

Montana  Bird Advocacy
First Annual Report 2018



A Few Thoughts from the Executive Director

The 2018 field season, our first, was eventful and productive. Working on a modest budget, and with the help of several highly skilled and dedicated volunteers, we conducted surveys for nesting Gray Flycatchers (*Empidonax wrightii*) and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (*Polioptila caerulea*) in the foothill canyons of the Pryor Mountains west of Bear Canyon and also spent a couple days in the arid juniper shrublands of the East Pryor Mountains looking for these two species. Our search for evidence of nesting Solitary Sandpipers (*Tringa solitaria*) in Glacier National Park got off to a slightly late start, but we succeeded in documenting the first breeding record for the state at a small wetland just outside the park's western boundary. We also participated in a large number of outreach activities involving the ornithological and birding communities within and beyond Montana, led two birding tours in Ghana and a donor tour in Montana, and scouted new tours in Peru and Senegal.

The Montana Bird Advocacy (MBA) started out small, and we will remain small. Our goals are rather modest but important: to increase knowledge of the distribution, status, and biology of Montana's birds, and to promote interest in and conservation of birds in Montana and throughout the world, with a focus on developing tropical countries in West Africa and South America. Our Web site provides a tremendous amount of current information that is valuable to anyone with an interest in Montana's birds. For example, we host the Web pages for the Montana Bird Records Committee, and in that capacity maintain the official state list of Montana bird species, with current English and scientific names presented in proper taxonomic sequence. We also provide and update continually a list of record early and late dates for all Montana migrant birds on the basis of an exhaustive review of several different sources of information. This information is available nowhere else.

Our cadre of major donors and our international birding tours have been great sources of funding for our important work. But to be sustainable in the long term, we need small donations from many birders who use the information that we alone provide. As such, I encourage you to visit our Web site often, to contact us if you have any bird-related questions you'd like answered, and then to consider making a tax-deductible donation to the MBA at least once a year. —Jeff Marks, Executive Director



Jeff and daughter Seychelle in Columbia River Gorge

Gray Flycatchers and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers in the Pryor Mountain Canyons

The canyons, draws, and adjacent flats and slopes coming off the western and southern foothills of the West Pryor Mountains constitute a unique habitat for Montana. This area sits within the rain shadow of the Beartooth Mountains and is the driest part of the state, with annual precipitation averaging only 13 cm (about 5 inches) in some places. Utah Juniper (*Juniperus osteosperma*) reaches the northern limit of its global range here, and with Big Sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) and several other plant taxa, it provides habitat for two poorly known bird species with Great Basin affinities: Gray Flycatcher and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. The most popular birding spot in the region, Bear Canyon, is the site of Montana's first nesting records for the gnatcatcher and another Great Basin species, the Black-throated Gray Warbler (*Setophaga nigrescens*); Gray Flycatchers were first reported there in 2006. Observations in 2015 and 2016 by Marks, Hendricks, and several other observers have indicated that the flycatchers and gnatcatchers inhabit many areas besides Bear Canyon, but the extent of their occurrence in the area is unknown. Accordingly, in collaboration with the Billings Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), we conducted surveys for these two species in appropriate habitats along the western and southern foothills of the West Pryor Mountains. Our results provided a much better picture of the distribution and relative numbers of these two species in the region.

In late April, Marks, Hendricks, Dan Casey, BLM biologist Ernie McKenzie, and retired US Forest Service biologist Barb Pitman visited all of the canyons along the southwestern face of the West Pryors west of Quarry Road and Piney Creek. Most of the canyons were unnamed, so we came up with our own names as we planned how to conduct the surveys. With the exception of King Canyon, which is mostly privately owned, we visited each canyon and draw at least once between late May and early July (see Table 1).



Gray Flycatcher (top) and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

(Bob Martinka photos)

Table 1. Estimated number of pairs of Gray Flycatchers and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers detected at survey units in the West Pryor Mountains, May to July 2018.

