



# Great Blue Herald

Grand Valley Audubon Society

GRAND JUNCTION, COLORADO

P.O. Box 1211, Grand Junction, CO 81502

## CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT - 123rd YEAR

*By Janet Gallenstein*

This marks the 123rd year that the Christmas Bird Count has been conducted. Each November, birders interested in participating in the CBC sign up and join in through their local Audubon chapter. From December 14 through January 5 each year tens of thousands of volunteers throughout the Americas brave snow, wind, or rain, and take part in the effort. Audubon and other organizations use data collected in this long-running wildlife census to assess the health of bird populations, and to help guide conservation action. Check out the Audubon Christmas Bird Count website to learn more about this conservation effort!

### Christmas Bird Count – Grand Junction

The Christmas Bird Count for Grand Junction occurred on Sunday, December 18, 2022 with 14 teams spending the day covering the Grand Junction area. It was a cold, sunny day and the Colorado River was almost too icy to navigate but both sets of rafters braved the water. Following the count, a chili supper was provided by the Grand Valley Audubon Society and the food was excellent and plentiful. The Vollmars received the trophy for the long eared owl, surely the most unusual bird located during the count.

**Harriet Stephens compiled the data for the count and tallied 103 species with a total count of 28,179 birds!** 10 species of birds (starling, Canada goose, mallard, robin, house finch, house sparrow, sandhill crane, rock pigeon, white crowned sparrow, American wigeon) represented 73% of the total quantity of birds counted. Single count species

### Grand Valley Audubon MISSION STATEMENT

Grand Valley Audubon Society strives to foster an appreciation of birds and other wildlife, preserve a diversity of habitats and *advocate for* a sustainable healthy environment through education, research and individual action.



*Cary Atwood and Cindy Appel on a very chilly river section of the Colorado, Las Colonias launch. Go to page 7 to read their story!*

included common loon, Ferruginous hawk, golden eagle, Lapland longspur, long eared owl, merlin, northern mockingbird, spotted sandpiper and Virginia rail.

### Christmas Bird Count – Mesa

The Christmas Bird Count for the Mesa area occurred on Sunday, January 1st, 2023 in surprisingly warm but windy weather; mid 40's at the elevation of the town of Mesa.

None of the 18 participants were able to access the top of the mesa due to road closures for avalanche control. Side roads were icy and there were snow showers by the afternoon. Most of the participants felt the number of species and quantity of birds was down compared to prior years, certainly due to unfavorable conditions for the count day. Actual count figures are not yet tallied but the suspect total of species is estimated to be about 50.

[www.AudubonGV.org](http://www.AudubonGV.org)

# GVAS CHAPTER HAPPENINGS

## Looking Back – Looking Forward

This fresh new year has much in it to celebrate for Grand Valley Audubon. We've had the successful completion of a December Christmas Bird Count, a New Year's Count in and around Grand Mesa, and a world record number of 100!! Western Screech Owls counted thanks to the dedication of dozens of volunteers out at all hours of the day and night.

- Our National Audubon Chapter Report, written by board members and due at the end of January also highlights the continuing momentum of our Wetlands Restoration project.
- Over the past year the US Fish and Wildlife Service has expressed renewed interest in collaborating to provide capacity for construction and maintenance of pipe irrigation



*Great Blue Heron*

and a water control structure at the North Pond in the Ela Sanctuary as a grow out pond for endangered Razorback Suckers. At the end of last year, we were awarded a \$150,000 grant from USFWS to move forward on this phase of the project. A special THANK YOU is due to Abby Burk of Audubon Rockies and GVAS member Meredith Swett Walker for the time and talent both have put into this ongoing, long term project.

- With all TUMACNBAC trips filled, two New Dimensions Birding Classes on offer, diverse monthly programs lined up and a Summer fundraiser with an intriguing guest speaker, there's much to look forward to as 2023 unfolds.

~ Cary Atwood

## UPCOMING PROGRAMS

### FEBRUARY MEETING – JOIN A SAFARI TO MADAGASCAR

Monday, Feb. 20, 2023

Social : 6:30-7:00 pm

Program: 7:00-7:30 pm

Presented by Renée Herring

Just the name evokes exotic images of nature – leaping lemurs, bulbous Baobab trees, crawling chameleons, rare reptiles and brightly-colored birds. Join us for a photo “safari” by Renée Herring, a retired CPW Watchable Wildlife Coordinator, to explore some wildlife riches found on the island that time forgot.

The varied landscapes of rainforests, spiny deserts, lakes, and dry forests contain 90% of Madagascar's plant and animal species that are found nowhere else on earth. Lemurs, lemurs, lemurs!

