



# On The Wing

Volume 37, Number 1

Boulder County Audubon Society Newsletter

Jan-Feb 2007

## BCAS 4th Tuesday Program Series

**January 23, 2007 - 7:30 p.m.**



**Burrowing Owl Family** - *Richard Holmes*

**February 27, 2007 - 7:30 p.m.**

### **Climate Change Comes to Colorado**

*Jeff Mitton*

Climate change has advanced from a possibility to a well-documented fact. Glaciers and polar caps are melting, and the sea level has risen more than a foot in the last 150 years. Plants are breaking bud and flowering earlier in Britain, and the growing season in North America has increased by more than a week in the last 25 years.

How has climate change influenced the plants, animals, and weather in Colorado? Snowmelt seems to be starting earlier in spring, and the annual rhythms of yellow-bellied marmots and robins have been substantially disrupted. Piñon pine has suffered heavy mortality in southwestern Colorado. Nine-banded armadillos are moving north from New Mexico, and have appeared in Colorado. More examples and predictions for further change will be discussed.

Jeff Mitton is chair of the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology department at the University of Colorado. His research focuses on the evolutionary forces that influence genetic variation within and among populations. His popular column on Front Range natural history has appeared in the Boulder Daily Camera for five years.

### **Treasures of the Greater Southern Rockies**

*Jacob Smith and Erin Robertson*

*Center for Native Ecosystems*

Graham's penstemon, Canada lynx, Black Hills dipper, burrowing owl, Gunnison sage grouse, Gunnison's prairie dog, Colorado butterfly plant. All these species are in trouble in the southern Rocky Mountains, and many are not receiving sufficient protection from federal and state agencies. Jacob and Erin will offer a photographic tour and status report on our region's endangered species and ecosystems and tell us what is being done by environmental groups to see that these treasures are protected and recovered.

Jacob Smith is founder and executive director of the Center for Native Ecosystems. Erin Robertson is CNE's staff biologist. Their presentation is the first in Boulder Audubon's 15-month series on "Sustaining and Restoring Native Ecosystems in the Southern Rocky Mountains Region."



**"Pika Peak"**

©Green Mountain Photography Inc 2006

*Richard Blanchette*

The Pika is one of the animals that is threatened by climate change in Colorado. See article on page 5.

**Refreshments and Socializing  
before the meeting at 7 PM  
Program at 7:30**

Meetings are held at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Boulder, 5001 Pennsylvania Ave. (off 55th St. between Arapahoe and Baseline)

## Winter Field Trips

**Saturday, January 6, 10 a.m to 3 p.m:** Wintering raptor tour with Jim McKee. Meet at the Cottonwood Marsh parking lot at Walden Ponds. Expect to see bald eagles, golden eagles, harriers, hawks, and a falcon or two. Bring binoculars and/or spotting scope, a field guide and FRS radios if you have them; as well as lunch or a snack and water. Be sure to dress for the weather as we will be out of the cars frequently.

**Saturday, February 17, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m:** Wintering raptor tour with Jim McKee. This trip will originate at the Lefthand trailhead at 39th Street and Neva Road. See January 6 field trip notice for details.

**Saturday, February 24, 8-11 a.m:** Birding tour of Valmont Reservoir. Senior plant engineer Dave Madonna, who maintains the "owl cams" at the Xcel Energy Valmont Power Station, will host this special tour. Expect to see bald eagles, cormorants, and a variety of gulls, grebes, and ducks. Valmont Reservoir was recently designated an Important Bird Area. Limited to 20 participants. To reserve a space, contact Steve Jones (stephen.jones@earthlink.net; 303-494-2468).

**Saturday, March 10, 7:30-11 a.m:** Spring welcoming breakfast hike at Sawhill Ponds. Join Steve Jones (stephen.jones@earthlink.net) for this annual celebration of spring. Bring something warm, sweet, exotic, or passionate to share at the old cottonwood log beside Boulder Creek. We should see a good number of raptors, along with waterfowl and early-singing passerines. Meet at the Sawhill Ponds parking area, west of 75th St. between Valmont and Jay roads. Dress warmly (it's colder here than where you live).

