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aikorns
AIKEN AUDUBON SOCIETY

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRDS

by Leslie Holzmann

Brown-headed Cowbirds have a bad reputation. A lot of birders don't like them because they seem to be shirking their parental duties. Since they are "obligate brood parasites," meaning they don't build their own nests, but only lay their eggs in the nests of other birds, we accuse them of taking advantage of those species by forcing them into doing all the work of feeding a hungry nestling. It's unfair. We're indignant.



Some birders even go so far as removing cowbird eggs from any parasitized nests they come across. This is a bad idea for many reasons. For one, it's illegal. Cowbirds are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Then, while the host parents may not realize that there's a different egg in their nests, they do know how many eggs should be there. If one is missing, they may abandon the entire nest, or even their territory! Worse, if the cowbird egg is removed or destroyed, a 2007 study discovered that the parent may come back and demolish the host nest. It seems like retribution, but from a natural selection viewpoint, it makes sense; allowing the brood to survive could pass on the ability to recognize a cowbird egg, so those genes must be eliminated.

Besides, cowbirds may not be as evil as we think. Research has exposed some surprising facts that shed new light on the species.

Brown-headed Cowbirds, as their name implies, tend to follow large grazing mammals, feeding on the insects on their hide or found in their droppings. They likely evolved this behavior as they followed the roaming herds of bison. Because of their nomadic lifestyle, they couldn't hang around to ensure the survival of their young.



However, it turns out that, when possible, the mother cowbird doesn't abandon her young. Instead, she hangs around, making sure that junior is thriving. It's clear that the above example of nest destruction is only possible if the mother knows her egg is missing.

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A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Summer is almost over, and with that comes a new season of Audubon programs. Even though our monthly meetings take a pause during the summer, it is still a busy time for bird enthusiasts!

Aiken offers field trips throughout the summer, including some to higher elevation areas that aren't accessible other times of year. These field trips are a great way to stay in touch with other bird lovers over the summer and catch some species that can be hard to find in the spring or fall.

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Coming programs

SEPTEMBER 18

Conservation on Department of Defense Lands
Anna Joy Lehmicke

OCTOBER 16

The Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project
Teia Schweizer

NOVEMBER 20

DNA Footprints in Birds
Dr. Garth Spellman

DECEMBER 14

Christmas Bird Count

Newsletter articles

Articles, announcements, or other items of special interest to Aiken Audubon members are welcome for consideration. We'd love to hear from you!

The deadline for submissions to the November/December 2019 issue of the *Aikorns* is Wednesday, October 16. Contact the editor, Leslie Holzmann, at Editor@AikenAudubon.com or call (719) 964-3197.

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SEPTEMBER 18 / ANNA JOY LEHMICKE CONSERVATION ON DOD LANDS

Colorado's Front Range is home to numerous military installations, from the Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site near Trinidad to Greeley Air National Guard Station near Fort Collins. Nationwide, the Department of Defense (DoD) controls 30 million acres of land. Department of Defense lands are home to 23% of all species listed under the Endangered Species Act, despite comprising only 4.5% of all federal lands. Come learn about the role that the DoD plays in the conservation of rare, threatened, and endangered species and the management of migratory birds and other species of conservation concern.

Anna Joy is the current president of Aiken Audubon Society and works as a wildlife biologist on Fort Carson. She grew up near Philadelphia and attended the University of Delaware as an undergraduate, where she studied wildlife conservation and first fell in love with birds. After receiving her PhD from the University of Georgia, she moved to Colorado Springs in 2014 and has no intention of leaving.



OCTOBER 16 / TEIA SCHWEIZER THE MAUI FOREST BIRD RECOVERY PROJECT



Islands throughout the world have suffered major species extinctions, primarily as a result of anthropogenic changes. The Hawaiian Islands are no exception, and have earned the unfortunate moniker “The extinction capital of the world” due to the high percentage of endemic plant and animal species that have gone extinct since human contact. Of the endemic bird species once found in Hawai’i, almost 70% are extinct, and an additional 20% are listed as threatened or endangered. The surviving species face challenging odds of survival due to invasive species, introduced diseases, and habitat loss and fragmentation. While these sobering issues can seem insurmountable, conservation efforts to mitigate loss of avian species have seen considerable success. In this talk, Teia will provide an overview of the challenges facing native Hawaiian birds and current conservation efforts, with a focus on the work she did with the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project to monitor critically endangered Kiwikiu (Maui Parrotbill) and restore native habitat.