### MARCH MEETING – ENDANGERED GUNNISON SAGE GROUSE

Monday, March 20, 2023,

Social : 6:30-7:00 pm

Program: 7:00-7:30 pm

Presented by Whit Blair

Whit Blair will be giving a talk about the **Gunnison Sage Grouse**: background, life stages and habits, then talking about the status of its populations and conservation efforts to save it! There will be a power point presentation to accompany his discussion.



Gunnison Sage Grouse. Photo by Jeremy Roberts, Conservation Media

### APRIL MEETING – IMPORTANT THINGS AHEAD FOR COLORADO WATER POLICY IN 2023

Monday, April 17, 2023,

6:30-7:00 pm Social / 7:00-7:30 pm Program

Presented by Abby Burke from Audubon Rockies

Audubon supports proactive water resilience strategies for 2023 Colorado legislation.

Clearly, water is a legislative priority. Big water ideas are in the wind, but proponents need to share concepts broadly. Our decisions about water influence all areas of life for people and nature. We're doing a better job of including and valuing a diversity of input in water decisions, but we need to do more. A diversity of water stakeholders must support legislative proposals that support multiple beneficial uses.

Audubon Rockies is busy working with lawmakers, agencies, and partners to prioritize healthy, functioning, and resilient watersheds and river systems for people and birds – the natural systems that we all depend upon. There are already seven bills on our water watch list, plus several draft bills. Here are three water priority areas for Audubon in the 2023 Colorado legislative session: Stream Health, Climate Resiliency, Water Funding & Projects. Join us to hear about opportunities to engage with them. For more information: <https://rockies.audubon.org/rivers/articles/>

**Monthly meeting information:** Grand Valley Audubon Society meets on the 3rd Monday of the month at 6:30 pm at the First Presbyterian Church, located at 3940 27 1/2 Rd, Grand Junction, CO 81506.

## MORE UPCOMING EVENTS

### Spring Bird Count set for Wednesday-Saturday, May 17-20, 2023



*Mountain Bluebird*

### Spring Bird Count 2023

Please mark your calendars for the Grand Valley Audubon Spring Bird Count, which will be held Wed. - Sat. May 17 to May 20, 2023.

It's a range of dates this year, which has never been done before. After much deliberation, the decision was made to allow for people who may only be available on a certain day of the week to count birds. Sometimes some areas of the count can be full of weekend recreationists, which may make it harder to see, hear, and count certain birds. This does not mean that the count can happen twice in the same area; the area leader will make the decision as to which day in the range of days that the count will take place.

This count is for the entire Mesa County, divided into 12 areas, with a leader for each area. More information on how to sign up for an area will be in the next newsletter.

Shannon Young is coordinating the count, and can be reached at [mtngirl1111@gmail.com](mailto:mtngirl1111@gmail.com), or at 970-260-1118. Harriet Stephens will be sending out the necessary forms and compile the count data.

## FUNDRAISER FOR GVAS COMING IN JUNE! A South Texan's Wild, Life-affirming Quest to Break a National Birding Record

When she began her year-long bird-spotting adventure, Tiffany Kersten was lost and lonely. She ended up achieving a major milestone – and finding her way.

Two months earlier, Kersten was unemployed, stressed about paying her mortgage, and still reeling from the emotional distress she had suffered since being sexually assaulted in 2018. The then 34-year-old had recently lost her job at the McAllen Nature Center and felt adrift personally and professionally.

With no real plans other than trying to make some money, Kersten started guiding small birdwatching tours in South Texas. She'd led sporadic birding trips over the past ten years, and this freelance work seemed like a good way to help pay the bills.

As luck would have it, one of her first clients was an avid birder named Charlie Bostwick, who was visiting Texas while working on a Big Year. As they traveled across the Rio

Grande Valley looking for green jays and great kiskadees, Kersten confided in him about the transition she was going through. Bostwick suggested that she go for a Big Year too.

She immediately rejected the idea. "I have a house. I need to get a job. I need to get my life in order," Kersten thought. "I can't just run around the country looking at birds."