## Future Programs

### *Sustaining and Restoring Native Ecosystems in the Southern Rocky Mountain Region*

**March:** Bob Crifasi, Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks. "Making Nature; Thinking about Our Front Range Riparian Ecosystems."

**April:** Steve Bouricius, Colorado Field Ornithologists. "Colorado Hummingbirds, Their Status and Future."

**Earth Day (April 21):** Special presentation by Anne Park, Naropa University.

**May:** Joyce Gellhorn, Colorado Native Plant Society. "White-tailed Ptarmigan, Ghost Birds of the Alpine Tundra."

**September 2007-March 2008:** Heather Swanson, Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks, Tom Veblen, University of Colorado (Fire history of the northern Front Range), Jeffrey Lockwood, University of Wyoming (Lessons learned from extinction of the Rocky Mountain locust), Carron Meaney (Status and future of Preble's jumping mouse), Alexander Cruz (cowbird nest parasitism in forest ecosystems).



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Alex and Gillian Brown (303)494-3042

### On the Wing © 2007 Boulder County Audubon Society

*On the Wing* is published five times annually: Jan, March, May, Sept, and Nov

**Next issue:**

Deadline for materials for the March 2007 issue is Fri, Feb. 23.

Email address for submissions:  
[otw@boulderaudubon.org](mailto:otw@boulderaudubon.org)

Color pictures in the Web  
version of *On the Wing*:  
[www.boulderaudubon.org](http://www.boulderaudubon.org)

## East Boulder County Habitat Threatened:

*February 2007 Vote on Proposed Annexation is a Crossroads for Land Use Decisions East of Lafayette*

A proposed annexation of unincorporated Boulder County land east of Lafayette threatens important bird habitat. Often overlooked by birders, this eastern edge of the County includes Coal Creek and one of the largest marshes along the Front Range, Powers Marsh. Development is quickly bearing down on this part of the County. Until recently, hundreds of Swainson's hawks were observed during the spring in rolling farmland just east of Lafayette in Erie and Broomfield. Now hundreds of houses are being built on those hills.

Fortunately, undeveloped land still separates Lafayette from sprawl to the east. This sizeable area includes the Coal Creek corridor, Powers Marsh, farmland, and Old Town Pond. Lafayette citizens will vote in early 2007 on whether to allow annexation of land to build a Lowe's box store and adjacent development in the middle of this open area. Development would fragment the open landscape, removing farmland that buffers the marsh and other wildlife habitat.

Powers Marsh provides habitat for a variety of birds, including nesting habitat for American Bitterns. These reclusive marsh herons are designated as "rare and declining" by the Boulder County Comprehensive Plan. The large marsh is one of only four recently active nesting sites in Boulder County for Northern Harriers, another "rare and declining" bird. Without grasslands or agricultural land to buffer the marsh, these birds will likely suffer from lack of foraging habitat and from nest predation by urban-adapted predators. Development near the marsh may alter drainage patterns and groundwater levels, potentially eliminating the wetland habitat.

Also near the proposed development, Old Town Pond provides habitat for the uncommon Yellow-headed Blackbird, a variety of ducks, pelicans and a healthy muskrat population. Barn owls nest successfully in nearby old grain silos. Burrowing owls frequent adjacent prairie dog colonies. And coyotes howl into the relatively dark nights.

If the proposed annexation is defeated in February, the box store will not be built and the possibility of preserving a larger block of open space will increase. If you live in Lafayette, vote "No" on Issue A (see [www.NoOnIssueA.org](http://www.NoOnIssueA.org)). If you live elsewhere, please inform those you know in Lafayette about this issue. And consider contributing toward the purchase of land at the edge of Lafayette containing the bird-rich Old Town Pond (see [www.PreserveLafayette.org](http://www.PreserveLafayette.org)).

Thanks to Boulder County Audubon for sending a letter to the Lafayette City Council in support of preserving this valuable East County habitat!

