bubo scandiacus*. These arctic birds nest on the northernmost tundras of North America and Eurasia and sometimes travel south for the winter. These are our only all-white owls, with adult males being pure white and juveniles and females showing dusky barring on the wings and body. Unlike the partially-white barn owls that live all over the United States, snowy owls have large yellow eyes and a completely white head. At an average of two feet in length, they are among the largest species of owl and have a wingspan ranging from four to five feet. These ghostly winter visitors are often seen perched on telephone poles or in tree tops.

Unlike the bald eagles, who are seen almost every year in the Flint Hills, snowy owls are irruptive birds whose migratory movements are erratic. The reasons for these wintry visitors' irregular migrations are poorly understood. Some years snowy owls stay in the arctic tundra, while in other years large numbers fly south for the winter. The birds are more commonly seen spending the winter in New England and more northern parts of the United States, but even in these locations winter counts of snowy owls vary from year to year. This year has seen large irruptions of snowy owls to areas all over the United States, and since November, many of these white specters have been spotted across northern Kansas. There were repeated sightings at Jeffrey Energy Center's Wildlife Refuge Area near Belvue, and Eva Horne and Brett Sandercock saw the first-ever reported snowy owl on Konza Prairie in early January. A list of reported sightings, complete with some amazing local snowy owl photos, is maintained by Chuck Otte and can be found at http://ksbirds.org/KS_SNOW_11_12.htm. As of early January, the webpage listed over 70 reported sightings in Kansas. This page also contains a link to a 1975 article by Bob LaShelle describing the last mass migration of snowy owls to our area. Otte notes that this winter has seen several reports of multiple birds in the same location, and that this season's reported sightings are quickly surpassing those of the 1974-1975 irruption.

Snowy owls have been wintertime visitors to the United States for centuries. In the central plains, Lakota traditions connected the arrival of the snowy owl with the coming of the cold North wind. What draws snowy owls this far south? Why do they appear in large numbers during certain years? Their migration is not fully understood, and there are some different theories regarding the pattern of their winter irruptions. Most theories link these migratory changes to variations in the population of the owls' primary arctic food source: lemmings. Snowy owls require wide open spaces, which resemble their tundra nesting grounds, to hunt effectively. The owls use these open spaces to hunt for southern substitutes for their lemming diet. Researchers at the Owl Research Institute in Charlo, Montana have investigated snowy owl irruptions into the northern United States and their wintertime hunting activity. Their research revealed that owls in Montana had a diet made of up to 95% voles, a common rodent in the owls' Montana hunting grounds. The Owl Research Institute's research supports earlier hypotheses that snowy owl irruptions occur when there is a crash in the population of arctic Brown Lemmings.

There is another theory about the relationship between lemming population and snowy owl migrations. Dr. Norman Smith has been studying snowy owl migration to the Boston area since the 1980s. He began by banding and observing birds, but for over a decade has been placing radio transmitters to track individual birds' movements. Smith argues that his research disproves the notion that southern migrations are driven by crashes in the arctic lemming population. He found that when there were fewer snowy owls overwintering in Boston, the birds were adult and malnourished. During peak migration years,

Smith observed that the visiting birds were healthy, well-fed juveniles, not struggling adults. These observations contradict the earlier theories that mass irruptions were driven by crashes in lemming populations; if this were the case, the owls arriving during peak migration years would be underfed. Dr. Smith's results suggest that high migration years are caused by summer booms in lemming populations, which result in more successful arctic mating seasons and more fledgling owls. Some of these young owls then fly south for the winter. Snowy owls lay clutches ranging from five to fourteen eggs, all of which usually hatch within a week during the summer breeding season. Some of these young birds stay on the breeding grounds throughout the winter, and it is not completely understood why other fledgling snowy owls migrate to the south.

Snowy owls hunt during both daylight and nighttime. Our local winter guests subsist mostly on small rodents during their stay, but they have also been known to hunt birds and even fish. In the early 19th century, Audubon observed snowy owls hunting. These owls caught fish by lying flat on a rock and scooping the fish up with their legs. Audubon also wrote that snowy owls were seen in Kentucky and South Carolina, and that Indians had reported seeing the white owls along the Arkansas River and near Memphis. Snowy owls' diets most likely become more varied when they spend winters farther south; reports to Chuck Otte have noted several owls eating ducks and larger birds this year, and during the snowy owl influx of the 1970s, a local hunter lost a shot duck to an opportunistic snowy owl. In his studies near Boston, Dr. Smith even observed one snowy owl eating another!

We may not fully understand the reasons for this unexpected fleet of feathered ghosts, but we can certainly enjoy their beauty and grace. By keeping track of the age, health, and diet of the owls that visit our area this winter, perhaps we can better understand what motivates these mass migrations. Keep an eye out for these awe-inspiring arctic owls, who will most likely begin their return flight to the North in February.

Please do not disturb snowy owls by approaching them too closely. When alarmed by human movement, owls may expend precious energy reserves.

Feb. 17-20

15th Annual Great Backyard Bird Count - a joint project of Audubon and The Cornell Lab of Ornithology.
Go to:
www.birdcount.org

Birds collected from Mine posts in Nevada

Screech owl from post

November 22, 2011 - American Bird Conservancy, the nation's leading bird conservation organization, is asking Nevada citizens to act on a state law that now gives them the ability to prevent thousands, possibly millions of bird deaths at mining claim sites. The law, passed in 2009, included a provision that became effective this month enabling anyone to pull up claim marker stakes that are improperly set and act as bird-killing traps.