*Tiffany Kersten, super birder!*

**A GVAS program with Tiffany Kersten is set for June 14, 2023. More information to come on website and enews.**

Click to read the full article about Tiffany Kersten:  
<https://www.texasmonthly.com/being-texan/south-texan-wild-quest-birding-record/>

## CONSERVATION NEWS!

By Nic Korte

### Three Billion Birds Later, Little Progress, BUT:

The newly released *State of the Birds* (download from Cornell's website, <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/>) notes that little has changed since the initial report documenting the loss of 3 billion birds in North America. The good news is that waterfowl and wetlands species are generally doing well. The concerted effort of hunters and bird watchers coalesce when it comes to wetland protection. Groups such as *Ducks Unlimited* and *Back Country Hunters and Anglers* are as invested in protecting wetland's species as is *National Audubon*. The Federal Duck Stamp, which you can purchase on the *American Birding Association's* website ([American Birding Association - American Birding Association https://www.aba.org/](https://www.aba.org/)), provides direct funding for wetlands acquisition and protection. These results demonstrate populations can be stabilized with directed effort. The *Recovering America's Wildlife Act*, introduced in the last Congress would be an enormous step towards saving other declining species. Unfortunately, there is little chance of enactment or even debate during the next two years.

### BUT, We Counted 101 Western Screech-Owls:

*Congratulations* again to all the volunteers who have made our Screech-Owl project a success. This year was our highest count ever. Does that mean there has been a population increase? Sadly, no. In the 1990's, the late Rich Levad estimated 3-4 owls/km<sup>2</sup> in the farmland between Grand Junction and Fruita. Unfortunately, that habitat has been fragmented by development and no longer produces the most owls in our inventory. Our high count this year is likely a result of the increasingly experienced cadre of volunteers, perfect listening conditions on count day, and our becoming increasingly smarter about box placement and maintenance. Approximately, 70% of the owls were called or sighted near or in boxes. Our results and those for waterbirds and ducks discussed above, shows that directed efforts to help a species are successful. They are, however, a lot of work – and a lot of fun!

**E-bird – Use It!** The [ebird.org](http://ebird.org) website just becomes more powerful with time. Have you tried this? Open <https://ebird.org/home> Discover a new world of birding... Click on "Science." Click on "ebird status and trends." Type in one of my favorite species: Swainson's Thrush. Across the top, click on "weekly." Is it not interesting to see that in January, they are most abundant in Peru and Bolivia? Look on the right side of the page. Pick another date: April 12. Now they are concentrated in Costa Rica – my favorite country to visit. I have seen 7 or 8 in a single binocular view at that time of year. If you continue to click through weeks – after rotating the map to have a clear view of the Rocky Mountains – you see they reach maximum abundance in our area in mid-June but have mostly cleared out by early August. This is just one (!) feature on this amazing birding tool. (If you are not



*Western Screech Owl, by Nic Korte*

contributing your sightings to the ebird database, it is time to get started!)



**Pinyon Jays:** Long-time birders of the area are well-aware of the precipitous decline of Pinyon Jays. The great conservationist, Aldo Leopold, referred to them as the "essence" of our habitat, but they are disappearing. I wrote a blogpost about them

describing the changes: ([THE NUMEMON: PIÑONERO NOSTALGIA – Birds and More](#)) There has been a push to fund additional research and to pursue listing under the Endangered Species Act. What we need first, is more data. Citizen scientists are asked to participate. Here's how local birders can help: [Pinyon Jay Community Science Project - Colorado Field Ornithologists \(cobirds.org\)](#)

*Pinyon Jay – photo credit: Milton Vine / Macaulay Library*

### Bohemian Waxwings in the Valley:

Exciting this winter has been the presence of a few Bohemian Waxwings. I checked our historical CBC data for this irruptive species: 1950 – 2021. The data show ten CBCs reporting BOWAs, but none since 2007. I hope everyone gets to see this rare visitor from the north!



*Bohemian Waxwing – photo credit: Evan Lipton / Macaulay Library*

## AUDUBON PRESERVE – Overview of the Wetlands Preserve Project

*By Meredith Swett-Walker*



*At the Preserve - view looking southeast into Traylor and Osprey Ponds. Photo by Cary Atwood.*

The Grand Valley is located on the eastern edge of the Pacific Flyway – an important migration corridor for waterfowl and shorebirds. These species rely on wetland habitat along their migration path where they can stop to rest and feed.

However, due to development, diversions, and management of flows in the Colorado River, naturally created wetland habitat in the riparian corridor is scarce in Western Colorado. For over 100 years, wetlands formed by agricultural irrigation and leakage from irrigation ditches have provided some substitute for natural wetlands in our area, but these may also become more scarce as residential development and water use changes due to drought. River diversions and flow management have also affected the Colorado River's endemic fish. Four species: bonytail, Colorado pikeminnow, hump-back chub and razorback sucker, are listed as threatened or endangered by the USFWS. These species need floodplain wetlands and backwaters as nursery habitat.