- Lynn Riedel, Lafayette

## Great Backyard Bird Count

**Feb 16-19, 2007**

<http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/>



The Great Backyard Bird Count is an annual four-day event that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are across the continent. Anyone can participate, from beginning bird watchers to experts. It takes as little as 15 minutes. It's free, fun, and easy—and it helps the birds.

Participants count birds anywhere for as little or as long as they wish during the four-day period. They tally the highest number of birds of each species seen together at any one time. To report their counts, they fill out an online checklist at the Great Backyard Bird Count Web site.

As the count progresses, anyone with Internet access can explore what is being reported from their own towns or anywhere in the United States and Canada. They can also see how this year's numbers compare with those from previous years. Participants may also send in photographs of the birds they see.

A selection of images is posted in the online photo gallery.

### • Why Count Birds?

Scientists and bird enthusiasts can learn a lot by knowing where the birds are. Bird populations are dynamic; they are constantly in flux. No single scientist or team of scientists could hope to document the complex distribution and movements of so many species in such a short time.

Your counts can help us answer many questions:

- \* How will this winter's snow and cold temperatures influence bird populations?
- \* Where are winter finches and other "irruptive" species that appear in large numbers during some years but not others?
- \* How are bird diseases, such as West Nile virus, affecting birds in different regions?
- \* What kinds of differences in bird diversity are apparent in cities versus suburban, rural, and natural areas?
- \* Are any birds undergoing worrisome declines that point to the need for conservation attention?

Scientists use the counts, along with observations from other citizen-science projects, such as the Christmas Bird Count, Project FeederWatch, and eBird, to give us an immense picture of our winter birds. Each year that these data are collected makes them more meaningful and allows scientists to investigate far-reaching questions.

**BOULDER COUNTY WILDLIFE INVENTORY, AUGUST - SEPTEMBER 2006**

*Gillian and Alex Brown, 4560 Darley Avenue, Boulder, CO 80305.*

Fall migration was well underway both months with some nights seeing the passage of hundreds of migrating birds moving southwards. Typically August is an under-reported month with birders less willing to brave the heat to look for the occasional rarity among the many nondescript juvenile birds. However, this year more birders seemed to realize that this is a great time of year for birding and we had reports of many unusual species. However, some common species (which were surely present) were not reported; in this category fall Golden Eagle, White-throated Swift and White-crowned Sparrow. September typically sees the peak of the fall migration; we had many reports but an over-concentration of them were for Sawhill and Walden Ponds. Altogether 156 bird species were seen in August and 166 species in September.

Both months provided some exciting finds. Union Reservoir was host to five species of tern: Arctic Tern (last seen in 2003), Common Tern (seen for the first time this year), Forster's Tern, Least Tern (last seen in 1998) and Black Tern, which was also present at Walden Ponds. A juvenile Sabine's Gull at Union Reservoir was a new sighting for the year. Shorebird migration was strong with most birders concentrating their efforts on Sawhill and Walden Ponds for which they were well rewarded. Sanderling (seen at Union Reservoir) were reported for the first time since 2004 as were Western Sandpiper and Pectoral Sandpiper. Other less usual shorebirds included Semipalmated Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper and Red-necked Phalarope. Sawhill and Walden Pond also had a good selection of herons with several Great and Snowy Egrets as well as the continuing presence of Green Herons. A White-faced Ibis seen at Sombrero Marsh was a less usual fall sighting

Some birds are typically more likely to be seen during fall migration than in the spring. This was the case with Cassin's Kingbird, Sage Thrasher and Townsend's Warbler which were all new sightings for the year. Cassin's Vireo which was seen for the first time since 2004 also seems to be a bird that is most likely to be seen in the fall. There were a few unusual warbler species; Nashville Warbler was new for the year, Palm Warbler was seen for the first time since 2004 and Canada Warbler was seen for the first time since 1996. Two unusual flycatchers were an Eastern Wood-Pewee and an Ash-throated Flycatcher.

