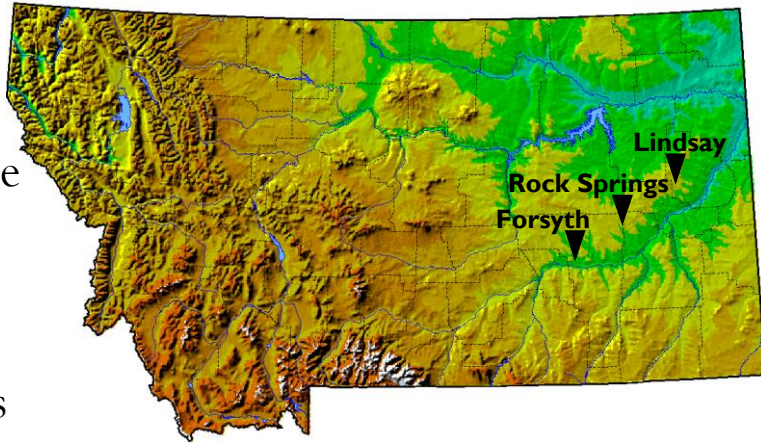


Breeding Bird Surveys 2019

Stories from a cool spring
June 12-14 2019, By Amy Seaman

All photos by Amy Seaman

The prairies and badlands were pleasantly calm during the second week of June when I set out to complete my annual survey of three central Montana Breeding Bird Surveys. After six years of surveys, annual variation has become apparent, and as many avid birders have noticed this year, things seem “behind”. As an example, this year was the first surveying the Forsyth route when the cottonwoods cotton wasn’t already falling. In fact, all of the cottonwood fruits remained shiny green in color, and the typical frenzy of Lark Sparrows feeding on the tufted cottonwoods seeds would have to wait. Temperatures kept



below 70 Fahrenheit during the counts, and calm winds supported excellent hearing conditions - a welcomed and infrequent occurrence on the open prairie.

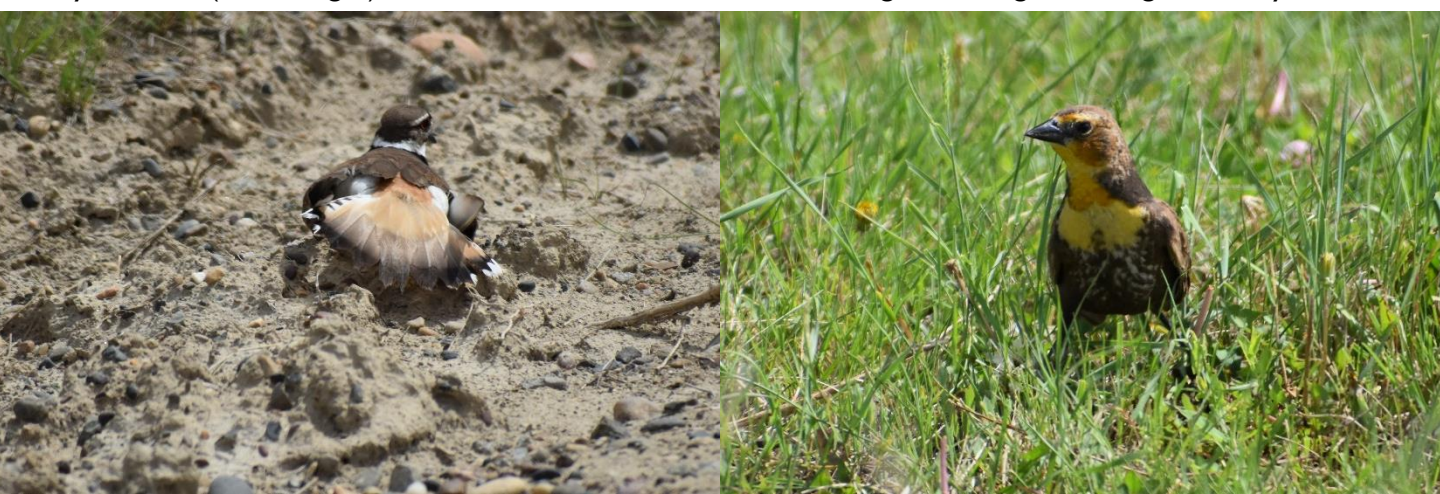
Photos: (Above) A short storm brought rain and a rainbow to the start of my Rock Springs BBS route. (Below) Cottonwoods along the Forsyth route were full of ripening green fruits and roosting Common Nighthawks. The last five years cotton has been falling at this time of year.