Survey unit	Previously named?	Min. no. pairs Gray Flycatchers ^A	Min. no. pairs Blue-gray Gnatcatchers
Cave Draw	No	0 (0)	0
Cactus Canyon	No	1 (2)	3
Wye Canyon	No	3 (5)	3
King Canyon	Yes	Not surveyed	Not surveyed
Inferno Canyon	Yes	6 (6)	6
Towhee Canyon	No	0 (0)	1
Big Wye	No	1 (8)	5
Water Canyon	Yes	2 (6)	4
Timber Canyon	Yes	2 (8)	4
Cassin's Canyon	No	2 (6)	2
Flycatcher Draw	No	4 (4)	2
Miller Canyon	Yes	0 (7)	0
McKenzie Canyon	No	3 (3)	1
Jaquith Canyon	No	3 (5)	2
Little Jaquith	No	0 (2)	1
Totals	—	27 (62)	34

^A Number of singing Dusky Flycatchers detected in parentheses.

Surveys were restricted to morning hours between sunrise and 1100 to maximize chances of detecting singing males. During each visit, we slowly walked the canyon bottoms and slopes and listened and watched for flycatchers and gnatcatchers. When one was detected, we noted the general habitat it was in and obtained a GPS reading. We took special care to avoid counting the same birds more than once, which was a potential bias especially for gnatcatchers because they typically make longer and more frequent flights than do Gray Flycatchers. We made note of all bird species detected by sight and sound, and also counted the number of singing male Dusky Flycatchers (*Empidonax oberholseri*) during each

survey. Most of the detections were made by hearing singing or calling birds. We assumed that only male flycatchers sang, and thus assigned a pair to each singing male we encountered.

Gray Flycatchers and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were widespread and fairly common in the foothill canyons of the West Pryor Mountains. We found Gray Flycatchers in all but four survey units, and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers in all but two units (Table 1). The canyons and draws where we did not find these species were the smallest survey units in the study area. In total, we detected more than twice as many Dusky Flycatchers as Gray Flycatchers, and in no case did the number of Gray Flycatchers at a site exceed the estimated number of Dusky Flycatchers at the same site. Both species occurred regularly in dense Utah Juniper, sparse Utah Juniper, and Utah Juniper/Big Sagebrush mixes.



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher habitat, Jaquith Canyon

(Jeff Marks photo)

Finding nests was not a priority during our surveys. Yet, Jeff and Ernie found three Blue-gray Gnatcatcher nests that were under construction on 24 May at the western end of the study area. Each nest was in a live Utah Juniper and was placed less than 2 m above ground (Table 2). Nests were measured on 3 June after construction had been completed. Unfortunately, all three nests failed following severe hail storms on 18 and 19 June.



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher nest destroyed by hail, 19 June 2018 (Jeff Marks photo)

Most of the data in the West Pryors were collected by volunteer Barb Pitman, with Jeff and Ernie collecting data on a few days. Jeff, Dan, and Ernie made a short visit to the East Pryors, where on 24 June they succeeded in finding two Blue-gray Gnatcatcher nests with large young ready to fledge, and one brood of fledglings attended by their parents. In contrast to the gnatcatcher nests found in the West Pryors, the two nests found in the East Pryors were built low to the ground in junipers that were mostly dead (Table 2)

Jeff, Dan, and Ernie also heard several territorial male Dusky Flycatchers, but not a single Gray Flycatcher, during their two full days in the East Pryors, which suggests that Gray

Table 2. Characteristics of the five Blue-gray Gnatcatcher nests found in 2018.

Survey unit	Nest substrate	Nest height (cm)	Substrate height (cm)	Clutch size ^A	Latitude/ Longitude (°)
West Pryors					
Jaquith Canyon	Utah Juniper	194	258	≥4	45.19328/108.68037
Jaquith Canyon	Utah Juniper	125	171	5	45.19431/108.67793
Little Jaquith	Utah Juniper	182	230	≥4	45.19570/108.68042
East Pryors					
Upper Sykes Ridge	Utah Juniper	81	121	≥4	45.03189/108.29083
Lower Sykes Ridge	Utah Juniper	76	168	≥3	45.01254/108.29340

^A Only one full clutch was observed. Minimum clutch size at other nests based on brood sizes.