Teia is interested in conservation biology and is currently employed at Colorado State University as a Research Associate for the Bird Genoscape Project. Her passion for conservation was sparked while working for three years in Hawai’i with the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project, which uses research, education, and restoration to protect the critically endangered Kiwikiu (or Maui Parrotbill). She has a Bachelor of Science in Biology.

Aiken Audubon programs are free and open to the public. They are held at Bear Creek Nature Center, located at 245 Bear Creek Road in Colorado Springs, 80906. Coffee and socializing begins at 6:30 pm and programs begin at 7 pm.

If inclement weather cancels an Aiken meeting, decision will be made by 1:00 PM on the meeting date. Notification will be placed on our website, on our Facebook page, and sent out through our email notification list. If there is any doubt, please contact any Aiken board member via telephone. Always, your safety is first, so use your own judgement when coming to a meeting.

Aiken Audubon Board Members

PRESIDENT

Anna Joy Lehmicke

President@AikenAudubon.com

VICE-PRESIDENT

Clark Jones

VicePres@AikenAudubon.com

SECRETARY

Jenyva Fox

Secretary@AikenAudubon.com

TREASURER

Linda Hodges

(719) 425-1903

Treasurer@AikenAudubon.com

PROGRAM CHAIR

Diane Luck

Program@AikenAudubon.com

CONSERVATION CHAIR

Linda Hodges

(719) 425-1903

Conservation@AikenAudubon.com

com

PUBLICITY CHAIR

Julie Frost

303-912-8055

Publicity@AikenAudubon.com

EDUCATION CHAIR

Julie Frost

303-912-8055

Education@AikenAudubon.com

FIELD TRIPS

Diana Beatty

FieldTrips@AikenAudubon.com

HOSPITALITY

[Position open]

Hospitality@AikenAudubon.com

CHRISTMAS COUNT

Tyler Stuart

(719) 661-9308

colospringscbc@gmail.com

AIKEN AUDUBON SOCIETY

330 E Costilla St., Box 79

Colorado Springs, CO 80919

INFO@AIKENAUDUBON.COM

com

AIKENAUDUBON.COM

Aiken Audubon Field Trips & Events

Everyone is welcome on Aiken field trips, regardless of experience level or membership in Audubon. Contact trip leader for details and to let them know you are coming. Remember to pack your binoculars, scope (if you have one), field guide, water, snack or lunch, hat, rain gear, sun screen, bug spray, camera(?), and some gas money for the drivers. No dogs are allowed.

Note: In cases of extreme weather, trips may be cancelled. If this might be a possibility, please contact the trip leader an hour before the scheduled meeting time. To receive e-mailed reminders of upcoming field trips and notices of last-minute cancellations, send your name and e-mail address to AikenAudubon@gmail.com.

THURSDAY CLASSES: SEPTEMBER 5 & 12, 6:30 – 8:30 PM **SATURDAY FIELD TRIPS: SEPTEMBER 7 & 21, 7:30 – 10:30 AM** **BIRDING FOR BEGINNERS 101**

This series sponsored by Fountain Creek Nature Center will teach beginning bird watchers the basics and develop skills in identifying birds by sight and sound. Prepaid registration required: \$50/nature center member, \$65/nonmember.

Contact Nancy Bernard, Supervisor, with any questions: (719) 520-6745, nancybernard@elpasoco.com. Register online at <https://communityservices.elpasoco.com/nature-centers/>.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 7:30 – 10:30 AM **FOUNTAIN VALLEY SCHOOL**



Join trip leaders Mel Goff and Jim Mariner for a morning birding at Fountain Valley School. The campus offers a variety of habitats, including grassy fields, hedgerows, trees, and marshy area with an adjacent riparian corridor.

Meet just outside gate on Grinnell (map). Trip limited to 15 participants. (Trip is currently full, but there is a waiting list.) Contact Mel with any questions and to sign up: melgoff@comcast.net.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 7:30-10:30 AM **FCNC FALL BIRD COUNT**

Help record the number of bird species and populations found in Fountain Creek Regional Park during fall migration, sponsored by Fountain Creek Nature Center. There is a requested donation of \$5/ person. Contact Nancy Bernard, Supervisor, with any questions: (719) 520-6745, nancybernard@elpasoco.com. Register online at <https://communityservices.elpasoco.com/nature-centers/>.

More trips online!

For the latest information on field trips and events:

AikenAudubon.com

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 6:45/7:30 AM – 3 PM **CHICO BASIN RANCH**

John Drummond is leading this trip to Chico Basin Ranch in mid-September to find birds in migration, as well as the usual Chico species (Ladder-backed Woodpecker, thrashers, owls, sparrows, etc.). There are often some fun surprises as well!