It is much harder to evaluate the average date of leaving for most species than it is to find the average date of arrival. This is partly because birders rarely take note of the last time they see a species in a year and also because the occasional straggler may skew the dates. This is one reason why many reports of the same area can be very useful. It was possible to see the peak numbers for many species this year. For instance most of the Eastern Kingbirds had left Boulder County by the end of August with one lone straggler seen in September but Western Kingbirds were still around during the first week of September. However, the Cassin's Kingbirds were seen later in September indicating that any kingbirds seen later in the month should be looked at carefully. Similarly, Bank Swallows and Cliff Swallows seem to have left the county by late August; Tree Swallow and Northern Rough-winged Swallow were seen the first week of September and Violet-green Swallow were here until at least the third week of September. Typically, Barn Swallow is the last swallow to leave Boulder County with early October sightings not being unusual.

For a full listing of the wildlife inventory please visit the Audubon website at [www.boulderaudubon.org/inventory.htm](http://www.boulderaudubon.org/inventory.htm)

Please send sightings to [sightings@boulderaudubon.org](mailto:sightings@boulderaudubon.org)

**CONTRIBUTORS TO THE AUGUST & SEPTEMBER INVENTORIES**

Linda Andes-Georges, Alex & Gillian Brown, Cliff and Marlene Bruning, Colorado Field Ornithologists, Carol Cushman, Todd Deininger, Ted Floyd, Mike Freiberg, Steve Frye, Paula Hansley, Jack Harlan, Ann Hicks, Steve Jones, Ellen Klaver, Nick Komar, Steve Larson, Juergen Lehnert, Gene & Lynn Monroe, Joe Morlan, Kayleen Niyo, Laura Osborn, Beth Partin, Peter Plage, Bill and Inez Prather, Suzi & Myron Plooster, Ernest Pund, Donald Randall, Jeff Rose, Bill Schmoker, Scott Severs, Randy Siebert, Bob Shade, Carmon Slater, Dix Smith, Margaret Smith, Walter Szeliga, Joyce Takamine, Oakleigh Thorne, Richard Trinkner, John Tumasonis, David J. Waltman, Wild Bird Center.

## Contribute to the Inventories

Linda Andes Georges

The B.C.A.S. "Wildlife Inventory" project, which has been ongoing since 1979, can turn your birdwatching wanderings into useful data for students, scientists, and decision-makers.

If you enjoy listing what you see (whatever it is) as you ramble about our county, consider submitting these lists to our persevering data-collectors, Gillian and Alex Brown. You can email your lists or use the post. (My wishlist for the future is to be able to fill in a chart on our website; not yet within our capabilities). It is easier for the number-crunchers if you consult the map (a gorgeous map) on our website (<http://www.boulderaudubon.org/inventory.htm>), and then indicate what you saw in each area, on what date.

Over time, these observations add up to trends, habitat preferences, and other information of interest to the people who make policy about what to buy for open space, where to put trails (or NOT to put them), and what creatures may need special consideration. They may help understand what impacts development and transportation are having in our county, and what role global warming is playing in our foothills and high-country ecosystems.

Join the regular "reporters." And while we are wildlife-wishing, let's dream about recovering some of our owls (burrowing and long-eared).

## Colorado Pikas: Threatened by Climate Change

Richard Blanchette

On an August hike up Flattop Mountain in Rocky Mountain National Park, I anticipated seeing pikas at the high elevation and getting some nice images. I hauled along my longer lens and was not disappointed. Quite a few were foraging for the winter.

On the return trip, we spent more time observing and photographing the pikas. We soon learned which rock the nearest haystack was under. We also found their favorite rock for sunning and surveillance. We named the rock Pika Peak and were able to get nice images, since we knew where they would show up. There were at least four pikas in the general area sunning at times, but mostly foraging. They seemed oblivious to us when they were gathering food and often came within 10 feet. If I got in the way they scurried over my hiking boot on their scramble back to the den area.

There are around 30 species of pika around the world in Asia, North America, and Eastern Europe. In North America, they are found in the high mountain areas of Western Canada and the Western United States. They live at elevations above 8000 feet on boulder-covered hillsides and talus slopes that have suitable vegetation nearby.

