



Montana  Bird Advocacy  
Third Annual Report 2020

Lewis's Woodpecker bringing Western Sheep Moth to nest (Cindy Goeddel photo)

## A Few Thoughts from the Executive Director

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A good case could be made for 2020 being one of the worst years in our lifetimes, considering political unrest, economic upheaval, the Covid-19 pandemic, continued assaults on our environment, and the wildfires that occurred in the West. Thankfully, the year ended on a positive note after results of the presidential election became official, which should be a great boost for future conservation efforts. Owing to the pandemic, we canceled a full birding tour to the highlands of central Peru that was set for July, and we also stopped recruiting for our second trip to Senegal that we'd planned for December. We plan to offer at least one of these trips starting in 2022.

Field work in 2020 focused on additional attempts to document nesting by Solitary Sandpipers (*Tringa solitaria*) in Glacier National Park (GNP) and surveying for nesting Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (*Poliptila caerulea*) in Beaverhead County soon after expert birder Matthew Eckerson found a pair of gnatcatchers near Clark Canyon Reservoir, which was the first time that species had been found in the county during the breeding season. In addition, wanting to stay close to home during the early stages of the Covid-19 outbreak, in April and May Jeff monitored a Bewick's Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*) nest in Portland, Oregon, which included watching the nest for four hours per day throughout the 18-day nesting period to determine provisioning behavior of the adults.

Our first birding tour to Senegal concluded in January just before the Covid-19 outbreak hit the United States with a vengeance. The trip was absolutely wonderful, and we hope to return there several more times in the coming years (see below).

The Montana Bird Advocacy (MBA) has continued to play a major role in increasing knowledge of Montana's birds and promoting 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. We also provide and constantly update information on the number of accepted records for all [vagrant birds](#) documented in the state. **This information is available nowhere else.**

Owing to loss of revenue from our canceled birding tours, fundraising was especially challenging in 2020. Our major donors came through early in the year, thankfully, which allowed us to continue our field projects without delay. Please, visit our Web site, contact us with any bird-related questions you'd like answered or comments you wish for us to consider, and think about making a tax-deductible donation to help support our important work. **Jeff Marks, Executive Director**



Jeff searching for Solitary Sandpipers in Glacier National Park (Rose Leach photo)

## Solitary Sandpipers Nesting in Glacier National Park

The Covid pandemic limited the amount of time and the number of people available to conduct field work in 2020. Jeff searched various wetlands off the Inside North Fork Road on the west side of GNP and Sondreson Meadow outside the park from 1–3 June and 29–30 June. Jim Rogers accompanied Jeff in GNP on 3 June and also searched Unnamed Wetland No. 1 on 17 June. Rogers returned with Craig Barfoot to search Unnamed Wetland No. 1 and McGee Meadow on 24 June. He also searched Unnamed Wetland Nos. 1 and 2 on 4, 9, and 23 July. We did not document nesting by Solitary Sandpipers in 2020, but we had some positive results, including the location of a new likely breeding site. We summarize these results briefly below.

**1 June**—Jeff found a pair of sandpipers near the southeastern corner of Unnamed Wetland No. 1 at 1345. They were calling and hopping onto downed logs in the wetland, and at one point one flew to a small tree and called. Both birds eventually flew off to the north and disappeared from view. Jeff walked the entire periphery of the wetland searching for old passerine nests and examined two American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) nests and one non-robin passerine nest that seemed suitable for nesting sandpipers; each nest was empty. Jeff then drove along the Inside North Fork Road to the locked gate just past the Camas Creek Bridge and walked north and west along the road to Anaconda Creek, where GNP biologist Lisa Bate observed a Solitary Sandpiper at a small wetland adjacent to the creek in the summer of 2019. Rushing water from Anaconda Creek had overrun the small wetland, and no sandpipers were present. On the return walk, Jeff bushwhacked into an unnamed wetland just east of Dutch Creek and north of the road. The wetland was choked with old emergent vegetation and appeared to contain no open water. No sandpipers were detected.



