

Montana  Bird Advocacy
Second Annual Report 2019



Solitary Sandpiper (Josh Covill photo)

A Few Thoughts from the Executive Director

Field work in 2019 again focused on surveying for Gray Flycatchers (*Empidonax wrightii*) and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (*Polioptila caerulea*) in Carbon County near the Pryor Mountains and on further documenting nesting Solitary Sandpipers (*Tringa solitaria*) in and near Glacier National Park. Again, we benefited from a cadre of dedicated volunteers who helped us accomplish our goals. With the generous help of our donors, we made it possible for our reference book, *Birds of Montana*, to be delivered free of charge to nearly every public library in the state. Also, I led a birding tour to the high Andes of Peru, and as I complete this report, I'm making final preparations for my new birding tour to Senegal, which will occur from 8-23 January 2020.

As I noted last year at this time, the Montana Bird Advocacy (MBA) started out small and plans to remain so. We continue to help 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. Our Web site (<https://www.montanabirdadvocacy.org/>) provides essential information for anyone with an interest in Montana's birds: we host the Web pages for the Montana Bird Records Committee, maintain the Official State List of Montana bird species (with current English and scientific names in proper taxonomic sequence), and provide and update continually a list of record early and late dates for all Montana migrants on the basis of an exhaustive review of several different sources of information. This year we also added a link that provides current information on the number of accepted records for all vagrant birds documented in the state. **This information is available nowhere else.**

Fundraising to support our important work continues to be a challenge. Our major donors and international birding tours sustain us in the short term, but we also need smaller donations from the many birders who benefit from the information that we alone provide. Please, visit our Web site often, contact us with any bird-related questions you'd like answered, and consider making a tax-deductible donation at least once a year.

Jeff Marks, Executive Director



Jeff and Carol Beardmore in central Peru

(Rose Leach photo)

Gray Flycatchers and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers near the Pryor Mountains

The canyons, draws, and adjacent flats coming off the western and southern foothills of the Pryor Mountains constitute a unique habitat for Montana. This area sits in the rain shadow of the Beartooth Mountains and is the driest part of the state, with annual precipitation averaging only 13 cm in some places. Utah Juniper (*Juniperus osteosperma*) is at 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 others 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, we conducted surveys for these two species in appropriate habitats along the western and southern foothills of the West Pryor Mountains from Bear Canyon westward in 2018. In 2019, Barb Pitman surveyed appropriate habitat in the West Pryors from Bear Canyon east to Gypsum Creek, which to our knowledge had not been searched before for these two bird species. Our results from



Singing Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

(Bob Martinka photo)

these surveys showed that both species occur in all areas along the southern canyons and adjacent slopes off the West Pryor Mountains that are dominated by Utah Junipers; within this area, we found a minimum of 51 pairs of Gray Flycatchers and 60 pairs of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (see Fig. 1).