Expect to walk about two miles on uneven ground. Bring the usual—food, water, two-way radios, etc. Scopes come in handy at the ponds. There is a strict limit of 15 participants, no exceptions! Meet at the Tejon Park & Ride at 6:45 am or the Hanover Fire Station at 7:30 am. Chico charges \$10 per person in groups of five or more.

Contact John at jxdrummo@aol.com to make your reservation and indicate where you are starting the trip. We expect this trip to fill up quickly.

SUNDAY OCTOBER 13, 8 – 11 AM **FOUNTAIN CREEK REGIONAL PARK**

Fountain Creek Regional Park is a 460-acre linear park situated along Fountain Creek between the cities of Colorado Springs and Fountain. The Fountain Creek Regional Trail runs along the creek for the length of the park, with side trails that go through a wetland area and circle a small pond. The trail is smooth, packed dirt and offers excellent viewing opportunities for a variety of woodland, riparian, and wetland birds for both beginning and expert birders.

This trip is being offered to coincide with the Colorado Springs Cool Science Festival, 9 days of special events designed to showcase STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) events taking place in the area. There is no cost associated with this walk, either to the Cool Science Festival or to the Fountain Creek Regional Park. Bring binoculars, water, snacks, and sunscreen.

Meet in the parking lot of the Fountain Creek Nature Center in time to set off at 8 am. Please note that the Nature Center is closed on Sundays, so restrooms will not be available.

Maximum of 15 participants. Sign up through the Cool Science Festival [website: https://www.coolsience.org/cool-science-festival.html](https://www.coolsience.org/cool-science-festival.html). Contact trip leader Anna Joy Lehmicke (alehmicke@gmail.com) with any questions or for last-minute sign ups.

Would you like to lead a field trip? No experience necessary, just enthusiasm and a friendly attitude. Contact Diana Beatty, FieldTrips@AikenAudubon.com, for more information on volunteering to lead a trip for Aiken Audubon.

CHICO BASIN RANCH CONCERNS

For the past 20 years, Colorado Springs birders—in fact, birders across the state—have been accustomed to wide access to the migratory stopover known as Chico Basin Ranch. That may be about to change.

Ranchlands (Duke Phillips and family) holds the lease for Chico from the State Land Board (SLB), which owns the property. The 25-year lease expires in 2024.

In their August meeting notes, the SLB devoted 33 pages to re-evaluating the Chico lease and increasing revenue. While the proposed options include selling the entire property for \$33 million or continuing to lease to one entity, it would be more profitable for them to split up the ranch. The preferred option seems to be dividing the property into three separate ranches, and potentially selling one off.

Public access would likely be denied.

Almost half (44%) of Chico is designated into the Stewardship Trust. “The designation is focused on large areas of intact, high quality Central Shortgrass Prairie that include globally significant natural plant communities and imperiled species” (SLB August 2019 Board Meeting Information). Dividing the ranch would obviously fragment wildlife habitat due to increased fencing, new ranch buildings, and differing management styles. This is the largest tract of undeveloped land owned by SLB, and the lack of fragmentation only increases its conservation value as a wildlife and migratory corridor. It’s possible that SLB would put a conservation easement on any property it sold, but that would be a long shot.

The State Land Board will be meeting in El Paso County on September 11 and 12.

PROTECT OUR PARKS (POPS)

Ah, we came so close.

You may recall that POPS is a proposed charter amendment that would protect city parks from being disposed of without a vote of the people. Aiken Audubon, Audubon Rockies and the Audubon Colorado Council all got behind this ballot initiative, as we’re concerned about protecting our landscapes for our avian friends. On August 13, Colorado Springs City Council narrowly voted (5-4) in favor of putting the POPS charter amendment on the November ballot.

What?! We were astonished! Victory!

Our exuberance quickly turned to dismay when we learned that councilor Jill Gaebler—one of our five “yes” votes—would be hiking in the Alps during Council’s second reading on August 27. Without our five votes, we would lose 4-4.

But wait! President Skorman would call a special meeting so Jill could vote. Sighs of relief.

We celebrated that night. We were direly in need of at least momentary cheer. After all, we’d spent three years on this.

By the next morning the other shoe dropped. We learned that charter amendments require a 10-day public notice in advance of a vote. Jill would be gone in 10 days.

What a roller-coaster of emotions. As I write this, I truly don’t know what the outcome of the August 27 vote will be. Presumably the measure will fail - and the lands that wildlife uses for habitat, cover and food will remain in the hands of the city, rather than the citizens. ☹

FLYING HIGH

BAR-HEADED GEESE FLY

nearly 20,000 feet above sea level to cross the Himalayan Mountains. The reason they don’t pass out? They have big lungs, take deep breaths, and have the most oxygen-rich hemoglobin.

