



Meadowlark

MAR/APR 2021
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Follow these conservation news sources

While birds may come to mind, we are about much more than birds. Audubon Society of Omaha is dedicated to the active promotion of environmental awareness through education, conservation, and enjoyment of our natural heritage. Because it's not always possible for The Meadowlark to include in-depth conservation news in each issue, look for updates here:

SOCIAL MEDIA/ONLINE: Check Audubon-Omaha on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. For in-depth, local conservation news, go to ne.audubon.org/conservation. This is an excellent resource, offering thoughtfully written articles and information on topics ranging from bird protection policies to climate change and political appointments.

PODCASTS: Learn while you drive, exercise, or work on any smart device by listening to FREE bird-themed and conservation podcasts. Topics include habitat destruction, current research and discoveries, legislative and political updates, and much more. Here are a few podcasts ASO is currently listening to: Talkin' Birds, Bird Hugger and Healthy Living Healthy Planet Radio. Find podcasts via Google Podcasts, Spotify, iTunes, Apple Podcasts and more.

ORGANIZATION: Nebraska Conservation Voters sends important action alerts and updates on the most important conservation news facing Nebraska. Sign up for their updates and action alerts at necv.org.

Keep an eye out for seasonal visitors

by Scott Bradley, Director



From left to right:

Male Wood Duck, photo by Haley McTee

Red-winged Blackbird, photo by Ron Hiatt

Ruby-crowned Kinglet, photo by Elizabeth Winter

Migration begins in March with waterfowl, blackbirds and cranes. As the water thaws, waterfowl, geese and swans will move north to their breeding grounds, so be sure to look for them on area lakes. Watch for Red-winged Blackbirds near marshes and lakes. Yellow-headed Blackbirds breed in the marshes further west, near Lincoln. Brown-headed Cowbirds, Common Grackles and Great-tailed Grackles are also common to the area.

In April, sparrows, Hermit Thrushes and kinglets will migrate through our area. Hermit Thrushes can be found in Child's Hollow at Fontenelle Forest. Ruby-crowned Kinglets are in local parks and Fontenelle Forest. Golden-crowned Kinglets enjoy coniferous trees in cemeteries, but can also be found in other parks around the metro area. Sparrows eat the seeds of grasses and frequent fields, grassy roadsides, reeds near water's edge, and marshes — any place with tall grass, reeds and/or water.

RIGHT HERE, RIGHT HOW: YOU CAN COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

Conservation begins at home; each of us can help restore our unique ecosystem.

March-ing

Starting to get out and about? Take a bag along for your walk and pick up any trash, plastic bags, bottles, cans and fast-food wrappers. Prevent birds from using these materials for nest building, which could harm hatchlings.

April Showers

bring May wildflowers. This April try planting a few native shrubs, grasses and flowers that birds, insects and animals depend on for food and shelter. 'Bee' patient and you just might catch a glimpse of new buzzy besties.

ON THE HORIZON

March



MEMBER MEETING

THURSDAY, MARCH 11

Speaker: Rick Schmid and Scott Bradley

Topic: Bird watching during spring migration, Part 1

When: 7 p.m.

Where: Computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone, in your setting of choice

How: Register for our Zoom meeting at our website (see calendar). You will then receive an email with instructions.

Who: Members and the public (free)



DIY FIELD DAY: CRANES

MARCH 6 - APRIL 11

What: Nebraska Crane Festival. For 50 years,

Audubon Nebraska's Crane Festival has been a destination for wildlife lovers to experience the arrival of the Sandhill Cranes. Starting in 2021 Rowe Sanctuary will be expanding the festival to be a month-long celebration of one of the world's great animal migrations.

When: The Sanctuary trails will be open for reduced hours, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. daily beginning Feb 15 - April 15.

How: Visit rowe.audubon.org/crane-viewing, for the latest details.

April



MEMBER MEETING

THURSDAY, APRIL 8

Speaker: Rick Schmid and Scott Bradley

Topic: Bird watching during spring migration, Part 2

When: 7 p.m.

