



Montana  Bird Advocacy
Fourth Annual Report 2021

A Few Thoughts from the Executive Director

For the second year in a row, the Covid-19 pandemic profoundly affected life as we had known it. With the availability of an effective vaccine early in the year, however, things began a return to normal. Nonetheless, various restrictions made international travel difficult to impossible, depending on the destination. As a result, we did not attempt to conduct birding tours in 2021. At the start of the year we were cautiously optimistic that our tours would resume in 2022, and indeed they did!

Field work in 2021 involved the continuation of two multiyear projects: documenting nesting by Solitary Sandpipers (*Tringa solitaria*) in and near Glacier National Park (GNP), and surveying for nesting Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (*Poliophtila caerulea*) in Beaverhead County. In addition, we began a new project thanks to the hard work of dedicated volunteer Steve Flood: determining the distributional limits of Eastern (*Vireo gilvus gilvus*) and Western (*V. g. swainsoni*) Warbling Vireos in Montana. Each of these two subspecies probably will be elevated to full species owing to differences in bill size, vocalizations, molt schedules, and DNA. Steve focused on vocalizations and made recordings at widely separated locales in Montana east of the Continental Divide. His results are summarized below.

The pandemic did not prevent the Montana Bird Advocacy (MBA) from continuing our major role in increasing knowledge of Montana's birds. Our Web site (<https://www.montanabirdadvocacy.org/>) provides essential information for Montana bird enthusiasts, including the Web pages for the [Montana Bird Records Committee](#), the [Official State List](#) of Montana's birds (with current English and scientific names listed in proper taxonomic sequence), a list of [record early and late dates](#) for all Montana migrants (derived from an exhaustive review of various sources of information), and a tally of the number of accepted records for all [vagrant birds](#) documented in the state. **This material is available nowhere else.**

Fundraising continued to be challenging in 2021 given the loss of potential revenue from international birding trips. Once again, however, our major donors came through, which enabled us to conduct our field projects with the help of several skilled volunteers. 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 consider making a tax-deductible donation to help support our important work. **Jeff Marks, Executive Director**



Jeff rethinking his commitment to gnatcatcher work in Beaverhead County after a late spring snowstorm (Paul Hendricks photo)

Solitary Sandpipers Nesting in Glacier National Park

The Covid pandemic again limited the amount of time and the number of people available to conduct field work. For the second straight year, we did not document any breeding attempts, and we encountered fewer birds relative to 2020. Jeff made only one visit to GNP to search for sandpipers, and Jim Rogers, accompanied at times by several other people, made 10 trips to GNP in search of sandpipers. Each visit is summarized briefly below.



Solitary Sandpiper at the Unnamed Wetland No. 2

(Jeff Marks photo)

17 May—With Gail and Bruch Tannehill and Sherry Jones, Jim searched for sandpipers along the Inside North Fork Road. They found one bird at Unnamed Wetland No. 2 at 48.58305°N, 114.01736°W, which appeared to respond to a vocal recording that Jim played. They saw no sandpipers at Unnamed Wetland No. 1 or around the Howe Lakes wetland complex.

19 May—Jim returned to the park alone and first searched Unnamed Wetland No. 1 without success. At Unnamed Wetland No. 2, however, he located a pair of Solitary Sandpipers at one of the upper small ponds at 48.58238°N, 114.01644°W. He watched the sandpipers preen and feed from 13:45 to 16:15. At 14:30, the birds copulated briefly (ca. 2–3 seconds). At about 16:15, they abruptly flew out of sight to the south. After 20 minutes of slogging through a dense patch of spruces, Jim discovered what he assumed was the same sandpiper pair feeding in another small wet area about 50 m away at 48.58176°N, 114.01605°W. He left their company at 16:45, with the birds still present.

25 May—Jim found a single Solitary Sandpiper in the same small pond of Unnamed Wetland No. 2 where he had watched the pair at length on 19 May. Also at the wetland were four Red-necked Phalaropes (*Phalaropus lobatus*), which were completely unexpected. Jim checked the area twice that day, in the morning and late afternoon, and the phalaropes were present both times. He found no sandpipers at Unnamed Wetland No. 1 or at Christensen Meadows.

28 May—Jim Rogers and Craig Barfoot briefly observed a single sandpiper in a small wet area to the north of the wetland where Jim saw the single bird on the 25 May. Again, no sandpipers were detected at Unnamed Wetland No. 1 or at Christensen Meadows.

