fall

2026

MONTANA AUDUBON

1976-2026

OLD SALT CO-OP EARNS THEIR WINGS

page 2



50-YEAR TIMELINE

page 6

OUR MISSION is to promote appreciation, knowledge and conservation of Montana's native birds, other wildlife, and natural ecosystems to safeguard biological diversity for current and future generations.

Founded in 1976, Montana Audubon seeks to create an environment in which all of Montana's native bird species have healthy, sustainable populations, ensured by long-term habitat security. Montana Audubon uses science, conservation education, and public policy work to protect our state's incomparable wildlife and landscapes.

fall 2026

2 **Old Salt Co-op Earns ACR Certification**

6 **50-year Timeline**

10 **Conservation Briefs**

12 **News from the Center**

On the cover: Healthy, diverse grasslands on the Mannix Ranch, near Helmville. Photo by Jessica French Inset: Brewer's Sparrow Photo by Bob Martinka

Helena Office
PO Box 595, Helena, MT 59624 • Phone: 406-443-3949
Fax: 406-443-7144 • info@mtaudubon.org
www.mtaudubon.org

Audubon Center
7026 S. Billings Blvd., Billings, MT 59101 • Phone: 406-294-5099
www.mtaudubon.org/center

Staff

Larry Berrin
Executive Director

Sarah Chatwood
Early Childhood Education Manager

Emily Chilcoat
Center Director

Boaz (Bo) Crees
Avian Specialist

Adam Cupito
Audubon Conservation Ranching Ecologist

Ashayla Dahlin
Teacher Naturalist/Summer Camp Coordinator

Peter Dudley
Public Affairs Manager

Jessica French
Audubon Conservation Ranching Manager

Mandi Hinman
Operations & Development Manager

Andrea Dougherty
Teacher Naturalist

Braydon Luikart
Field Biologist

Rock McLean
Teacher Naturalist

Alisha Merfeld
Teacher Naturalist

Ivory Miller
Teacher Naturalist

Sarah Schultz
Facilities & Grounds Coordinator

Paige Secrist
Teacher Naturalist

Danella Stapley
Center Conservation & Science Coordinator

Lizzie Weinreb
BSWC Education

Casey Zacney
Communications & Development Specialist

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THE VIEW FROM ABOVE



The challenges facing Montana's birds, other wildlife and their critical habitats continue to evolve, and so must we.

Fifty Years. It's hard to believe that we have been part of Montana's conservation story for half a century. In September 1976, representatives from three Audubon chapters came together to form Montana Audubon. They could not have known then where that decision would lead. Over the next five decades, generations of members, volunteers, donors, staff, and our conservation partners have built an organization that continues to work for Montana's birds, other wildlife, and wild places.

Included in this issue is a 50-year timeline highlighting the moments, movements, and milestones that have shaped Montana Audubon. It is not a complete history – there are far too many stories, people, and accomplishments to fit into a single timeline. Instead, it offers a glimpse of the remarkable journey we have been on together.

There are accomplishments worth celebrating: leading the effort to pass the nongame checkoff program in the 1980s that has raised over $1 million dollars for the Fish Wildlife & Parks nongame department, launching our first Wings Across the Big Sky Bird Festival, opening the Montana Audubon Center, and most recently, helping bring bird-friendly conservation practices to over ½ million acres of ranches across Montana.

There are also milestones that remind us how persistence matters. A decade of Black Swift surveys contributed to their removal from Montana's Species of Greatest Inventory Need list. Our work on Greater Sage-grouse conservation has spanned years and multiple phases, most recently resulting in protection from oil and gas leasing across 2.7 million acres. And just last year, Montana Audubon and our partners helped secure $32 million annually for important state conservation programs, like Habitat Montana, a program we helped to establish in our first few years of operation when we were just a *fledgling* bird organization.

Looking back is meaningful, but anniversaries are also a time to reflect and see how we can build on our work moving forward. The challenges facing Montana's birds, other wildlife and their critical habitats continue to evolve, and so must we. What gives me confidence is the same thing that has carried Montana Audubon through the past 50 years: people who care deeply about this state and are willing to work together with us to protect it. Thank you for being part of our story and here's to the next 50 years!

Yours in Conservation,

Larry Berrin, Executive Director

OLD SALT CO-OP EARNS THEIR WINGS

All four of Old Salt Co-op's cattle ranch Co-op members – J Bar L Ranch, LF Ranch, Mannix Ranch, and Sieben Live Stock Company – are the newest ranches to achieve Montana Audubon's Bird-Friendly Land Certification. Secured through the Audubon Conservation Ranching program, the certification acknowledges that the producers manage their acreage to support birds, biodiversity, and working landscapes.