Where: Computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone, in your setting of choice

How: Register for our Zoom meeting at our website (see calendar). You will then receive an email with instructions.

Who: Members and the public (free)



STUDENT ART SHOW

MONDAY APRIL 5-30

What: See all entries from the Student Art Contest on

our website Special Events page

Where: Computer, tablet or smartphone

How: An online gallery for each grade will note winners of award of Merit and Excellence as well as Best in Show.

Field notes from the President

INTERACTING WITH THE BIRD WORLD IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

by Bob Wells, President, Audubon Society of Omaha

As we pass the one-year anniversary of the arrival of Covid-19 in the U.S., it is a good time to reflect on how it has affected the birding world that so many of us enjoy. Unlike many aspects of our daily lives, the pandemic has had a largely positive effect on birdwatching.

Even as we struggle to find opportunities to interact closely with friends and loved ones, many of us are rediscovering the joys of being outside safely and noticing the activity of seemingly higher numbers of birds. Some may argue that spending more time at home, isolated from others, explains why we are perceptibly more aware of the birds around us. As one of the few activities that have intensified against the backdrop of the pandemic, birding has really taken flight. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has reported that downloads of its free birding apps, Merlin and eBird, have shot up greatly. In fact, Merlin downloads soared 102% in the past year. Over Easter weekend alone, during spring migration, the app registered 8,500 downloads. Audubon's free digital field guide has seen comparable increases during the lockdown.

Birding retailers have noted sustained growth in seed and feeder sales despite the overall economic downturn. Audubon Society of Omaha's 40th annual bird seed sale marked massive sales gains in October, buoyed by touch-free pickup, which accommodated Covid-19 concerns. Sales of binoculars and feeders have increased as well.

Not all of the social distancing and other Covid-19 precautions have been positive, however. At ASO, we have had to respond by limiting in-person birding field trips, restricting in-person attendance at educational meetings and, for the first time in many years, canceling our popular Christmas Bird Count. Thanks to moving those monthly educational meetings to the Zoom platform, we have continued to attract roughly the same number of participants as we draw to our in-person gatherings. Another plus: our Zoom meetings allow us to reach out to presenters with internet connections anywhere in the country. In March and April, be sure to join us for a program conducted by Rick Schmid from his retirement home in Stillwater, Minnesota and Scott Bradley, Audubon Society of Omaha.

ASO welcomes newcomers to birding — a hobby (passion) that transcends pandemics and offers the joys of observing many of the most wonderful and accessible species in all of nature.

ICYMI (In Case You Missed It)

AUDUBON PHOTO CONTEST

It's that time of year again! The 2021 Audubon Photography Awards are Officially Open for Entries. Now in its 12th year, there will be two new Prizes: the Female Bird Prize and Video Prize. The nationwide contest is accepting entries until **April 7, 2021**. Read more for more information on judges, categories, prizes and rules at audubon.org/photoawards-entry
Good luck!

CAUSE OF MASSIVE DIE-OFF

Findings released by the U.S. Geological Survey's National Wildlife Health Center ruled out poisoning, disease, and parasites as causes of death for the massive die-off in SW US last fall. Instead, scientists found one major commonality among all the dead birds: severe starvation. The carcasses shared signs of malnourishment, including empty stomachs, depleted fat stores, dehydration, and emaciation. Drought made food and water scarce and an early snowstorm created dangerous conditions for migrating birds.

Going solar in Nebraska *Reprinted with permission from National Audubon Society*

HELP BIRDS BY INSTALLING ROOFTOP SOLAR PANELS. IT'S NEVER BEEN SO EASY.

Every day, the sun channels energy onto your roof. Solar panels let you capture some of that energy and use it to power your home, business, or electric car while lowering your electricity bill. By switching to solar power, you'll reduce the carbon pollution behind climate change that threatens many birds, and their habitats.

What's the catch? Installing rooftop solar takes some research, planning, and upfront costs. Those costs vary by state, and different states have different funding opportunities. Keep in mind that you will probably recoup those upfront costs within a decade with the money saved on your electricity bill—and you'll continue to save more money later.