BIG JOHNSON RESERVOIR UPDATE—WATER!

Having been parched for the past three years, Big Johnson may get a glimpse of water before the end of 2019.

Gary Steen, manager of the Fountain Mutual Irrigation Company, says that while the company continues to make repairs to the outlet gates, the silt material has been removed and they should be able to partially fill in the reservoir between late November and early December. (November through mid-March is when they are allowed to take water from Fountain Creek for storage. I mistakenly reported earlier that November was the only window they had for removing water from the creek.)

As Mr. Steen has said before, it will be two to three years before the reservoir is mostly full. Let’s hope there will be enough water to lure some migrants next May.

HABITAT HEROES AT KIOWA CREEK: SEPTEMBER 21

Audubon Rockies will be planting a Habitat Hero demonstration garden at Audubon’s Kiowa Creek Ranch in Black Forest. The ranch is currently operated by Corner Post Meats, and certified by Audubon’s Conservation Ranching Initiative.

You and the whole family are invited to get your hands dirty planting native plants, constructing a nest box, and touring the beautiful grasslands and ponderosa forest of Kiowa Creek Ranch. This property isn’t usually open to the public, so take advantage of this unique opportunity to visit these 1,600 rolling acres.

This event will be held on Saturday, September 21 starting at 9 a.m. Click on the link below to sign up for this outing, and don’t forget your binoculars!

/// <https://rockies.audubon.org/events/habitat-hero-planting-kiowa-creek-ranch>

JOIN THE CONSERVATION ACTION TEAM

Are you interested in learning about regional conservation issues? Might you be willing to send off an email to a legislator to protect a property or a species that you care about? Aiken Audubon is looking to put together a list of folks who could be contacted for issues of import. No commitment required. If this sparks an interest, please contact Linda Hodges at (719) 635.5551 or hikerhodges@gmail.com.

BETTER BIRDING BY EAR

by Leslie Holzman

I am always impressed when a fellow birder hears a bird singing and quickly names its species. “Hear that Black-headed Grosbeak?” they’ll ask. Or, “Where’s that Lazuli Bunting I’m hearing?” They make identifying birds by the sounds they make seem so easy!

I, on the other hand, can’t distinguish the song of a robin from that of a bluebird, or a goldfinch from a phoebe.



Spotted Towhee

us to “Drink, drink, drink teeeeeee.” But every time I go birding, I have to relearn the sounds I’m hearing. I get so frustrated. It’s a good thing that the birders I’ve met are a patient lot!

It’s somewhat mysterious, my inability to remember bird sounds. I hear very well, even those extra high-pitched cheeps that so many people miss. I just can’t seem to put those sounds into my long-term memory.



Ring-billed Gull

to read spectrograms. It also helps to know what the varied sounds

I’ve struggled for years to remember bird songs and calls. I can recognize a few of the most distinctive species—Red-winged Blackbirds, American Crows and Common Ravens, and the cascading melody of a Canyon Wren, to name a few. I know that some birds call their names, such as a Black-capped Chickadee’s “Chick-a-dee, dee, dee.” Those cute little mnemonics help too. I know that Common Yellowthroats say “Witchity, witchity, witch,” and Spotted Towhees tell

Now you’ll understand why I was so excited to discover that there is an entire course on the national Audubon website designed for sound-challenged people like me. “[Birding by Ear](#)” is an eight-part series of video lessons taught by esteemed birders such as Kenn Kaufman, “[Bird and Moon](#)” creator Rosemary Mosco, and Colorado birder (and Aiken guest) Nathan Pieplow, author of the Peterson Field Guide to Bird Sounds (both the eastern and western editions). I discovered that there are a number of tricks I can use to increase my retention, such as visualizing the sounds, familiarizing myself with the local bird sounds, and learning

mean—is it an alarm, a territorial declaration, or a youngster asking for another meal?

It will be a while before I’m sufficiently proficient for Part 7, which covers the birds’ different regional accents (although I know people who are this accomplished!) That’s fine with me; I know I have to begin at the beginning. I hope that listening and re-listening to these talks will at least move me up a few skill levels, perhaps from “pathetic” to “optimistic,” if not yet “confident.” Then, when spring comes next year, I’ll be ready. ☘



Cactus Wren

SEPTEMBER 28 – OCTOBER 6

JOIN THE 6TH ANNUAL CREEK WEEK

Last year’s watershed-wide, 9-day litter cleanup inspired nearly 3,000 volunteers from service groups, neighborhoods, scouts, schools, and churches alike to remove 24 tons of litter from Palmer Lake to Pueblo and beyond. The astounding growth in participation in this annual event (350% over 5 years!) speaks to how strongly our citizens value a clean watershed, and makes Creek Week the largest watershed-wide cleanup in Colorado. Don’t you want to be a part of it?