Solitary Sandpiper at Unnamed Wetland No. 2, June 2020

(Jeff Marks photo)



Unnamed Wetland No. 1, June 2020

(Jeff Marks photo)

**2 June**—In the morning, Jeff searched areas surrounding the open water at McGee Meadow but did not find any sandpipers. He then revisited Unnamed Wetland No. 1 and searched the entire area but found no sandpipers. Next, he searched an unnamed fen just west of the Inside North Fork Road and south of Camas Creek. Like the wetland near Dutch Creek, this one was choked with decadent emergent vegetation and contained no open water. No sandpipers were detected. **Thus far, all wetlands in Montana where breeding by Solitary Sandpipers has been confirmed or strongly suspected contain a mixture of open water and emergent vegetation** (see photos below).

**17 June**—Jim Rogers searched Unnamed Wetland No. 1 but found no sandpipers.

**24 June**—Jim Rogers and Craig Barfoot found one Solitary Sandpiper at Unnamed Wetland No. 1 at 0900. It was giving alarm calls at the southwestern end of the wetland, near where Jeff observed a pair of sandpipers on 1 June. It eventually flew off to the southwest toward McGee Meadow. Jim and Craig searched the rest of the wetland but found no other sandpipers. Next they drove back out the Inside North Fork Road and parked at McGee Meadow along Camas Road. They searched McGee Meadow around all of the open water but found no sandpipers.

**29 June**—Jeff arrived at Unnamed Wetland No. 1 at 0830 and again searched it thoroughly without detecting a Solitary Sandpiper. Jeff then drove back down the Inside North Fork Road and stopped for lunch at a small turnout near a small sedge-choked wetland at 48.58365°N, 114.02049°W. Within 5 minutes he heard a Solitary Sandpiper calling from a smaller wetland to the east above the main pond. He walked over and immediately found the bird, which was very agitated and repeatedly flew to the tops of small trees and called. Over the next hour, Jeff walked down to this second, smaller

pond, which is at 48.58339°N, 114.01904°W, and to an even smaller pond a short way to the east. He found a total of three different Solitary Sandpipers, but only the first bird was calling and acting territorial. The surrounding area has been burned, with only a small number of live trees remaining, and Jeff searched extensively looking for old passerine nests. He found two American Robin nests, one empty, the other with nestlings. The one sandpiper followed him everywhere, calling and landing on the ground near him and in tree tops. Jeff walked several hundred meters to the north of the middle pond and sat down to watch the birds in case they were tending young, but no young were seen. We have named this new site Unnamed Wetland No. 2. Jeff returned to this small wetland complex at 1745, again finding three different sandpipers, only one of which acted agitated (as if defending young) and called repeatedly. It seems as though a brood was here, but Jeff could not confirm that.



Unnamed Wetland No. 2, June 2020

(Jeff Marks photo)

**30 June**—Jeff returned to Unnamed Wetland No. 2 at 0830 in a steady rain. He searched each of the three ponds and nearby uplands but found no sandpipers. Where had they gone? The rain increased, and Jeff left the park and returned to Missoula.

**4, 9, & 23 July**—On 4 July Jim Rogers found one Solitary Sandpiper at the first of the three ponds at Unnamed Wetland No. 2 and no sandpipers at Unnamed Wetland No. 1. He also found a sandpiper at the middle pond of Unnamed Wetland No. 2 on 9 July. The bird called several times and followed him as he walked up to search the third pond but spent most of its time at the middle pond. Jim returned to the park on 23 July and searched both of the Unnamed Wetlands. They were nearly dry, and he found no sandpipers at either site.



Wetland choked with sedges, unsuitable for Solitary Sandpipers (Jeff Marks photo)

On the basis of our own field work since 2018, and our scrutiny of evidence provided by other observers dating back to 2007, we confirmed nesting by Solitary Sandpipers at two sites and strongly suspect that the species nested at three other sites (Table 1, Fig. 1). Brief details of documented and suspected nesting are provided in Table 2. Before our work in 2018, Solitary Sandpipers had been known to nest in the boreal forest of Alaska, Canada, and extreme northern Minnesota, the latter being the only one of the contiguous United States where nesting had been documented. We documented one more nesting event in 2019.