Gnatcatcher nest in partially dead juniper, 24 June 2018 (Dan Casey photo)

Flycatchers do not occur in the East Pryors, or else are present in very low numbers relative to the West Pryors. We plan to spend three or four days in the East Pryors in late May 2019 to determine whether Gray Flycatchers are present.

Solitary Sandpipers Nesting in Montana?

The Solitary Sandpiper is a fascinating shorebird of the boreal forest. It and the Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) are the only shorebirds that lay their eggs in old passerine nests in trees. At the start of 2018, Solitary Sandpipers were known to nest only in Alaska, Canada, and extreme northern Minnesota, the latter being the only one of the lower 48 states where nesting had been documented. Recent evidence suggested that they also nested in Montana within Glacier National Park (GNP), but no nest or dependent young had been observed. Accordingly, the Montana Bird Advocacy designed a plan to visit about a dozen lakes and marshy wetlands in GNP and surrounding areas during spring and summer 2018 to determine whether territorial sandpipers were present, and if so, to document breeding by finding nests or observing adults attending flightless young.

Volunteers Steve Gniadek, Jim Rogers, and Bruce Tannehill visited 10 wetlands surrounded by boreal forest, nine of them within the park, and one just outside the park's western boundary. They found territorial sandpipers at only two places: McGee Meadow and Sondreson Meadow. Miraculously, Steve documented the first breeding record for the state when he observed a territorial pair with a half-grown chick at Sondreson Meadow on 18 July! We hope to survey additional lakes in and around GNP from mid-May to late July 2019.



McGee Meadow, Glacier National Park

(Jeff Marks photo)



Solitary Sandpiper juvenile



Solitary Sandpiper adult (Steve Gniadek photos)

Montana Bird Records Committee

As Secretary of the Montana Bird Records Committee (MBRC), Jeff is responsible for obtaining rare bird reports from observers. He also coordinates voting on rare bird reports and manages the MBRC's Web site at <https://www.montanabirdadvocacy.org/mbrc> and their private Yahoo listserv, in addition to writing the minutes after each annual meeting.

Jeff also updates Montana's official list of birds on a regular basis, thus providing the most current list, with accepted English and scientific names, and in correct taxonomic order: <https://www.montanabirdadvocacy.org/state-list>.

Record Early and Late Dates for Montana Migrants

Since publication of Birds of Montana in 2016, interest has grown in tracking record early and late dates for Montana's migrant birds. Accordingly, in summer 2018 Jeff carefully reviewed a variety of data sources and provided an updated list of record early and late dates on our Web site at <https://www.montanabirdadvocacy.org/record-dates-migrants>. Jeff continues to update the list whenever observers document new record dates.

Killdeer's Keep

A species profile for Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*), written by Paul, was added to the list of common Montana species in serious decline, as highlighted in the Killdeer's Keep section of our Web site. Additional species profiles are in the early stages of development.

Pinyon Jay Working Group

The Pinyon Jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*) is a rapidly declining species that was listed as globally *Vulnerable* by BirdLife International in 2004. Jeff joined the Pinyon Jay Working Group early in 2018 and is the sole representative from Montana. He participates in

conference calls and has helped draft various in-house documents on the status and management of the jay. Jeff also helped edit a major document produced by the Working Group entitled "Conservation Strategy for Pinyon Jays." Virtually nothing is known about the biology and population status of Pinyon Jays in Montana, and the MBA hopes to play a role in initiating monitoring efforts in the future.



Pinyon Jay

(Ed Harper photo)

Montana Bird Conservation Partnership (MBCP) and Partners in Flight (PIF)

Paul attended the annual meeting of the MBCP at Great Falls in February 2018, briefly introduced the Montana Bird Advocacy to the attendees, and provided input to various ongoing MBCP priorities. In October 2018, Jeff attended the annual meeting of the Western Working Group of PIF, which was held in Hood River, Oregon.