2 June—Jim searched without success at Unnamed Wetland Nos. 1 and 2.

14 & 21 June—Jim again searched unsuccessfully at Unnamed Wetland Nos. 1 and 2.



Solitary Sandpiper habitat at the Unnamed Wetland No. 2

(Jeff Marks photo)

24 June—Jim searched without success at Unnamed Wetland Nos. 1 and 2 and at McGee Meadow, as well as in several wetland areas along the North Fork Road between from the Camas Creek entrance to GNP and Polebridge. He also visited Sondreson Meadow, where nesting by Solitary Sandpipers was documented in 2018.

14 July—Jim and Jeff Marks searched the complex of wetlands at Unnamed Wetland No. 2. No sandpipers were detected.

22 July—On Jim’s last visit he searched unsuccessfully at Unnamed Wetland Nos. 1 and 2, and at McGee Meadow.



Solitary Sandpiper chick at Unnamed Wetland No. 1, 16 July 2019

(Josh Covill photo)

Blue-gray Gnatcatchers nesting in Beaverhead County



Nate and Paul hiking to Eckerson Ridge

(Jeff Marks photo)

As we noted previously, on 21 June 2020, Matthew Eckerson found a pair of gnatcatchers on a ridge above Clark Canyon Reservoir in Beaverhead County in habitat dominated by Rocky Mountain juniper (*Juniperus scopulorum*) and mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus ledifolius*). Before then, no verified report of gnatcatchers occurred in the county during the nesting season. From 7–9 July 2020, Jeff, Paul Hendricks, and Nate Kohler searched for gnatcatchers 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. This nest was 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.

Reasoning that gnatcatchers were regular breeders in the area, we spent several days in suitable habitat in Beaverhead County in 2021 hoping to find more birds and thus improve our understanding of the species’ distribution at the western edge of their range in Montana. On 10 June, Jeff and Paul searched suitable habitat around Bannack State Park but found no gnatcatchers. On 11 June, Jeff, Paul, and Steve Sherman hiked to Eckerson Ridge and visited the two other places they’d found gnatcatchers in 2020. They failed to see or hear a single gnatcatcher and concluded that the birds were not present anywhere they searched (gnatcatchers normally are quite vocal and very easily detected during the nesting season). On 12 June, Jeff, Paul, and Kate Stone checked Henneberry Gulch east of the Beaverhead River and again failed to find gnatcatchers. On 13 June, Jeff and Paul visited Cottonwood Canyon in Jefferson County, some 130 km northeast of Eckerson Ridge in Beaverhead County. From 1–2 pairs of gnatcatchers had been found at Cottonwood Canyon every year from 2014 through 2020. Jeff and Paul found no birds despite searching extensively. Jeff, Rose Leach, and Steve Flood returned to Cottonwood Canyon briefly on 14 June and again found no gnatcatchers. Indeed, no one else reported gnatcatchers at Cottonwood Canyon at any time in 2020. The birds appeared to be absent, making us wonder if gnatcatchers had disappeared from much of their expanding range outside of Carbon County.

Distributions of Eastern and Western Warbling Vireos in Montana

Keen-eared birders have become adept at separating Eastern Warbling Vireos (*Vireo gilvus gilvus*) from Western Warbling Vireos (*V. g. swainsoni*) on the basis of subtle differences in song (Figs. 1a, b). Montana has breeding populations of both subspecies, but until now little has been known about their distribution in the state. Anticipating that these two subspecies will be elevated to full species in the future, we enlisted Steve Flood to record singing Warbling Vireos in eastern Montana and to make sonograms from his recordings. Thus, Steve began to assemble a database that will be useful in determining where each taxon can be found in parts of the state where either one is reasonably likely to occur.



One of Steve Flood's target Warbling Vireos

(Bob Martinka photo)

Warbling Vireos found at lower elevations east of 111° west longitude during the breeding season tend to belong to the Eastern subspecies (Fig. 2). Exceptions occur at higher elevations, such as in the Little Rocky Mountains and the Bears Paw Mountains, where the Western subspecies occurs east of the westernmost individuals of the Eastern subspecies (Fig. 2). A bird recorded near Great Falls, where the Western subspecies would be expected, had elements of