Solitary Sandpiper chick at Sondreson Meadow, 18 July 2018 (Steve Gniadek photo)

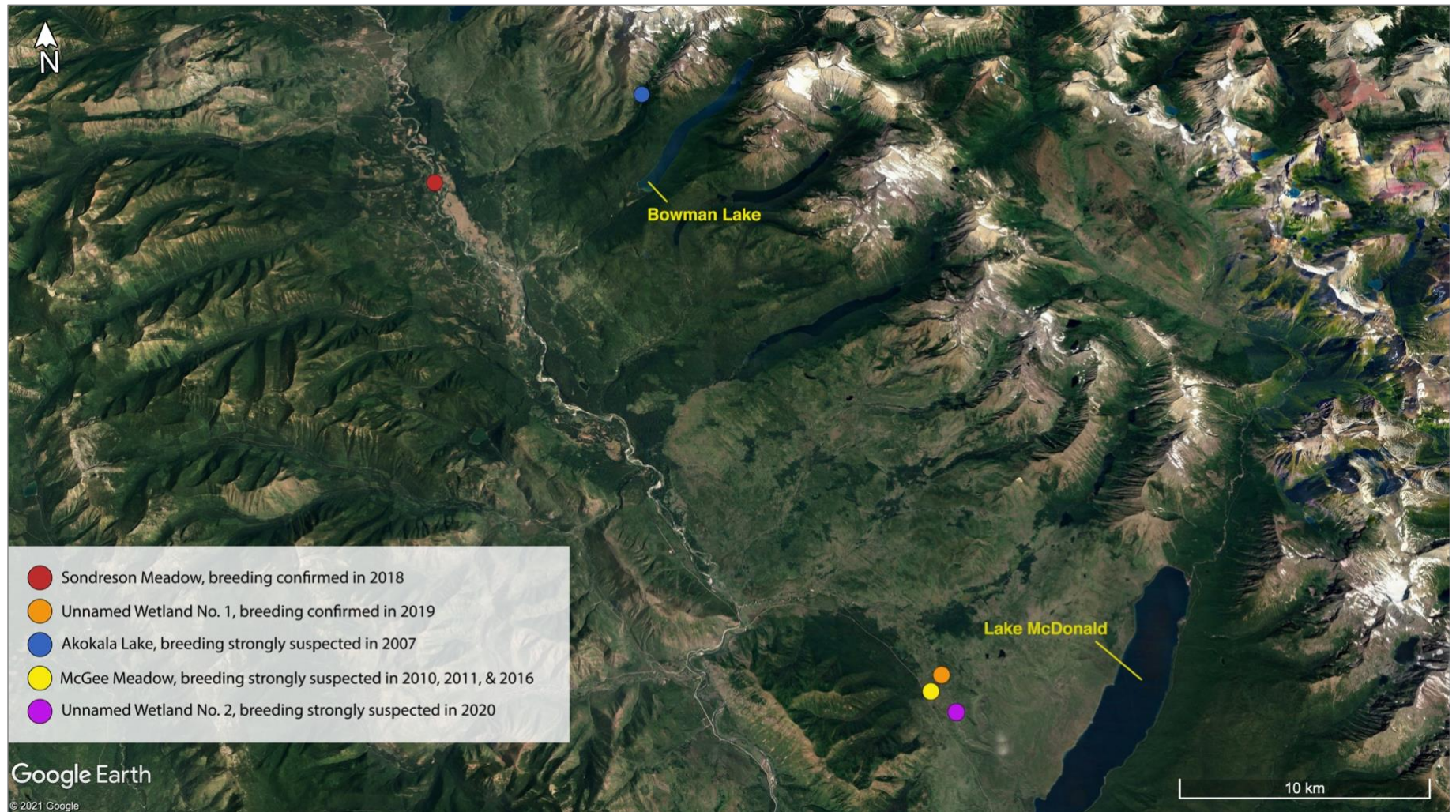


Figure 1. Map of known and suspected Solitary Sandpiper breeding sites in Montana

Table 1. Wetlands in and near Glacier National Park where Solitary Sandpipers have been confirmed or strongly suspected to breed.

Site	Approximate location	Breeding suspected	Breeding confirmed
Sondreson Meadow <sup>a</sup>	48.83516°N, 114.34525°W	2017	2018
Unnamed Wetland No. 1	48.59768°N, 114.02524°W	2007	2019
Akokala Lake	48.88145°N, 114.19860°W	2007	No
McGee Meadow	48.59156°N, 114.03236°W	2010, 2011, 2016	No
Unnamed Wetland No. 2	48.58339°N, 114.01904°W	2020	No

<sup>a</sup> Site adjacent to Glacier National Park on Flathead National Forest.