Jessica French



Cattle graze on the LF Ranch, near Augusta. All certified ranches receive a gate sign with this logo to hang on their ranch gates. ACR certified beef and bison meat can be labelled with this logo as well.

Audubon Conservation Ranching is a science-based certification program designed to protect bird habitat and support profitable, resilient ranches. Since 1970, grassland bird species have experienced the steepest population decline among all terrestrial biomes. Today, a total of 516,980 acres spread across 28 ranches are Audubon Certified and recognized as bird-friendly in Montana. The certification seal on promotion and product packaging is found in more than 2,000 retail locations, carrying the story of conservation to consumers.

Now that certification includes all four of the Old Salt cattle ranch Co-op members. Founded in 2021, the Helena-based co-op raises, processes, and sells its own meat, and aims to invest its earnings back into the land, ecosystem, and community. Old Salt's producers share ownership in all its businesses, including the meat brand, processing operations, restaurants, and in the Audubon-sponsored Old Salt Festival. The Festival is held annually around the time of the summer solstice in the Blackfoot Valley.

"We care about all the wildlife that call a place home. To be able to work with Audubon will only help us improve management over time." –Cole Mannix

"More heartbeats per acre is our goal," said Cole Mannix, President and Co-founder of Old Salt. "We care about all the wildlife that call a place home. To be able to work with Audubon – an organization that understands birds and their habitats so deeply – will only help us improve management over time."

To earn the certification, the four ranches meet strict standards for habitat management, environmental sustainability, and animal welfare, all verified through third-party audits. Bird-friendly management methods, such as pasture rest and rotation, enrich grassland habitat that supports priority species like the Grasshopper Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Bobolink, Mountain Plover, and Lark Bunting. Annual avian surveys in 2025 and 2026 on the Mannix Ranch detected a total of 100 species, including six Audubon Priority Grassland Species, including Western Meadowlark, Sharp-tailed Grouse and Brewer's Sparrow.

Founded in 1882, the Mannix Ranch in Helmville, MT is one of Old Salt's member-owners and the family ranch of co-founder, Cole Mannix. When possible, the ranch uses short-duration, intensive grazing of three days or less to allow plants to regrow. This method establishes a mix of short grass, tall cover, and diverse forbs within pastures – important foraging and nesting habitat for grassland birds.

"Our ranch cares deeply about conservation – that the land stays intact and can support wildlife and a healthy ecosystem," said Logan Mannix, a member of the fifth-generation, family-run Mannix Ranch. "Audubon's certification is a good fit for us because it focuses more broadly on ecosystem health and wildlife habitat rather than specific inputs."

continued...

LF Ranch, based in Augusta, prioritizes ground cover, species diversity, and robust grass growth in its management practices. The ranch recently introduced more yearling cattle into its herds in part to improve grass utilization and the long-term health of the range.

"Bird-friendly ranching follows sound ecological practices," said Andrew Bardwell, General Manager of LF Ranch. "If we get our grazing right, cow performance follows, and everything else on the ranch thrives: plants, animals, and birds."

Headquartered in Adel and founded in 1868, Sieben Live Stock Company implements strategic rest during the growing season to protect its pastures across Cascade County. Early in his career, Cooper Hibbard, Sieben Live Stock's President and COO, bunked with Audubon biologists at a ranch in Mexico and learned how bird surveys can reveal the overall health of an ecosystem and habitat.

"I've been a believer ever since," Hibbard said. "A healthy, thriving bird population is indicative that we are achieving our mission of creating as much life as possible through our grazing management and overall approach to stewardship."

Based near Melville, J Bar L Ranch also follows bird-friendly management practices, such as high-intensity, short-duration grazing and rest periods for fragile pastures. Established in 2000, the ranch is now part of Old Salt's vision to ignite renewal in American agriculture.

"We take an earth-first approach to managing our land, the livestock, and the business," said Andrew Anderson, Ranch Co-Manager for J Bar L. "We're trying to promote a set of conditions that are resilient, both ecologically and financially, to protect the landscape and keep more dollars within the agricultural sector and our communities in Montana."

Every year this approach is honored at the Old Salt Festival, hosted at Mannix Ranch. Sponsored by several groups, including Audubon, the festival celebrates the many shared values between Audubon and Old Salt: healthy grasslands, land stewardship, viable long-term ranching operations, and coming together as a community.

"We've all grown to accept an extractive system in which agriculture is where we grow food at the expense of all other living things," said Chris Wilson, National Audubon's Director of Audubon Conservation Ranching.