The importance of the Breeding Bird Survey to conservation should not be underestimated, but instead recognized for the gigantic citizen science effort it represents. Over 4,100 similar routes, public routes 25 miles long consisting of 50 half-mile stops, traverse the continent, covering a vast array of habitats. Volunteers count all breeding birds seen and heard along these routes on an annual basis. And, since 1966, this program has helped managers at every level access scientifically produced status and trend information for many landbird populations. This information is crucial for managing dozens of species of songbirds, colonial waterbirds

(Above) Pothole wetlands with emergent vegetation provide habitat for a smattering of ducks each year. Species like Blue-winged Teal, Pied-billed Grebe, and American Coot are often seen in areas like this along the Forsyth route; (Below left) An adult Killdeer performs a broken wing distraction display along the Forsyth route; (Below right) A Yellow-headed Blackbird female forages in the grass along the Forsyth route.



and even shorebirds that breed in the grasslands like the Long-billed Curlew and Upland Sandpiper. Montana Audubon has been supporting these efforts for six years, helping survey some of the state's 107 routes. We have focused our efforts in the grasslands and sage-brush steppe habitats, where new routes were added in 2015. These routes allow us to collect valuable sightings of grasslands species of concern like the Chestnut-collared Longspur, McCown's Longspur, Sprague's Pipit, and Baird's Sparrow. In all, we helped record 88 species between June 11th and 14th en route this year. We recorded 57 species on the Lindsay route, with 2019 marking my first record there for the Baltimore Oriole. While surveying the Rock Springs area north of Miles City we recorded 39 species, including many firsts like Sora, Pied-billed Grebe, Ruddy Duck, and Northern Rough-winged Swallow. And finally, we counted 69 species along the Forsyth route, picking up the first Virginia Rail and Great-horned Owl on that route. Of the 88 species found, 9 are species of concern: Sharp-tailed Grouse, Long-billed Curlew, Burrowing Owl,

Badlands cross a path through the Lindsay BBS route, and the climb over them takes you through juniper and sagebrush filled gullies. Mountain Bluebirds and Field Sparrows are often active here, and in 2014 I was lucky to see an Eastern Bluebird. Long-billed Curlews, Upland Sandpipers, and Clay-colored, Brewer's and Chipping Sparrows all use sites like this as well.



Loggerhead Shrike, Chestnut-collared Longspur, McCown's Longspur, Brewer's Sparrow, Baird's Sparrow, and Bobolink. During the count we also spotted a Swainson's Hawk nest occupied by both adults, saw a family group of Short-eared Owls active just as the sun started to bring its first light, and even caught a glimpse of a Great-horned Owl fledgling.



(Above left) Upland Sandpiper along the Forsyth Route; (Above center) A Common Nighthawk roosts in the cottonwoods along the Forsyth Route; (Above right) A Bank Swallow sits at day break before heading off to forage along the Lindsay Route. (Below left) A Great-horned Owl fledgling skulking in the grass along the Forsyth Route; (Below right) 2 Adult Swainson's Hawks perched at their nest along the Rock Springs Route.



In Montana, these road-based Breeding Bird surveys are one of the few ways to monitor birds on a large scale, and continuing to survey these routes each year provides an important annual benchmark for the 88 species counted here, and the many others recorded across the continent's 4,100 routes. Your support of Montana Audubon helps us continue contributing to work like this, and we want to also thank the Sargent Foundation for supporting this effort. As we continue with efforts like the Breeding Bird Survey, we will continue to fill in information gaps we have concerning grassland species, and others reliant on Montana for breeding habitat.



(Above) A Red Crossbill is seen perching in the tops of a dead cottonwood – 2019 was the second time I have recorded a Red Crossbill on the Forsyth Route; (Below) Mornings always break dramatically in the badlands habitat of the Lindsay Route.