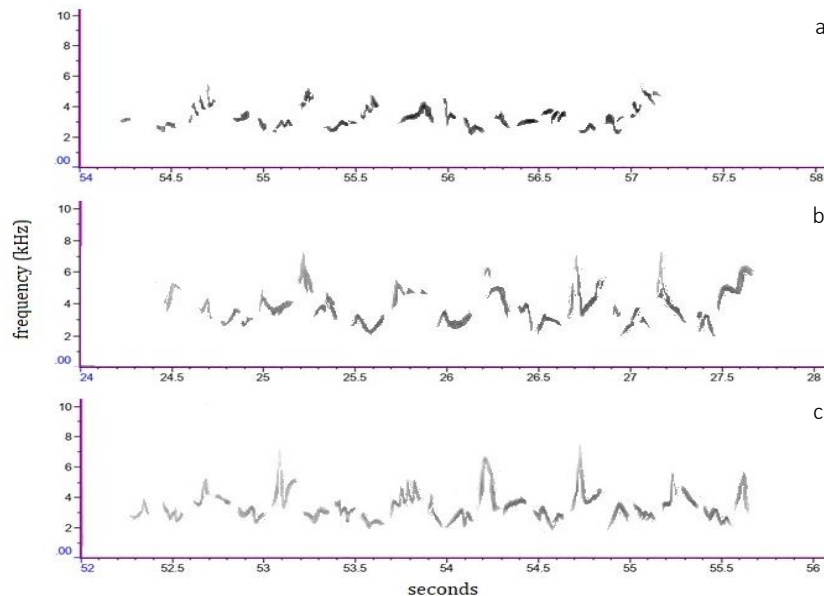


Figure 1. Sonograms of Warbling Vireo songs recorded by Steve Flood. Shown are songs of typical Western Warbling Vireo (a), typical Eastern Warbling Vireo (b), and atypical bird with elements of Western and Eastern songs (c).

both taxa (Fig. 1c). Steve intends to obtain recordings along the Yellowstone River between Livingston and the North Dakota border in future years.



Steve Flood in the field with recording gear

(Cameo Flood photo)