The stakes are PVC pipes, and to a lesser extent, metal pipes, often used to mark not only the corners but sometimes the lengths and widths of mining claims. Once driven into the ground, the four- to six-inch diameter pipes extend several feet above ground for easy spotting by claim holders and regulators. Small birds often see the opening of the pipe markers as a hollow suitable for nesting. After perching on the pipes, the birds then enter the hole only to become trapped because the walls of the pipes do not allow them to extend their wings and fly out and are too smooth to allow them to grapple their way up the sides. Death from dehydration or starvation in the hot, dry Nevada desert climate then soon follows. Other animals such as lizards also meet the same fate.

Recent examination of 854 pipes revealed 879 birds (as well as 113 reptiles and 20 mammals) – an average of more than one bird mortality per pipe. Given that, according to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), there are in excess of one million federal mining claims in the Nevada, this could mean a million or more dead birds in that state alone.

Of the 43 species of birds so far recovered from the markers, by the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NVDOW), most are cavity nesters. The Ash-throated Flycatcher and the Mountain Bluebird were the most frequent victims, but others commonly trapped included woodpeckers, sparrows, shrikes, kestrels, and owls.

Concern about the pipes prompted BLM's Las Vegas Office, the NVDOW, and the Nevada Conservation Corps to organize a four-day marker removal effort in a portion of the Spring Mountains early in November. Amelia Savage, BLM Las Vegas Wildlife Biologist said the three groups are planning two more pipe removal efforts, in each of the next two months. "BLM and NVDOW planned the marker removal for months so we could spring into action the first full week after the law gave us the authority to act. We targeted an area where we knew we could make a difference and get a lot done. We look forward to the next efforts and hope they are as productive as the first one," said Savage.

According to Christy Klinger, a Wildlife Biologist with the NVDOW and one of the organizers of the BLM/NVDOW marker-pulling effort as well as a second marker pulling effort with the Red Rock Audubon Society, "Certainly, the wildlife mortality was troubling, but another disconcerting discovery we made is that about half of those markers that had protective caps put in place at some earlier point in time, now had those caps displaced, on the ground nearby. So the hazard from the pipe became re-established."

"It is certainly possible and perhaps even likely that a million or more birds have needlessly died in these pipes. It is encouraging that we are seeing efforts by local, federal, and state agencies to address the problem. However, given the enormous scale of the issue, long-term solutions are required.

According to a BLM publication called Public Land Statistics, in 2010, there were 3,388,400 mining claims of record on BLM-managed lands in the 11 western states and Alaska. Following Nevada, the states with the highest number of federal mining claims are Utah, with 401,828, Wyoming (which includes minimal numbers from Nebraska) with 306,588, California, with 300,809, and Colorado with 278,326.

"When you look at numbers such as these, it is possible that these mining claims markers are a significant source of bird mortality in this country," said Fenwick.

This post was written by American Bird Conservancy (ABC), a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit membership organization whose mission is to conserve native birds and their habitats throughout the Americas. ABC acts by safeguarding the rarest species, conserving and restoring habitats, and reducing threats, while building capacity in the bird conservation movement. http://focusingonwildlife.com/millions-of-bird-deaths-in-nevada.html

2012 Hog Island Audubon Camp in Maine - Registration open!

The National Audubon Society has opened registration for their legendary 6-day birding programs for adults, teens and families at the historic Audubon Camp in Maine on Hog Island. Pete Dunne, Scott Weidensaul, Steve Kress, Lang Elliott, Don Kroodsma, Bill Thompson III and many more expert ornithologists, naturalists, educators and authors will be in residence during the 2012 sessions. Website: http://hogisland.audubon.org

Hog Island Audubon Camp is run by the Seabird Restoration Program (Project Puffin) of the National Audubon Society. All summer programs include field trips to nearby Eastern Egg Rock, where Dr. Steve Kress and his team of biologists have successfully restored an island colony of Atlantic Puffins, and Roseate, Arctic and Common Terns. Immerse yourself in the joy of birding with expert-led workshops, lively evening presentations, saltwater birding tours and trips to diverse habitats on the Maine coast. Roger Tory Peterson was the camp's first birding instructor in 1936 and many of America's finest naturalists, including Rachel Carson, have spent time on the 330-acre wildlife sanctuary, located in mid-coast Maine, on Muscongus Bay. Participants live in restored wooden buildings dating back to the early 1900's and are treated to three fabulous meals each day, prepared by chef extraordinaire Janii Laberge.

2012 Programs:
Maine Seabird Biology & Conservation - June 3-8 & Sept 9-14
Joy of Birding - June 10-15 & June 24-29
Field Ornithology - June 17—22
Coastal Maine Bird Studies for Teens - June 17—22 & June 24—29
Sharing Nature: An Educator's Week- July 19—24
Family Camp - August 19—24
Audubon Chapter Leadership Program - August 26—31
Living on the Wind: Fall Migration and Monhegan Island - September 16—21

Most programs sell out months in advance, so it is worth registering early. Nearly 100 scholarships are offered each year by local Audubon Chapters and birding clubs - see the website for applications.

For more information or to enroll, visit http://hogisland.audubon.org or call (607) 257-7308 x 14. You may also contact Erica Marx, registrar, at hogisland@audubon.org.

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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, 66505-1932

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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