SOLAR POWER IN NEBRASKA

Not many homes and businesses in Nebraska are powered by solar panels, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association. However, in 2016, \$9 million was invested on solar installations in the state, which supports about 30 solar companies.

Board Recap – Stay in the know!

by Heidi Walz, Director

Entries for ASO's 2021 Online Student Art Contest were accepted through March 1. This year's show will be available to view in an online gallery via the Special Events tab on our website starting April 5. Mark your calendar to “stop by” and look at the amazing work of local students. A HUGE thank you to Virginia Stauffer for continuing to lead this massive project even through a pandemic.

Volunteers really came through at our February 20 Winter Bird Seed Sale, loading and delivering LOTS of bird seed during our bi-annual bird seed fundraiser. Thank you to John, Betty, Mark and the rest of the volunteer team — we hope you have a restful break and don't have too many birdseed nightmares between now and the next sale in the fall!

Tune in and turn on to ASO's YouTube Channel. We have been recording our monthly meetings since migrating to online / Zoom sessions. You can watch archived meetings on such topics as bird feeding, forest restoration and plants that attract birds. Just go to YouTube.com, search for “Audubon Omaha” and look for our logo.

INFORMATION FOR HOMEOWNERS

If you want solar panels on your roof, you have two options: own the solar panels or rent them from a third-party owner. If you lease, you'll pay a monthly fee to use the solar panels and their electricity, and avoid the upfront cost.

If you do choose to purchase your panels, you can pay for them up-front or finance them with a solar loan, which allows you to pay them off over the course of several years. In either case, you can save extra money by taking advantage of rebates and incentives, which are offered to encourage solar panel installations. One of these is the Investment Tax Credit, a federal tax credit that helps people pay for solar projects – and lets you subtract



Northern Rough-winged Swallow. Photo: Doris Dumrauf/Alamy

30 percent of the system's cost from your tax bill. Many states offer additional incentives, and Nebraska has more than 40 policies and financial incentives to help you pay for solar power. Go to dsireusa.org and type in your ZIP code to see what incentives are available in your area.

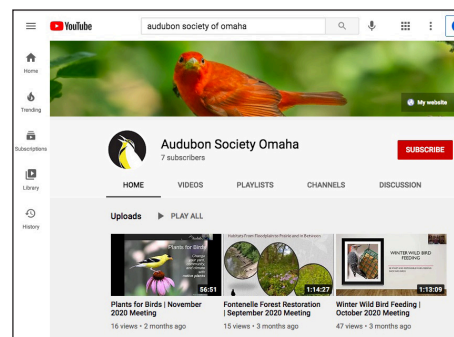
Learn about options for installing rooftop solar in Nebraska at solarreviews.com/solar-incentives/nebraska.

INFORMATION FOR RENTERS

Renters can't usually install solar panels on their roofs, but in some states they still have the option to use and invest in solar power and other renewable energy sources.

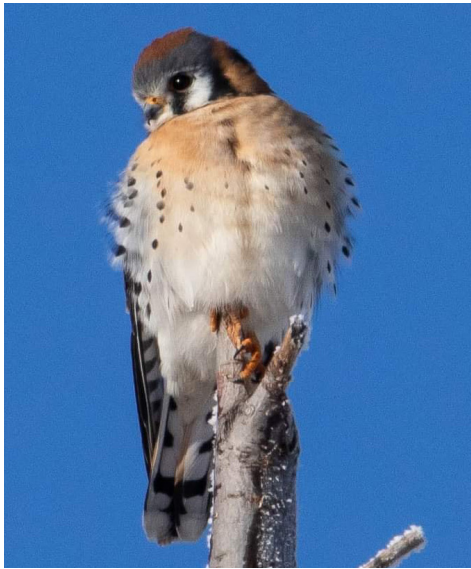
Community solar programs, which share electricity among many households, are also available for people who can't install solar panels on their roofs. Learn more about how our community solar works from OPPD.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *What You Should Know About Getting Rooftop Solar* is a great how-to article from OPPD. Find it on their website, OPPD.com under the Residential tab, then Products and Services, and then see Community Solar for more information.