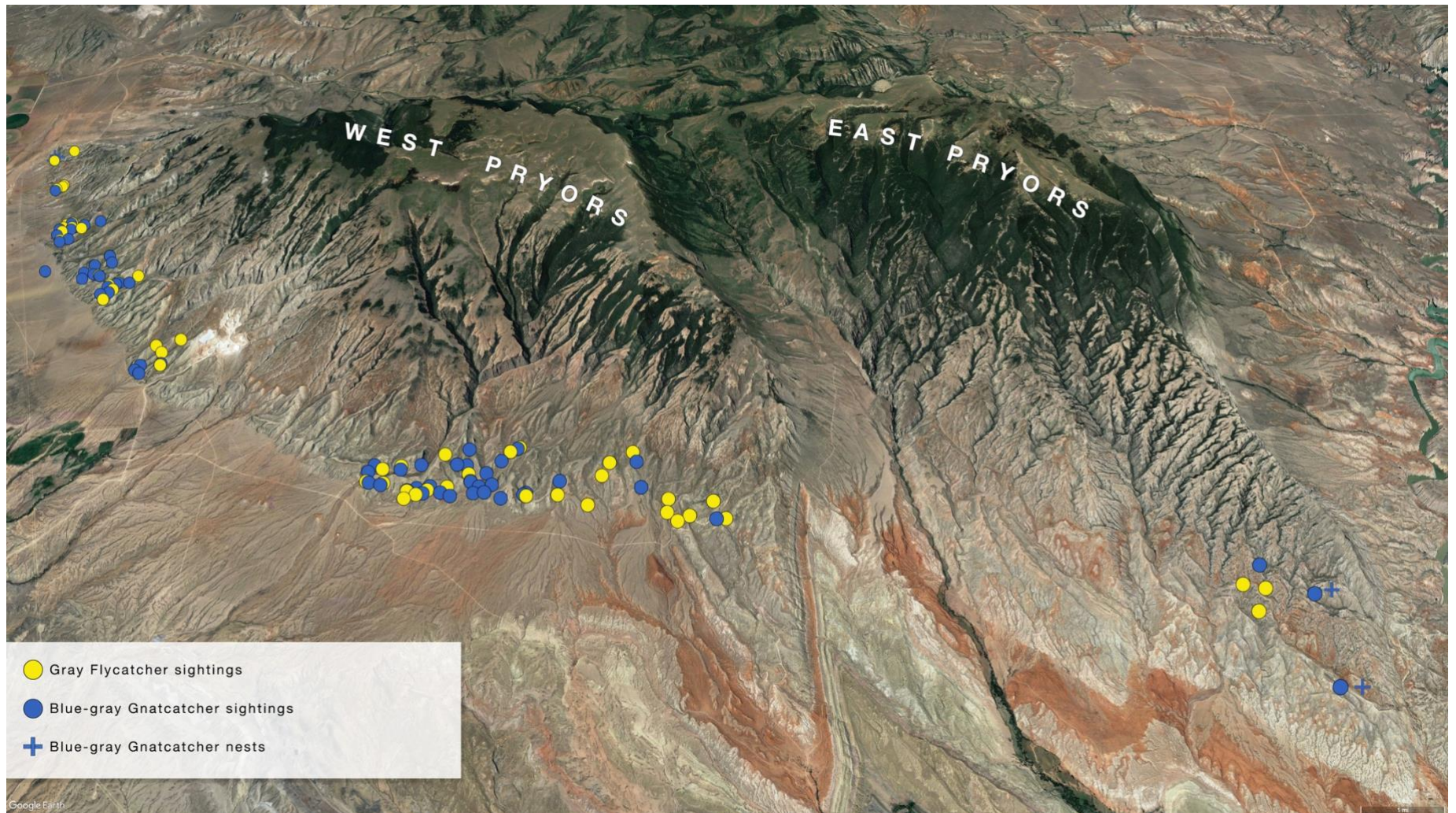


Figure 1. Pryor Mountain study areas surveyed for Gray Flycatchers and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers in 2018 and 2019



East Pryors

(Jeff Marks photo)

On 23 May 2019, Marks, Hendricks, Ernie McKenzie, Barb Pitman, and Hilary Turner hiked in the sagebrush- and juniper-dominated flats in the East Pryors between Sykes Ridge and Big Coulee. During nearly 8 hours on foot, we found a minimum of three pairs of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, three singing Gray Flycatchers, and three singing Dusky Flycatchers (Fig. 1). All three of these species appear to be less abundant here than in the canyons coming off the West Pryors. Our work is the first to confirm that Gray Flycatchers occur in the flats below the East Pryors.

Field work on Gray Flycatchers and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers in the Pryors is concluded, for now. We hope to return to the Pryors in the future to experimentally examine whether Green-tailed Towhees (*Pipilo chlorurus*) are nest predators of gnatcatchers, as suggested by anecdotal observations we have made in Carbon County over the years.



Gray Flycatcher

(Bob Martinka photo)



Paul, Hilary, Ernie, & Barb, East Pryors

(Jeff Marks photo)

Solitary Sandpipers Nesting in Glacier National Park

In 2018, we confirmed for the first time that Solitary Sandpipers nest in Montana when Steve Gniadek observed a half-grown chick at Sondreson Meadow just outside the western boundary of Glacier National Park. Before then, the species was known to nest in the boreal forest of Alaska, Canada, and extreme northern Minnesota, the latter being the only one of the lower 48 states where nesting had been documented.

With the help of volunteers Steve Gniadek, Jim Rogers, Bruce Tannehill, Craig Barfoot, Josh Covill, and Rose Leach, we visited several wetlands in the park from late May to late July and found what appeared to be territorial sandpipers at three places: McGee Meadow, a small unnamed wetland about 800 m northeast of McGee Meadow, and Sondreson Meadow. Despite repeated visits to McGee, we found no evidence that sandpipers nested there. After Jim Rogers and Craig Barfoot first found a vocalizing pair of sandpipers at the unnamed wetland on 29 June, Steve Gniadek and Josh Covill documented breeding there on 16 July when they photographed a chick that was about half-grown. As it turns out, this is the same wetland where Chris Peterson photographed an adult sandpiper that was vocalizing from a perch in a tree in late June

2007; the sighting was erroneously reported as being at Howe Lake. In any event, this marks the second confirmed nesting by Solitary Sandpipers in Montana. Jeff Marks and Rose Leach visited the unnamed wetland on 30 July, at which time the wetland had only a few puddles of standing water, and no sandpipers were present.



Solitary Sandpipers on the nesting grounds, Glacier NP

(Bruce Tannehill photo)

Birds of Montana Library Project

When Jeff checked the WorldCat database in July, he was dismayed to learn that fewer than 10 public libraries in the state had a copy of *Birds of Montana*. Shortly thereafter, and with the help of our publisher (Buteo Books) and the Montana State Library in Helena, we launched a campaign to make copies of the book available to public libraries free of charge. The State Library queried all 110 of the state's public libraries to see if they wanted a copy, and then sent the book to each library that replied in the affirmative. By mid-November we had raised the \$6,400 needed to purchase and ship 97 copies of the book to Helena. The books arrived at the State Library on 19 December and were distributed to public libraries across the state soon thereafter. Thank you very much to all who helped make this project a huge success!