In 2022, we strengthened an ongoing collaboration with US Fish and Wildlife Service. Due to our proximity to the Colorado River, there have been plans of using our North Pond area as a growout for the endangered Razorback Sucker. With the plan of installing an irrigation pipe to move water (*outlined in paragraph below*) creating greater viability for growout ponds, we have been awarded a \$150,000 grant by USFWS to help make Phase 2 funding a reality. We are currently working to complete the budget narrative and other compliance forms needed.

The GVAS Wetland Improvement Project will create wetlands that will help offset a small part of this habitat loss for birds and our native fish while providing wildlife viewing and educational opportunities for the public.

**Phase 1:** The recontouring of Osprey Pond and Avocet Pond (*old gravel pit ponds*) to create shallow wetlands is complete.

**Phase 2 & 3 are projected to be completed by 2025.**

**In Phase 2:** We will recontour a portion of Traylor Pond to create more shallow seasonal wetland habitat and will install pipe irrigation to move water efficiently from the Redlands Tailrace Canal to the new wetlands to fill them seasonally for migrating waterfowl and waders.

**In Phase 3:** We will extend the irrigation pipe to North Pond (*another gravel pit pond which is adjacent to the Colorado River.*) This pond also receives water from the river in high water years via a cut in the riverbank. Phase 3 will move that



*The future Wet Meadow area adjacent to Dike Rd that will be seasonally flooded for migrating waterfowl and wading birds. Photo by Cary Atwood.*

cut to a more favorable position to catch native razorback sucker fry from the river. A water control structure will be installed in the new riverbank cut with screening to prevent the intake of non-native predatory fish and a “kettle” which will allow USFWS personnel to catch and sort grown razorback suckers and release them into the river. The irrigation water piped in from the Redlands Tailrace Canal will allow USFWS to maintain appropriate water levels in the North Pond while the razorback suckers are growing to maturity. This project is being conducted in partnership with Ducks Unlimited, which has extensive experience bioengineering wetland habitat for waterfowl, and with the USFWS Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program which will manage the fish grow out activities in the North Pond.

# GVAS BIRDING TRIP: ECUADOR & GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS

**BIRDING TRIP DATES:**  
Nov. 30 - Dec. 9, 2023 and  
Nov. 10 - Dec. 13, 2023

## ECUADOR AND THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS:

*Birding the Choco-Andes Region with an optional  
3-night Galápagos Islands Cruise*

**Ecuador:** November 30 – December 9, 2023  
**Galápagos:** December 10 – December 13, 2023

This trip is brought to you by **HOLBROOK TRAVEL**. Holbrook Travel has been our partner in developing trips to Central and South America in the past 5 years. Holbrook Travel believes that sustainable travel is a key to understanding and preserving the natural and cultural diversity of our planet.

## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS:

- > Explore the Chocó ecoregion across a variety of protected areas, including Yanacocha Biological Reserve, Alambi Cloud Forest Reserve, Milpe Bird Sanctuary, Antisana Ecological Reserve, and others.
- > Visit the famed Refugio Paz de las Aves, known as a haven for antpittas and Andean Cocks-of-the-rock.
- > Meet a representative from a community project dedicated to restoring the habitat of the Black-breasted Puffleg, the official emblematic bird of Quito.
- > Bird the Mashpi-Amagusa Reserve for target species like the Rose-faced Parrot, Orange-breasted Fruiteater, Chocó Vireo, Moss-backed Tanager, and Indigo Flowerpiercer.



*Golden-rumped Euphonia*

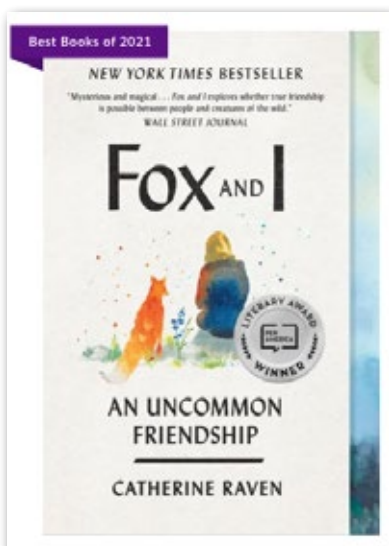
**Galápagos trip extension:** 3-night cruise aboard a yacht to see the incredible diversity on the Galapagos Islands. Hike



and snorkel to see the islands unique species, such as the Galápagos Giant Tortoise (left), Blue-footed Booby, and Galapagos Penguins.

Links to the itinerary will be available in the next newsletter, and will soon be posted on the GVAS website, [www.audubongv.org](http://www.audubongv.org) under "Events".

For destination dreaming, go to [www.holbrooktravel.com](http://www.holbrooktravel.com)



## BOOK REVIEW By Nic Korte

### FOX and I by Catherine Raven

Most reviews on the internet give this book 5-stars, but many contain phrases like "not a book for all," or "difficult to get into."