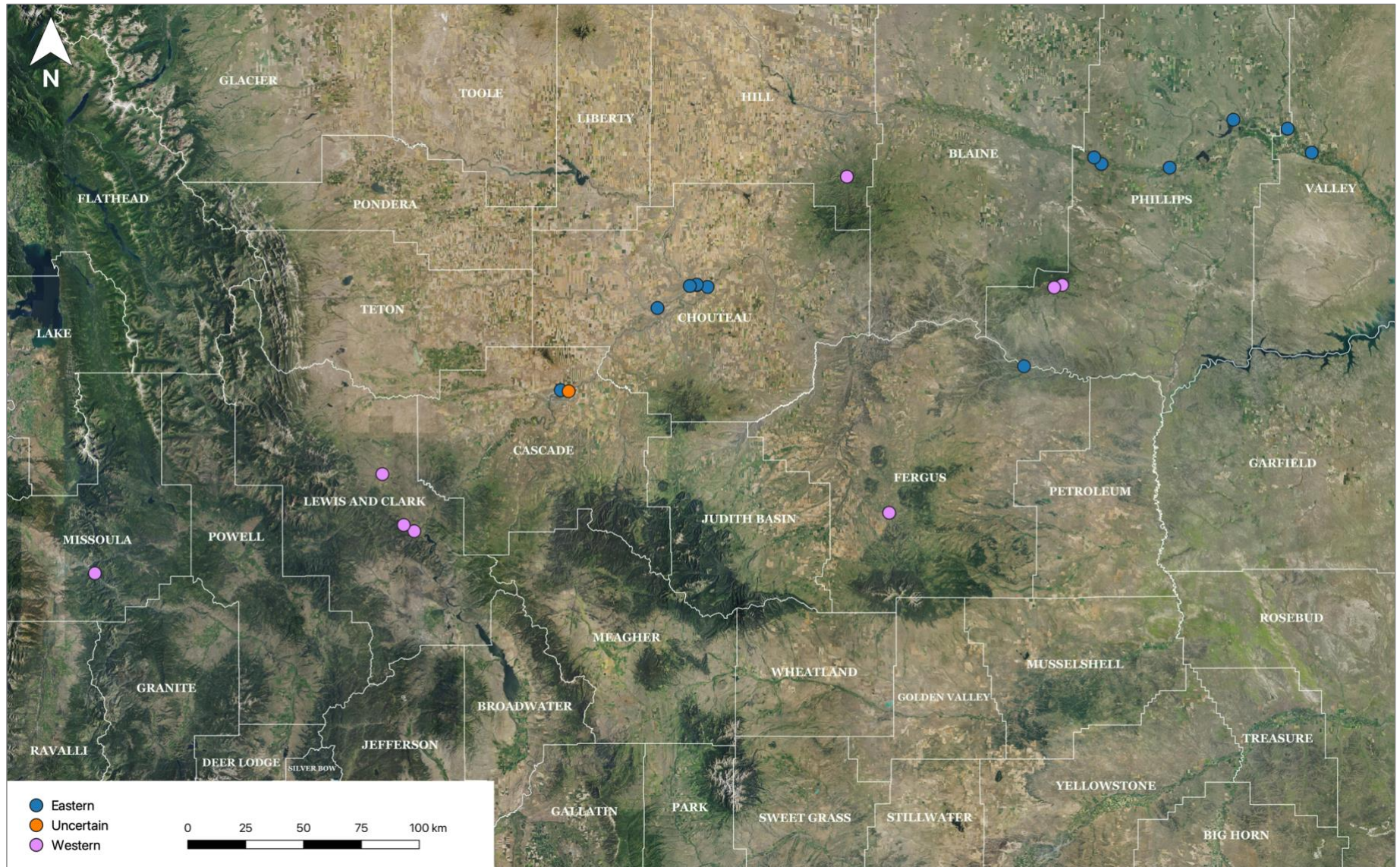


Figure 2. Location of Warbling Vireo songs recorded by Steve Flood in 2021.

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 reports and manages the MBRC's Web site at <https://www.montanabirdadvocacy.org/mbrc>, in addition to writing the minutes each year Jeff also updates Montana's official list of birds, thus providing the most current list, with accepted English and scientific names.



The MBRC met in person in Great Falls on 24 September 2021 (Allison Begley photo)



Montana's 2nd Heermann's Gull, Polson

(Dan Casey photo)



Montana's 2nd Neotropic Cormorant (left), Great Falls

(Alex Lamoreaux photo)

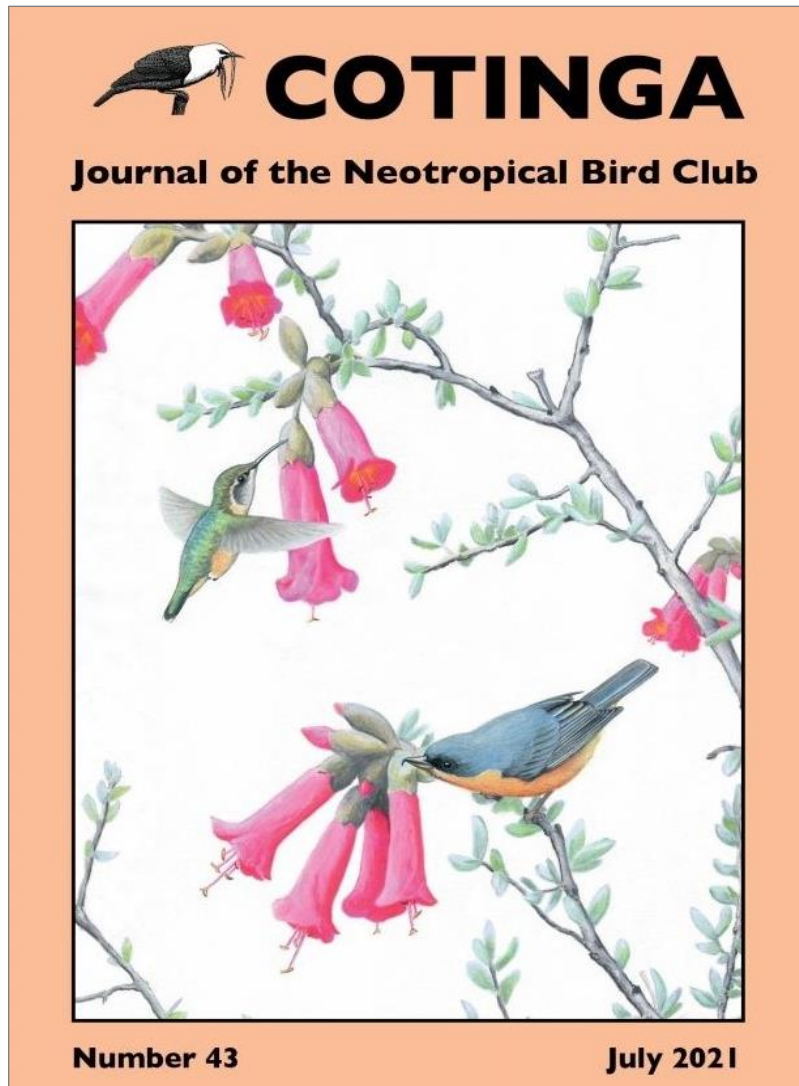
Record Early and Late Dates for Montana Migrants

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>.