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>, 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>.



Montana Bird Records Committee Group Photo



Adult Pomarine Jaeger

(John Carlson photo)

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.



Western Tanager

(Ed Harper photo)

Killdeer's Keep

Jeff wrote a species profile for the American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) to add to the list of essays about common Montana species whose numbers are in serious decline, as highlighted in the [Killdeer's Keep](#) section of our Web site.

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. In 2019 Jeff continued to participate as a member of the Pinyon Jay Working Group as the sole representative from Montana. 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. Indeed, in late May of this year Jeff and Paul found an active nest, the first either of them had seen, in a stand of Utah Junipers within the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area.



Pinyon Jays

(Ed Harper photo)

Publications

In 2019 Paul published a paper in *Northwestern Naturalist* documenting predation by a garter snake (*Thamnophis elegans*) on nestling Dark-eyed Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*), and Jeff and Dan Casey published a note in the *Journal of Raptor Research* on a Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) killing a Lesser Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis parvipes*). Paul and Jeff are working with Ned and Gigi Batchelder to write up the Batchelders' long-term data on Costa's Hummingbird (*Calypte costae*) nesting in Nevada and Black-chinned Hummingbirds (*Archilochus alexandri*) nesting in Texas.

Birding Tours

The MBA 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 July, Jeff led a tour to the highlands of central Peru and put the finishing touches on a new birding tour to Senegal that will occur in January 2020. The Senegal tour is full with 8 participants, and we hope to offer it again in the winter of 2020-21.



Ulcumano Ecolodge, Peru (Jeff Marks photo)



Yellow-scarfed Tanager

(Dubi Shapiro photo)



Lunch at 15,200 feet, Marcopomacocha, Peru

Other Outreach Activities

Jeff and Paul routinely participate in various outreach activities, including eBird review, management of various listservs concerned with birds, and manuscript review for professional journals. In 2019, Jeff reviewed manuscripts that were submitted to *Journal of Raptor Research* (2), *Journal of Wildlife Management* (2), *Western North American Naturalist*, and *Southwestern Naturalist*. Jeff also published a letter to the editor in the autumn 2019 issue of *Living Bird*. Paul reviewed a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Species Status Assessment for the Puget Oregonian (*Cryptomastix devia*), which sounds the name of a local newspaper but actually is a land snail (yes, Paul is an expert on species other than birds). Paul also published a letter to the editor in the May/June 2019 issue of *Bird Watcher's Digest* and an account of Clark's Nutcrackers caching Whitebark Pine seeds in trees in the Fall 2019 issue of *Nutcracker Notes*, the journal of the Whitebark Pine Ecosystem Foundation.

Thank You!

We could not function without our supporters and field volunteers. First, we thank Cynthia Hudson & Robert Zirl, Susie Maclin, the Drollinger Family Charitable Foundation, Jeff Woodman, Beth Madden, Ron Martin, and Dan Casey for their unrestricted donations. Carol Beardmore, Peggy Harger-Allen, Diane Kook, Rose Leach, Jenna McCullough, Judy Meredith, Nancy Moore, Cay Ogden, and Nick Vinciguerra helped support our work and participated in our mission by joining an international birding tour (or two). Clancy Cone, Ben Deeble, Deborah Drain, Summer Griffis, Lou Ann Harris

Cynthia Hudson & Robert Zirl, Katie La Salle-Lowery, Susie Maclin, Beth Madden, Margaret Marti, Ron Martin, Bob Martinka, Bryce Maxell, Christopher Norment, Cay Ogden, Jim Rogers & Sherry Jones, Mary Francis Ruffatto, Kitty Lou Rusher, Emily Sieger, Michele & Doug Stark, Dan Sullivan, Jon Swenson, Bitterroot Audubon, Five Valleys Audubon, Flathead Audubon, Last Chance Audubon, Mission Mountain Audubon, Pintler Audubon, Sacajawea Audubon, and Upper Missouri Breaks Audubon made donations for the *Birds of Montana* Library Project.

For help in the field we thank Barb Pitman, Ernie McKenzie, Dan Casey, and Hilary Turner (Pryor Mountains) and Steve Gniadek, Jim Rogers, Bruce Tannehill, Craig Barfoot, and Rose Leach (Solitary Sandpipers in Glacier NP). We also thank Tara Carolin and Lisa Bate for making possible our work in Glacier National Park, John Carlson, Josh Covill, Ed Harper, Rose Leach, Bob Martinka, and Dubi Shapiro for donating photos, and Matthew Nordhagen for his outstanding work on our Web site and annual report.



Mountain Plover

(Susan Maclin photo)



Young Solitary Sandpiper found at unnamed wetland in Glacier NP on 16 July 2019 (Josh Covill photo)