Table 2. Evidence for nesting by Solitary Sandpipers in and near Glacier National Park.

Site	Observer(s)	Date	Evidence
Sondreson Meadow	S. Gniadek	18 July 2018	Half-grown young
Unnamed Wetland No. 1 <sup>a</sup>	S. Gniadek/J. Covill	16 July 2019	Half-grown young
Akokala Lake	S. Gniadek	1 July 2007	Calling adult
McGee Meadow	J. Carlisle/H. Carlisle	22 May 2010	Calling adults
McGee Meadow	C. Robson	29 June 2011	Calling adult
McGee Meadow	E. Rasmussen	16 July 2016	Calling adults
Unnamed Wetland No. 2	J. Marks	29 June 2020	Calling adults

<sup>a</sup> Nesting first suspected when Chris Peterson saw an adult calling from trees on 23 June 2007.

## Blue-gray Gnatcatchers nesting in Beaverhead County



Eckerson Ridge, July 2020

(Jeff Marks photo)

On 21 June 2020, Matthew Eckerson found a pair of gnatcatchers on a ridge above Clark Canyon Reservoir in Beaverhead County. The habitat was dominated by Rocky Mountain juniper (*Juniperus scopulorum*) and mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus ledifolius*) and appeared to be suitable for nesting. Before then, no verified report of gnatcatchers occurred in the county during the nesting season. Jeff and Rose Leach hiked to the location on 1 July and found a pair of gnatcatchers in the area but could not determine whether they were nesting. From 7–9 July, Jeff, Paul, and Nate Kohler searched sagebrush and juniper habitat on and near “Eckerson Ridge.” They found one gnatcatcher of unknown sex about 3 km north-northeast

of Eckerson Ridge on 7 July and a male gnatcatcher on a nest near the summit of Eckerson Ridge on 8 July. The nest was in a Rocky Mountain juniper at about 1,915 m elevation (6,280 feet) and contained three hatchlings and one unhatched egg. Allowing four days to lay the clutch and an incubation period of 13 days, the first egg would have been laid on or about 22 June. This nest is the first documentation of breeding by Blue-gray Gnatcatchers in Beaverhead County and thus far is the highest elevation that gnatcatchers have been found in the state.



Male Blue-gray Gnatcatcher on nest, Eckerson Ridge

(Paul Hendricks photo)



## Montana Bird Records Committee

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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, thus providing the most current list, with accepted English and scientific names: <https://www.montanabirdadvocacy.org/state-list>.

## Record Early and Late Dates for Montana Migrants

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Interest remains high among birders to track record dates for Montana's migrant birds. Accordingly, Jeff has continued to update the list of record early and late dates on the MBA Web site at <https://www.montanabirdadvocacy.org/record-dates-migrants>.

## Nesting Bewick's Wrens

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Before the field season began in Montana, Jeff decided to pay close attention to a pair of Bewick's Wrens that set up housekeeping in a nest box in his neighborhood in Portland, Oregon. Jeff caught and banded the male shortly after his mate began laying eggs in early April and banded the female two days before the eggs hatched in late April. Jeff then watched the nest for four hours each day throughout the 18-day nestling period, during which time he observed 811 food deliveries by the parents. Data analysis was underway at the time this report was completed and posted online.



Montana's first Ivory Gull, Flathead Lake, 30 January 2020

(Craig Barfoot photo)



For the first time, the Montana Bird Records Committee held its annual meeting via Zoom

## Publications

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A Sennar Penduline Tit preens a flock mate in Senegal (Jenna McCullough photo)

It was a productive year for writing manuscripts for journal publications. Paul published a paper in [Northwestern Naturalist](#) on food-caching by Black-billed Magpies (*Pica hudsonia*), and Jeff co-authored a note in the [Bulletin of the African Bird Club](#) describing the first case of allopreening known for the rare and poorly studied Sennar Penduline Tit (*Anthoscopus punctifrons*). Also in 2020, Paul and Jeff submitted manuscripts to the *Wilson Journal of Ornithology* with Ned and Gigi Batchelder and others on Costa's Hummingbirds (*Calypte costae*) nesting in Nevada and Black-chinned Hummingbirds (*Archilochus alexandri*) nesting in Texas. Paul also submitted manuscripts to *Northwestern Naturalist* on Cedar