The eyes have it — your photos

Email photos to asopublisher@gmail.com



American Kestrel, photo by Barb Rimel



Pinyon Jays photo by Michelle Denice Wiese



Snowy Owl photo by Brandon Hanusek

Keep cats safe and save birds' lives

by Anne Maguire, Director

In the past six months, more than 3.5 million cat lovers viewed a Facebook video titled, “The Funniest and Most Humorous Cat Videos Ever.” At the same time, millions of bird lovers spent hours watching birds gather at their feeders. And while both pastimes brought great joy, there’s a deadly divide between the creatures who have captured our hearts and attention. Cats kill birds.

Each year in the U.S., cats kill an estimated 2.7 billion birds, many of which are endangered species.

Cat-related injuries are the leading cause of bird mortality, followed by loss of habitat and environmental stresses. Yes, those cute, cuddly pets kill birds and other native wildlife at an alarming rate, despite the fact they are well-fed by their owners. Their prey drive is not triggered by hunger. It’s their instinct to kill. House cats that are allowed outside will occasionally leave a dead bird or mouse at their owner’s doorstep. But for the most part, cat owners are completely unaware of the destruction their pet is wreaking on our natural environment.



TODAY THERE ARE AN ESTIMATED 88 MILLION PET CATS IN AMERICA AND ANOTHER 60 MILLION FERAL CATS SURVIVING IN CITIES AND RURAL AREAS

Domestic cats are not native to America. They arrived in the 1600s, carried across the sea in hulls of ships bringing settlers to this land. Today there are an estimated 88 million pet cats in America and another 60 million feral cats surviving in cities and rural areas. In addition to killing birds, cats are responsible for the annual deaths of up to 20.7 billion small mammals according to a study by the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, funded by the U.S. Fish and Game Service.

While most cat owners keep their cats indoors, 30 percent let their cats roam outside. Pam Wiese, with the Nebraska Humane Society, reports they counsel adopters on the risks of letting their cats outside, which include predators, vehicles, disease, and theft by strangers. A study by the UC Davis College of Veterinary Medicine reveals the lifespan of an indoor cat is 15-20 years, while an outdoor cat averages 2-5 years. NHS does not adopt to homes that plan to keep their cat outdoors. However, because Omaha does not have a cat leash law, NHS cannot prevent cat owners from allowing their cats to roam.

Interestingly, 60 percent of bird watchers also consider themselves cat people. And 80 percent of cat owners say they enjoy birds. So, how can we work together to protect birds and cats? Look for an article in the next issue of *The Meadowlark* to find out what we can do to help keep cats safe and save birds' lives.

A burning question: How do we conduct prescribed fires to protect our prairies?

by Glenn Pollock

Like Yogi, Smokey is smarter than the average bear. Visit smokeybear.com, and you'll see that, "Prescribed fires help reduce the catastrophic damage of wildfire on our lands and surrounding communities by:

- Safely reducing excessive amounts of brush, shrubs and trees,
- Encouraging the new growth of native vegetation, and
- Maintaining the many plant and animal species whose habitats depend on periodic fire."

Carefully executed prescribed burns – usually conducted in the spring – play an essential role in the conservation and management of our native prairie lands.

Rx FOR A SAFE PRESCRIBED FIRE

Staging a prescribed fire isn't something you do on the spur of the moment. It's not a case of Fred calling Tom and asking, "What are you up to this afternoon? It's a nice, sunny day. I've got a torch and tractor with an old water tank. What say we burn that 20 acres of CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) land?" That just doesn't cut it.

For each prescribed burn we conduct, Audubon Society of Omaha assembles a detailed plan, which ensures that we follow Nebraska law and act as a responsible steward of the land and a good neighbor. Here are a few of the elements that factor into our deliberations.

- **WEATHER.** Wind direction, humidity, temperature and forecast are all critical. Wind speed and direction help determine where we start the fire, how we control its path and how we mitigate the effects of smoke on nearby farms, housing developments or communities. If there is no wind, for example, it's difficult to determine where the fire might spread. If the humidity is too low, the fire could burn too quickly. If it's too hot, temperatures could take a toll on the fire crew.