Other names include rock rabbit, cony, and whistling

hare. The names come from their appearance as well as their high-pitched alarm call. If you hear an "Eeek!" in rocky alpine areas there is (or was) a pika nearby.

The American Pika (*Ochotona princeps*) is a stocky little mammal that is similar in shape to a hamster. It has brown fur with black tips, round ears and a nearly invisible tail. It is not a rodent; rather, it's a cousin of rabbits and hares (lagomorphs with two sets of incisors.) Pikas range in length from 6 to 9 inches and weigh 4 to 6 ounces.

Pikas are diurnal, appearing in early morning and disappearing into their grass-lined nest, hidden in rock crevices, shortly after sunset. They spend about 30% of the time out of their burrows feeding, haying, defending territory or sunning themselves on a favorite lookout rock. They harvest grasses in the summer, dry them in stacks under rocks, and then store the hay in their burrows. They do not hibernate, but remain active throughout the winter under the snow, living on their stockpiles. Their haystacks can contain as much as a bushel of plant material.

Pikas today live in high-altitude "islands" to which they retreated as the climate warmed and dried after the ice ages. They are very susceptible to heat; even brief exposure to temperatures above about 80° F can be fatal. Donald Grayson has studied the historic distribution of pikas in Great Basin mountains. About 30 colonies have become extinct in the past 4000 years, and 7 of 25 colonies have become extinct in historic times. Livestock grazing and roads may be factors, but since most populations were/are in remote, isolated areas, climate change is a major suspect. Human activity and global climate change appear to be pushing the American pika population to higher elevations and thus ultimately towards extinction.

[Donald Grayson, "A Brief History of Great Basin Pikas," *Journal of Biogeography* (J. Biogeogr.) (2005) 32, 2103–2111]

[Article adapted from original email to hiking group]



**Busy Pika**

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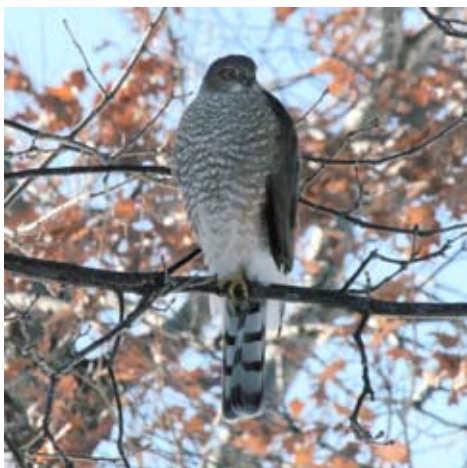
Richard Blanchette

### Rare Bird Eaten as Birdwatchers Watch

The rare red-rumped swallow, normally a Mediterranean native, was spotted in Lunan Bay, near Montrose, Scotland. Excited birdwatchers flocked to the site to catch a glimpse of this bird as it flew over the beach.

The swallow should have kept flying though. It decided to land on a roof of a nearby farm building. At the twitchers' disbelief, a Sparrowhawk (*Accipiternisus*) appeared, grabbed the swallow with its powerful talons and flew off to feast on the tasty morsel.

"We had just phoned local birdwatchers to tell them of this rare occurrence. Then we had to ring them back and tell them it had been eaten," said Mike Sawyer in horror, of the Dundee branch of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.



Sharp-shinned Hawk - Don Glen

This Sharpshinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) is a close relative of the European Sparrowhawk mentioned in the short story above. The similarity is so great that an American birder would undoubtedly call its European cousin a "sharpie" without hesitation. In this country, the American Kestrel, a small falcon, is sometimes referred to as a sparrow hawk.

Thanks to Don Glen for the picture, taken looking out a window into his yard. He has had excellent backyard photo opportunities of sharpies in 2004 and 2006.