Checklist of Montana Birds, August 2018

Jeff worked with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Montana Audubon, and the Montana Natural Heritage Program to finalize the 2018 checklist of Montana's birds. The checklist is available in digital form on our Web site and in hard copy from Montana Audubon and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Publications

Paul has manuscripts in press in *Canadian Field-Naturalist* and *Northwestern Naturalist*, dealing with caching of Whitebark Pine (*Pinus albicaulis*) seeds in trees by Clark's Nutcrackers (*Nucifraga columbiana*) and snake predation on nestling Dark-eyed Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*), respectively, which will appear in 2019. Jeff and Dan Casey have a manuscript in review in the *Journal of Raptor Research* on a Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) killing a Lesser Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis parvipes*). In addition, Paul and Jeff are working with Ned and Gigi Batchelder to write up the Batchelders' long-term observations of Costa's Hummingbird (*Calypte costae*) nests in Nevada.

Birding Tours

The Montana Bird Advocacy leads birding tours to exciting international destinations to help raise funds for our work in Montana and to promote interest in and conservation of the

world's birds. In January and December, Jeff co-led tours to Ghana with expert local guides. He also scouted new tours in [Peru](#) in July 2018 and in [Senegal](#) in December 2018. We currently have openings for both tours, which will occur in July and December 2019, respectively.



Group photo from Ghana birding tour, December 2018

From 19–22 June Jeff, board member Rose Leach and Susie Maclin spent a delightful three days birding in the Red Lodge, Pryor Mountains, and Roundup areas, where they found all of their target species, which included Mountain Plovers, Common Poorwills, Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, Gray Flycatchers, Cassin's Kingbirds, Plumbeous Vireos, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, and Dickcissels.



Mountain Plover

(Susie Maclin photo)



Diademed Sandpiper-Plover in Peru

(Dubi Shapiro photo)



Little Green Bee-eater in Senegal

(Jeff Marks photo)

Other Outreach Activities

Jeff and Paul participate in various outreach activities throughout the year, including eBird review, co-management of the MOB birding listserv, and manuscript review for professional journals. In the last year, Jeff reviewed manuscripts that were submitted to *Journal of Raptor Research* (3), *Wader Study*, *Journal of Wildlife Management*, *Western North American Naturalist*, *Southwestern Naturalist* (2), and *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club*; Paul reviewed manuscripts submitted to *The Auk* and *Western Birds*. Paul also submitted a Letter to the Editor of *Bird Watcher's Digest* regarding the distribution of White-tailed Ptarmigan (*Lagopus leucura*) in Montana and the best places to look for them, and provided input and guidance to Bird Conservancy of the Rockies personnel in their (successful) effort to document the continued presence of Brown-capped Rosy-Finches (*Leucosticte australis*) in the New Mexico alpine during the breeding season.

Thank You!

We could not function without our supporters, and we offer a sincere “thank you” to everyone who has helped us out: Craig & Patricia Barfoot, Jim Brown, Dan Casey, Clancy Cone, Ken & Karen Dial, Ginny Fay, Steve Feiner, Jon Franzen, Peggy Harger Allen, Ed Harper, Craig Hohenberger, Cynthia Hudson & Robert Zirl, Bob & Carolyn Jones, Freda Kerman, Diane Kook, Rose Leach, Beth Madden, Harriet Marble, Barbara Marks, Ron Martin, Bob Martinka, Jenn Megyesi, Judy Meredith, Cay Ogden, Jim Rogers & Sherry Jones, and Dubi Shapiro. We also thank Dan Casey, Steve Gniadek, Rose Leach, Susie Maclin, Ernie McKenzie, Barb Pitman, Jim Rogers, and Bruce Tannehill for helping out in the field, and Tara Carolin and Lisa Bate for making possible our work in Glacier National Park. Last, Matthew Nordhagen has done an outstanding job, often on short notice, keeping our Web site up to date. He also helped design this newsletter. Thank you Matthew!



Sprague's Pipit (Ed Harper photo)