Publications

It was another productive year for writing and submitting manuscripts for journal publications. Papers by Paul and Jeff appeared in *Northwestern Naturalist* (**Cedar Waxwings** [*Bombycilla cedrorum*] feeding at sapsucker sap wells), *Cotinga* (nectar robbing by a **Purple-collared Woodstar** [*Myrtis fanny*]), and *Wilson Journal of Ornithology* (**Black-chinned Hummingbirds** [*Archilochus alexandri*] nesting in Texas, **Lewis's Woodpeckers** [*Melanerpes lewis*] provisioning their young with nestling passerines, incubation

behavior of **Evening Grosbeaks** [*Coccothraustes vespertinus*], vocalizations of **Belted Kingfishers** [*Megasceryle alcyon*]]. Paul and Jeff continue to prepare publications from work they conducted in Montana, Oregon, Peru, and West Africa.



Andrew Guttenberg's original artwork made the cover of *Cotinga*



Lewis's Woodpecker bringing a nestling passerine to its own nestlings (Cindy Goeddel photo)

Birding Tours

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. As noted above, we did not conduct tours in 2021. However, we planned for two tours that did occur in 2022: Ghana in February and northern Peru in July. We will summarize results from these tours in the next Annual Report.



Rufous-sided Broadbill from our Ghana tour in February 2022 (Jeff Marks photo)



Jeff with Jackson Owusu in Ghana, February 2022 (Paul Mensah photo)

Other Outreach Activities

Jeff and Paul continue to take part in various outreach and professional activities, including eBird review, management of various listservs concerned with birds, and manuscript review for professional journals. In 2021, Jeff reviewed manuscripts for *Wilson Journal of Ornithology* and *Western Birds*, and Paul reviewed a book-length manuscript on Belted Kingfishers for Oregon State University Press and several manuscripts that were submitted to *Northwestern Naturalist*. Jeff also continued to write the Montana section for the quarterly online newsletter of the Western Field Ornithologists.

For three days in late May Jeff joined a group of five other birders and ornithologists to conduct bird surveys on the Crazy D Ranch near Melville, Montana. The trip was organized but **Beth Madden**, a grassland bird expert from Bozeman.



The crew at the Crazy D Ranch, May 2021

(Lou Ann Harris photo)

Thank You!

We could not function without our supporters and field volunteers. First, we thank **Cynthia Hudson & Robert Zirl, Barbara Marks, Susie Maclin, Angela Fee, David Fee, Rose Leach, and Jon Swenson** for their unrestricted donations. We are grateful to **Steve Flood** for conducting work on Warbling Vireos in eastern Montana; **Nate Kohler, Steve Sherman, and Kate Stone** and for helping us search for gnatcatchers in Beaverhead County; and **Jim Rogers, Sherry Jones, Bruce Tannehill, Gail Cleveland, 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 **Bob Martinka, Josh Covill, Cameo Flood, Allison Begley, Alex Lamoreaux, Dan Casey, Cindy Goeddel, Paul Mensah, Lou Ann Harris, Jackson Owusu, and Ramiro Yabar** for use of their photographs. Finally, we thank **Matthew Nordhagen** for his continued outstanding work on our Web site and annual report.

Sneak peeks from the 2022 Annual Report, which will include summaries of our Ghana tour in February, our Peru tour in July, and our new research project on nesting Gray Flycatchers:



Steve Sherman and Paul in Beaverhead County

(Jeff Marks photo)



Stygian Owl in Peru, July 2022
(Ramiro Yabar photo)



Jeff with Paul Mensah in Ghana, February 2022
(Jackson Owusu photo)



Paul Hendricks pointing to Gray Flycatcher nest at Badger Gulch, July 2022
(Jeff Marks photo)



Late Gray Flycatcher nest with complete clutch of 2 eggs, Badger Gulch, 5 August 2022
(Paul Hendricks photo)



Female Gray Flycatcher incubating, Badger Gulch, 6 August 2022
(Paul Hendricks photo)



Nestling Gray Flycatchers on day of fledging, Badger Gulch, 22 August 2022
(Steve Sherman photo)