This year’s event will be no exception. All citizens are welcome to participate either individually in a public event or form a Creek Crew. The Steering Committee is accepting requests for dates and sites NOW on a first come, first serve basis by completing the online form at www.fountaincreekweek.com. Youth under age 18 must participate with at least one supervising adult 21 years+ (minimum of one adult for every 10 children).

The success of Creek Week stems from the countless hours of hard work of a Steering Committee representing governments, nonprofits, businesses, colleges, and individuals across the region. The team works for months to map and ground-truth cleanup sites, promote events, manage registrations, and secure funds and materials. We are still searching for generous sponsors to help equip crews with bags, gloves, safety vests, trash grabbers and T-shirts. Once again we are expecting record numbers of participants for this year’s cleanup.

Crew Leader Interest Form, sponsorship information and more can be found at www.fountaincreekweek.com. Questions? Email creekweeksoco@gmail.com and a Committee Member will respond within a few days. ☘



Look for the
Aiken Audubon Society
Facebook page!

facebook.com/pages/Aiken-Audubon-Society

Cowbirds... continued from front page

How can a Brown-headed Cowbird chick, growing up in a foster family, learn how to be a Brown-headed Cowbird? At first, scientists assumed that mom was involved here too, but a 2015 study revealed otherwise. Instead, the young fledge early and roost away from the nest at night. This could help them avoid imprinting on the songs and behaviors of their host family¹, as well as offer an opportunity for them to meet other cowbirds.



Finally, unlike European cuckoos, Brown-headed Cowbirds don't kill their foster siblings. Instead, they join forces, clamoring for food, and driving the harried parents to greater efforts to keep them all fed. Because the cowbird chick hatches sooner and grows faster than its nestmates, it needs that additional food. According to one study, "If you look at the growth of the cowbird chick, it does best in hosts who have ... approximately two nestmates growing up together with the cowbird chick."²

If we vilify cowbirds, we should also revile Eastern and Western Bluebirds, Purple Martins, and Tree Swallows. While not obligate parasites, they have also been known to lay eggs in nests not their own. So do some species of ducks—and even turkeys have been observed dropping eggs in handy chicken nests. Apparently, foster parenting is a successful strategy for passing on one's genes for many species.

1 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0003347215003401>

2 https://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/08/05_cowbird.shtml

BRUNCH CONCERT AT CORNER POST MEATS

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 11 AM – 3 PM

Audubon and Corner Post Meats have partnered for a fund raising brunch event at Kiowa Creek Ranch. Kiowa Creek Ranch is an Audubon-certified Conservation Ranch in Black Forest managed by Corner Post Meats which operates sustainable, bird friendly, farm-to-table ranching.

Join us Sunday, September 29 from 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM for some birding, a concert by Wirewood Station, as well as brunch and brews by R&R Coffee Café, Atrevida Brewery, and Sette Delori Winery.

For more information and tickets visit: <https://cornerpostmeats.com/pages/events>.



President's Message, continued from front page

We also have plenty of fall field trips scheduled—check out the descriptions in the newsletter and be sure to keep an eye on our webpage and Facebook page, as more trips are added all the time.

There are also other bird-related events that Aiken members volunteer their time for—this summer included two Bioblitzes, at Corral Bluffs and Red Rock Canyon Open Space. Bioblitzes are intense biological survey events where groups of citizen scientists attempt to record as many species in a given area as possible over a given amount of time, generally over one or two days. Over the two events, ten volunteer birders counted over 70 species of birds, from Broad-tailed Hummingbirds to Golden Eagles.

We're always looking for volunteers to help out with different events, whether it's counting birds or manning a table to help educate the public on birds in our area. You don't need to be an expert birder to help out! An extra pair of eyes is always helpful for spotting birds, even if it takes a little help to get to an ID. If you have a passion for volunteering or you're itching to get more involved with Aiken, keep an eye on our Facebook page or contact any board member to ask about upcoming opportunities. Your help is always appreciated!

Happy birding.

Anna Jay Lehnicke
President, Aiken Audubon Society

Flores' Funnies



Artist Rick Flores, an El Paso County Nature Center volunteer, enjoys sharing his views of happenings at Bear Creek & Fountain Creek Nature Centers.