Waxwings (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) feeding at sapsucker sap wells and to *Wilson Journal of Ornithology* on Belted Kingfisher (*Megaceryle alcyon*) vocalizations and Evening Grosbeak (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*) incubation behavior. Jeff also submitted a manuscript to *Cotinga* on nectar robbing by a Purple-collared Woodstar (*Myrtis fanny*) and to *Wilson Journal of Ornithology* with Cindy Goedel and Vicki Saab on Lewis's Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes lewis*) provisioning their young with nestling passerines. It is worth noting that publications on the woodstar and the penduline tit resulted from observations made during birding tours that Jeff led to Peru and Senegal, respectively. By the time this report was posted online in April 2021, the three papers on hummingbirds and the ones on Lewis's Woodpeckers and Cedar Waxwings had been accepted for publication but had not appeared in print.

## Birding Tours

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The MBA leads birding tours to several 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, Jeff led his first tour to [Senegal](#). We had a wonderful time and encountered 312 species of birds, including Scissor-tailed Kite (*Chelictinia riocourii*), Arabian Bustard (*Ardeotis arabs*), White-bellied Bustard (*Eupodotis senegalensis*), African Finfoot (*Podica senegalensis*), Abyssinian Ground Hornbill (*Bucorvus abyssinicus*), Adamawa Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia hypopyrrha*), Pel's Fishing Owl (*Scotopelia peli*), Little Gray Woodpecker (*Dendropicos elachus*), Fox Kestrel (*Falco alopex*), River Prinia (*Prinia fluiatilis*), Fulvous Chatterer (*Turdoides fulva*), Sennar Penduline Tit, and Neumann's Starling (*Onychognathus*

*neumanni*). As noted above, the pandemic forced cancellation of tours to Peru in July and to Senegal in December. We hope to offer these tours again starting in 2022.



Male Abyssinian Ground Hornbill, Senegal (Jenna McCullough photo)



Spotted Thick-knee, Senegal (Nick Vinciguerra photo)



Male Senegal Batis, Senegal (Jenna McCullough photo)



Happy group at Keur Mbaye, Senegal, January 2020 (photographer unknown)

## Other Outreach Activities

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Jeff and Paul took part in various outreach and professional activities, including eBird review, management of various birding listservs, and manuscript review for professional journals. In May and June Paul conducted bird surveys on a 140-ha ranch in the Mission Valley. Jeff reviewed a book-length manuscript on Common Nighthawks for Oregon State University Press and manuscripts that were submitted to *Wilson Journal of Ornithology*, *Journal of Raptor Research*, *Journal of Wildlife Management*, *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club*, and *Canadian Field-Naturalist*. Jeff also began writing the Montana section for the quarterly online newsletter for the Western Field Ornithologists in January and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

## Thank You!

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We could not function without our supporters and field volunteers. First, we thank **Cynthia Hudson & Robert Zirl, Barbara Marks, Susie Maclin, Diane Kook, Cay Ogden, Jean Carlson, Jon Swenson, Rose Leach**, and **Peggy Harger-Allen** for their unrestricted donations. **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 our birding tour to Senegal in January.

We are grateful to **Nate Kohler, Rose Leach**, and **Steve Sherman** for helping to search for gnatcatchers in Beaverhead County and to **Jim Rogers** and **Craig Barfoot** for searching for nesting Solitary

Sandpipers in Glacier National Park. We also thank **Tara Carolin, Lisa Bate**, and **Dan Seifert** for making possible our work in Glacier National Park, and **Cindy Goeddel, Zach Feiner, Craig Barfoot, Sam Koenen, Jenna McCullough, Nick Vinciguerra, Rose Leach**, and **Pel Marks-Bienen** for allowing us to use their photographs. Last, we thank **Matthew Nordhagen** for his continued outstanding work on our Web site and annual report.



Stones placed by Rock Wrens at their nest entrance, Beaverhead County (Jeff Marks photo)



Montana's record late White-winged Dove in Bozeman, December 2020 (Sam Koenen photo)



Male Bewick's Wren at nest, Portland, Oregon (Zach Feiner photo)



Jeff on Bewick's Wren nest watch, Portland, Oregon (Pel Marks-Bienen photo)



Bewick's Wren captured for nesting study in Portland, Oregon (Jeff Marks photo)