

Whirlwind Adventures during Eastern MT Breeding Bird Surveys (BBS)

June 8-11, 2016 by Amy Seaman



You'd think watching grassland birds would be easy, or at least your neck wouldn't get so tired. And it's true, I guess, except for the larking. Every buzzy metallic zee zee ze you hear comes out of the bright ether, a deep eye-straining blue that settles in even before noon. The birds are all "larking", flittering, floating, and singing aloft only to drop down disappearing like butterflies in the grass. Fortunately patches of white on a Lark Bunting's wing, or the contrasting black belly of a Chestnut collared Longspur may catch your eye just enough to hint at who it was. Amidst the displays, Bobolinks sputter like Star Wars

droids and Lark Sparrows buzz and zap, luckily avoiding the high distinguishing 'ttzzzeeee's' Lark Bunting's often utter between phrases.

All photos by Amy Seaman



Photos: (left) Badland buttes along Quarter Horse Rd – part of my Forsyth BBS route and (above) a Common Nighthawk roosting within a cottonwood patch. At one site in 2015 I witnessed over 35 Common Nighthawks foraging together over fields along this route. This year I counted 11 birds during the survey period. The top photo is stop 50 of the Forsyth BBS route. The road really ends there!

All of these “larking” birds, in addition to grassland favorites such as Upland Sandpipers, Grasshopper Sparrows, Loggerhead Shrikes and Dickcissel, are present along my two, 25 mile, 50 stop, Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) routes near Forsyth and Lindsay Montana. Over 4,100 routes, similar to these and covering a vast array of habitats, are annually surveyed by volunteers in order to determine the status and trends of landbird populations continent-wide. The BBS program has grown massively over the years, starting with 600 routes east of the Mississippi, in 1966. At the time, Montana had none but now has 107, 42 that were added last year in targeted grassland habitat. These routes were chosen after seeing evidence for declines in a number of Montana grassland birds, including many of the “larking” Chestnut-collared Longspurs, Horned Lark, and Bobolink, over the years. And, although BBS data is collected only once annually, it can inform management and conservation year round.



(Above) Lunch spot on Quarter Horse Rd.— a Cottonwood riparian area surrounded by grasslands and sagebrush. A great site for birds of all types including Grasshopper Sparrows (below left) and Golden Eagles (below right).



BBS now operates as a cooperative effort between the U.S. Geological Survey and Environment Canada (Canadian Wildlife Service), and the 4,100 routes lie throughout Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. The last 50 years of data has been instrumental in focusing on neotropical migrant declines in the 80's, on grassland bird declines starting in the mid-90's, and precipitating the creation of Partners in Flight, North America's most comprehensive bird conservation organization. For many years Montana Audubon has been involved with the BBS through volunteer recruitment, outreach, and supporting staff to survey a handful of routes. The Forsyth and Lindsay routes are two of those, and both generally head north of their respective towns. Forsyth cuts through agriculture and rolling sage grasslands that spread north of the Yellowstone River Valley turning their backs on large water, where creeks, half-dry gullies and potholes support cottonwood groves. Lindsay trails through agriculture, badlands sprinkled with tiny wetland pockets, and open shrubby pastures, a Clay-colored Sparrow and Brown Thrasher's world. This year I set up a third route running north and west of Rock Spring, Montana, though high winds and a string of storms kept me from surveying.

A corridor of cottonwoods runs along Horse Creek in the distance along a portion of the Forsyth route. A blanket of sage, grass, and wildflowers touches the riparian edge. Cheat grass greens-up early and dies early showing up as burnt and reddish already by mid-summer. Prairie dog colonies thrive in a patchwork mosaic, though this year hunting pressure was visibly higher. (Right) A truck rigged with a chair and rifle mount for hunting in prairie dog country.



Picking a BBS route to survey is all about wanting to dedicate a day or two to focused birdwatching, trying to see and hear every species present. Scouting my survey route before the “official count” allowed me to familiarize myself with the many birds and habitats present along the way, in addition to turning up a few of the less common and less vocal species.



(Above) A Swainson's Thrush found twice on the Forsyth route after the count; (Below left) A hybrid Bullock's x Baltimore Oriole male showing unique plumage; (Below right) A Western Kingbird watches me.



This year I recorded 65 individual species on the Lindsay route, and 76 species on the Forsyth route, counting incidentals. The Lindsay route was new in 2015 and in just two years I have recorded 73 different species using the area. It's fun to see which prairie waterfowl will show up en route. There have been Blue-winged Teal, American Wigeon and Mallards before, but this year I added Canvasback, and Northern Pintail!

(Below) Cottonwood groves provide structure, food, and shade to an otherwise open and sparsely vegetated landscape. Orchard Orioles, House Wrens, Yellow Warblers, Yellow-breasted Chats, Least Flycatchers, and more can readily be found in groves like these. This year I spotted an Indigo Bunting.



(Below) Wetlands and open water in the badlands and prairies support many species of waterfowl , including Common Mergansers, Blue-winged teal, Wilson’s Phalarope, American Wigeon and Mallard.



BBS routes take you into some of Montana's most beautiful country, a mixed array of public and private, working and resting lands. You really have to plan ahead out here, but it lends the benefit of slowing time down just a bit so that one can sit and watch. Everyone has to stop and ask if you're okay when you're pulled over, so I pull out the "birder line". Seems ironic to have them ask "you okay?" Well, you answer "I was just gonna camp here so I can get up at 330 to watch birds", that's normal I think, "I'm okay." I encourage all that feel they may be able (you don't have to know every bird in the book!) to take a chance with a survey route, and stick with it a few years. Many volunteers maintain routes for years on end, some for decades, and none come away disappointed, I know I haven't. Visit the BBS website, search through data, peruse Montana routes, and don't hesitate to contact us. We are available ALL YEAR.

<https://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBS/>



(Top Right) The second wave of a thunderstorm approaches camp at Makoshika State Park; (Middle Right) Lightning sparks the sky overhead as a second wave of a severe thunderstorm threatens camp; (Bottom Right) Open grassland with sparse sage on Quarter Horse Rd; (Below) Cartersville Rd. sunset.