One reviewer said she loved the book and recommended it to a book club and "all six members hated it." The author's often, terse, "stream-of-consciousness" style is not for everyone but by the end, you are inside the writer's brain.

You understand when she says that she has "a curious world view," and that her fox "was not typical for his species, and I am not typical for mine." I struggled myself for a while but am glad I persevered. The book is replete with interesting nuggets of natural history often told through the author's "uncommon friendship" with a fox.

## ICEBOUND IN GRAND JUNCTION - A CBC ADVENTURE!

Story and photos by Cary Atwood



Cindy Appel steadies her raft for a day of counting birds for the CBC on the Colorado River.

**Sunday, December 18, 2022:** After missing the previous two years of our Grand Valley Christmas Bird Count, I was excited to rejoin seasoned boatwoman Cindy Appel on our annual river float through town. She's been running the Grand Canyon for decades, and we've been doing this float, often with other volunteers along. We decided this year, the two of us were enough. How many people really want to sit for sub-freezing hours on a cold raft, counting birds? Well, it does take special people.

We rigged up Cindy's 16 foot raft a few days beforehand, placed it on the trailer and packed gear for a good 4-6 hour slow wintry float to come. Hot soup, hearty snacks and plenty of warm layers always make the list. Each year our launch point is Corn Lake State Park, entering the count circle downriver a bit, then taking out at the Blue Heron boat ramp off Redlands Parkway.

An exceptionally cold, crisp day greeted us, with temps a polar twelve degrees at the start. Arriving at Corn Lake, a skating rink-sized mass of ice made a launch impossible for the two of us to handle. Onward to Plan B: the new Las Colonias boat launch. Cindy maneuvered the car with the trailer angled just so, tipping the raft along a short stretch of ice directly into moving water. Perfect. Along with the two hundred plus Mallards dabbling among the icy floes, we were off...into the wintry waters.

A float on the river reveals a different perspective than standing on the bank. Ducks let you drift by without much disturbance, herons remain unruffled in a statuesque pose, eagles give a regal stare from a high perch and if you're lucky, a lone Spotted Sandpiper probes amongst shoreline river cobbles. Most years we've done this float, it has been more about counting large waterfowl numbers than spotting any kind of rare bird.

In spite of the ice, conditions that would normally prevent Cindy from even launching her raft, we blithely drifted and rowed on a steady current in the increasing warmth of the sun, careful to keep our sights on birds. Just beyond the Broadway bridge Cindy says, "Cary, I don't see any water going through down there." I agreed, but we remained captivated by a pair of playful river otters that had just appeared.

As the current carried us a bit farther downriver, the full force and folly of our distraction exposed a new realization. Oops! Too late to row against the current, the raft came to a jarring halt. The previous week of sub-freezing temperatures and slow moving water had created a massive, impenetrable ice dam across the river. We were good and stuck. Icebound on the Colorado near downtown Grand Junction. Who woulda thought?? Now it was time to face a most embarrassing and unwelcome reality: *call for help*.

A 911 call put us through to a Mesa County Sheriff's officer, who, after hearing the details of our predicament, contacted Mesa County Search and Rescue. To our good fortune, a group of these well trained and dedicated volunteers had just finished a Sunday lunch when our call came in. Within minutes they appeared on Dike Road with gear and plans to shoot out a rope from the west riverbank with the hope of dragging the raft to shore. After a few failed attempts, they shifted gear and volunteers to the east bank, closer to the raft. During this time we sat enjoying hot soup and munching on cookies while they hatched and worked a plan. Do you have any idea how we were feeling as they worked to rescue us? *Embarrassed. Mortified. A little regretful about not doing more due diligence.* No doubt a few of their thoughts were like this: *crazy people on a raft in the river in the middle of December.* What the heck were they doing??? Looking for what? Birds? Oh, of course...those Audubon people...crazy bird ladies.

It took only one Swift Water Rescue team member in his new purple drysuit walking onto the ice and swinging a throwline out to us before the raft was quickly heaved and pulled across the ice to shore. This wonderful SARS gang of ten volunteers helped us de-rig the raft and carry our gear to the nearby ice rink parking lot. We are SO VERY thankful it was a safe outcome, and so INCREDIBLY grateful and appreciative of their expertise and help. And the best bird of the day? About two hundred Sandhill Cranes aloft overhead – circling and calling exuberantly. I want to imagine they were cheering us on after our safe and successful release from the ice.



Cary Atwood: looking at the ice ahead!



Cindy Appel....what's that?



Oh, No! Stuck on the ice!