### Valmont Reservoir Recognized as Important Bird Area



David Wilks at the IBA Ceremony - G. Oetzel

Audubon Colorado officially dedicated its 54th Important Bird Area Sept. 26 in Boulder. The site is Xcel Energy's Valmont Generating Station reservoir. This site was designated because of the large concentrations of waterfowl species that frequent the area, primarily as a wintering habitat and rest stop during spring and fall migration. The reservoirs and adjacent uplands provide important habitat for the survival of select species and populations of Colorado's wild birds, including eagles and other raptors, waterfowl, gulls and other waterbirds. Over the years birders have identified 139 bird species at the Valmont Reservoir. Over 50 people attended the ceremony, representing business, conservation, local government and birding enthusiasts. Bird walks and tours of the area followed the dedication and a brief talk by David Wilks, President, Energy Supply, Xcel Energy.

An important feature of the Valmont Reservoir IBA is that it is owned by a major corporation and exemplifies how businesses can work to ensure protection of Important Bird Areas. This is the first Colorado IBA to be owned entirely by a private corporation and the first IBA to be designated in Boulder County. Xcel Energy has also been a major supporter of the Audubon at Home project "Colorado Wildscapes" and is currently developing a Wildscapes demonstration garden at its Cherokee Generating Station in Denver.

- Valmont Reservoir field trip Feb 24, see page 2

### Have you renewed your Boulder Audubon chapter membership?

Much of the support for *On the Wing* and our many other activities comes from local chapter memberships. We receive very little from National Audubon dues. **See page 8.**

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### Ptarmigan of Boulder County

Joyce Gellhorn and Calvin Whitehall

Have you ever seen a ghost? The elusive white-tailed ptarmigan, ghosts of the alpine tundra, are snow white in winter except for their black beak and black eyes. Because they roost in snow burrows and blend so well into their environment, they are often difficult to find. This seminar includes both an evening slide program focusing on adaptations of white-tailed ptarmigan to their alpine home and a field class to visit a favored wintering site. We will snowshoe 2 1/2 miles each way in hopes of seeing these ghosts.

Thursday, February 22, 7-9 p.m., indoor class

Saturday, February 24, 8 a.m.-3 p.m., field class: Brainard Lake

Tuition: \$60 (\$50 for BCNA members). Limited to 12 participants.

Equipment: Be prepared for cold, windy conditions. We will be on snowshoes. You can rent these if needed. Also bring a daypack, binoculars, lunch, and a thermos with a hot drink.

To register: Call Joyce at 303-442-8123, or email [jgellhorn@sprynet.com](mailto:jgellhorn@sprynet.com)

### International Bird Trade: Threat to Exotic Birds

January 5th is International Bird Day, with one of the goals being recognition of the problems of the trade in caged exotic birds. A number of bird species, Macaws, for example, have become rare in the wild partly as a result of their capture for the international trade in pet birds.

Despite their adoption programs for cats and dogs, PetsMart and Petco continue to sell exotic birds into the pet trade. Captive birds frequently suffer from stress, leading to behavioral and physical problems, and they commonly suffer from nutritional diseases. Many "owners" lose interest in the birds, causing them to languish in their cages. Bird sanctuaries are also overwhelmed with hundreds of unwanted and abused exotic birds in need of rescue. All of the above could be eliminated if people stopped buying caged birds. Prime Minister Tony Blair recently supported a permanent ban on the importation of wild birds to the European Union countries. We can help this effort by not buying caged birds and by asking PetsMart and Petco to discontinue their sales.

- Ann Tagawa

### Audubon Nebraska's 37th Annual Rivers and Wildlife Celebration

Fri-Sun, March 16-18, 2007  
Holiday Inn, Kearney, NE



- Sunrise and sunset visits to crane viewing blinds along the Platte River—not to be missed!
- Day-long excursions to local wetlands and lakes to view migrating waterfowl and native Nebraska wildlife

Featured speakers include:

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<http://www.audubon.org/states/ne/ne-rwc2007.htm>

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**Tuesday Evening Programs**

**Jan 23, 7:30 p.m.**

**Treasures of the Greater Southern  
Rockies**

*Jacob Smith and Erin Robertson  
Center for Native Ecosystems*

**Feb 27, 7:30 p.m.**

**Climate Change Comes to Colorado**  
*Jeff Mitton*



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