- **GEOGRAPHY.** A detailed map, identifying the topography and other

relevant features of the burn area, is vital to planning and a key part of the briefing conducted with members of the fire crew.

- **SUPPLIES.** Before each burn, we identify everything we'll need, including ATVs, radios, safety attire for the crew, adequate water supply, and more.

- **Contingencies.** This includes lists, processes and procedures involving nearby fire departments, police support, emergency medical care, and clear radio frequencies.

- **BURN PERMIT.** No permit, no fire.

- **PERSONNEL AND TRAINING:** A burn boss heads the fire crew and works with members to assign roles based on their qualifications and experience. Fire crews must receive basic firefighting training through a National Wildfire Coordination Group. The crew boss will have advanced training and experience. A few crew members will work behind the scenes, not on the fire line. Before the burn, the boss will conduct an action meeting to ensure that every crew member fully understands his or her role. A follow-up meeting takes place after the burn to review what went well and what needs to improve before the next burn.

- **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION** Media coverage of Western wildfires can inadvertently create the false impression that all fires – even prescribed burns – jeopardize people and property. Understanding these misconceptions, ASO proactively worked with local officials to negotiate a burn easement when we learned a housing tract was being planned north of our prairie. By listening to community concerns and communicating a thoughtful response that included smoke mitigation, we avoided a conflagration and preserved the right to protect our prairie.

If you are interested in joining an ASO burn crew and doing this important work, just send us an email. And, remember: there are roles for everyone – you don't have to be able to run up and down a hill with a 50-pound pack on your back.

RESOURCES & INFO:

HOW TO JOIN/RENEW/UPDATE

Join or renew your membership online at audubon-omaha.org and select "Get Involved." Save paper and avoid confusion.

Your membership with National Audubon automatically makes you a member of Audubon Society of Omaha.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS?

Please call National Audubon toll-free at 1-844-428-3826, or send an email to audubon@emailcustomerservice.com

STAY CONNECTED

Join our email list at audubon-omaha.org under "Get Involved" and follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

BEQUESTS & GIFTS

A bequest to Audubon Society of Omaha is a gift to those who will succeed us and secure our natural heritage.

Want to send a gift on behalf of someone? Mail your check along with the name and address of the person to be notified to:

Audubon Society of Omaha
P.O. Box 3542, Omaha, NE 68103
We'll send them a thank-you note letting them know of your gift.

VOLUNTEER

Our pledge to volunteers is to use your resources responsibly for the purposes of conservation through habitat management and education.

TAKE ACTION

Big things are happening, so communicate with your elected officials. Go to audubon-omaha.org for links to contact info for each.

INJURED BIRD?

Raptors: Call 866-888-7261 to speak to a Raptor Recovery volunteer.

Non-raptor: Call Nebraska Wildlife Rehab at 402-234-2473. You may also contact the nearest Nebraska Games & Parks Conservation Officer or your local Humane Society.

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STEWARDSHIP OF THE EARTH AND ITS CREATURES

the Meadowlark

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Spring visitors

Keeping birds
and cats safe

How and why we
burn the prairie

Time to go solar



American Robin, photo by Mary Ellis

The Audubon Society of Omaha is dedicated to the active promotion of environmental awareness to our community through education, conservation, and enjoyment of our natural heritage, especially birds.

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Past President: Matt Miller
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Secretary: Shannon Engberg

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Elizabeth Chalen Michelle Foss
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Anne Maguire Heidi Walz

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Education: Elizabeth Chalen
Finance: Betty Fullerton
Fundraising: Anne Maguire
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Membership: Kathy Schwery
Natural Areas Management: Glenn Pollock
Nominating: Megan Diechert
Program: Bob Wells
Bird Seed Sale: John & Betty Fullerton
ASO Administrator: Taylor Daniels
Executive Director, Audubon Nebraska:
Kristal Stoner

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