"Old Salt is a model for how we can move toward a truly regenerative system that builds ecological integrity by continually reinvesting in land and local communities."

Montana Audubon welcomes recent news from Cole Mannix that a documentary film series on social entrepreneurship by the non-profit World Within will feature a special episode on the Old Salt Co-op, to be released November 5th on YouTube. Around that same date, Old Salt is launching a crowd equity campaign to take their business, and their impact on Montana's food system, to the next level. Also, stay tuned for the 2027 Old Salt Festival ticket release! Audubon will be a 2027 sponsor again and we would love to celebrate with you in person next summer solstice!

> ***"Old Salt is a model for how we can move toward a truly regenerative system that builds ecological integrity by continually reinvesting in land and local communities."***
> —Chris Wilson, National Audubon's Director of Conservation Ranching

This new partnership with the Old Salt Co-op illustrates the important work we do and the outcomes we strive to achieve under the Audubon Conservation Ranching Program.

For nearly a decade, Montana Audubon has been partnering with ranchers to sustain healthy grasslands, abundant birdlife, and resilient rural communities throughout Big Sky Country. Through this bird-friendly land certification that uses a science-based approach, we empower land stewards to enhance habitat, improve soil health and water quality, and strengthen the connection between conservation and ranching. By purchasing products from Audubon Certified Bird-Friendly Land, consumers become conservationists, helping protect America's grasslands and the birds, wildlife, and people that depend on them.

A special thank you to Margo Rosenbaum, Communications Associate with National Audubon, for conducting the interviews and providing much of the content for this article.

Thank you to the foundations who make our ACR program possible: National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Cornell Douglas Foundation, and Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation.



Left to right: National Audubon's Chief Conservation Officer Marshall Johnson, National Audubon's ACR Program Director Chris Wilson; President and Co-founder of Old Salt, Cole Mannix; Montana Audubon's Public Affairs Manager, Peter Dudley.

Louise Johns



Bobolink



Chestnut-collared Longspur



Public Affairs Manager Peter Dudley leads a "Bird Walk" on the Mannix Ranch during the 2026 Old Salt Festival.



Lark Sparrow



Sharp-tailed Grouse

MONTANA AUDUBON AT 50

HALF A CENTURY OF BIRDS, CONSERVATION, AND COMMUNITY



1976

September 25, 1976: Three Audubon chapters come together to form Montana Audubon



1981

Montana Audubon hires its first lobbyist and intern: Work begins on nongame check-off legislation.



1983

Montana Audubon leads the effort to pass the nongame checkoff option on MT state tax forms, which has raised over $1 million dollars for the Fish, Wildlife, and Parks nongame department.



1987

Montana Audubon and other conservation organizations lead the effort to create Habitat Montana and secure and protect consistent funding for the program in three concurrent sessions.

Trumpeter Swans

1999

Important Bird Area (IBA) Program Launched in Montana



2000

First Wings Across the Big Sky Bird Festival (Polson, MT)

2008

The Audubon Naturalist in the Schools (ANTS) is launched as construction of an education center in Billings begins.



2009

The Montana Audubon Center opens!



2012



American Kestrel

2014

First year of Black Swift counts in the Glacier area – the first statewide population estimates are recorded.

Secured windmill setbacks at Kevin Rim and signed an MOU with NaturEner to establish a long-term raptor monitoring program.







Montana Audubon and partners lead the effort to secure $32 million annually for state conservation programs like Habitat Montana.

Launched Audubon Conservation Ranching (ACR) program in Montana

Montana Audubon and Flathead Audubon secure permanent protection for the 405 acre Owen Sowerwine Important Bird Area.











2015 The first Fledglings Preschool is launched and Shepard's Nature Playspace is constructed at the center.

Montana Sage-Grouse Stewardship Act signed into law. Montana Audubon helped write and pass this law during the state legislative session.

Vesper Sparrow



2018 Montana eBird is launched – a partnership between Montana Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

2019 U.S. District Court rules in our favor on the first phase of the Greater Sage-grouse case nullifying oil & gas leases covering 336,000 acres!

Montana Audubon leads the effort in Montana to pass the Great American Outdoors Act which is signed into law providing permanent funding for Land & Water Conservation Fund.

Senator Jon Tester at LWCF rally in Great Falls

2020



2024 Ten years of our annual Black Swift surveys and data collection pay off as they are removed from the state Species of Greatest Inventory Need list.

2025 ACR reaches a half-million bird-friendly acres in Montana!

June - The U.S. District court in Montana ruled in our favor on the third and final phase of the Greater Sage-grouse case nullifying oil & gas leases covering 2.7 million acres!

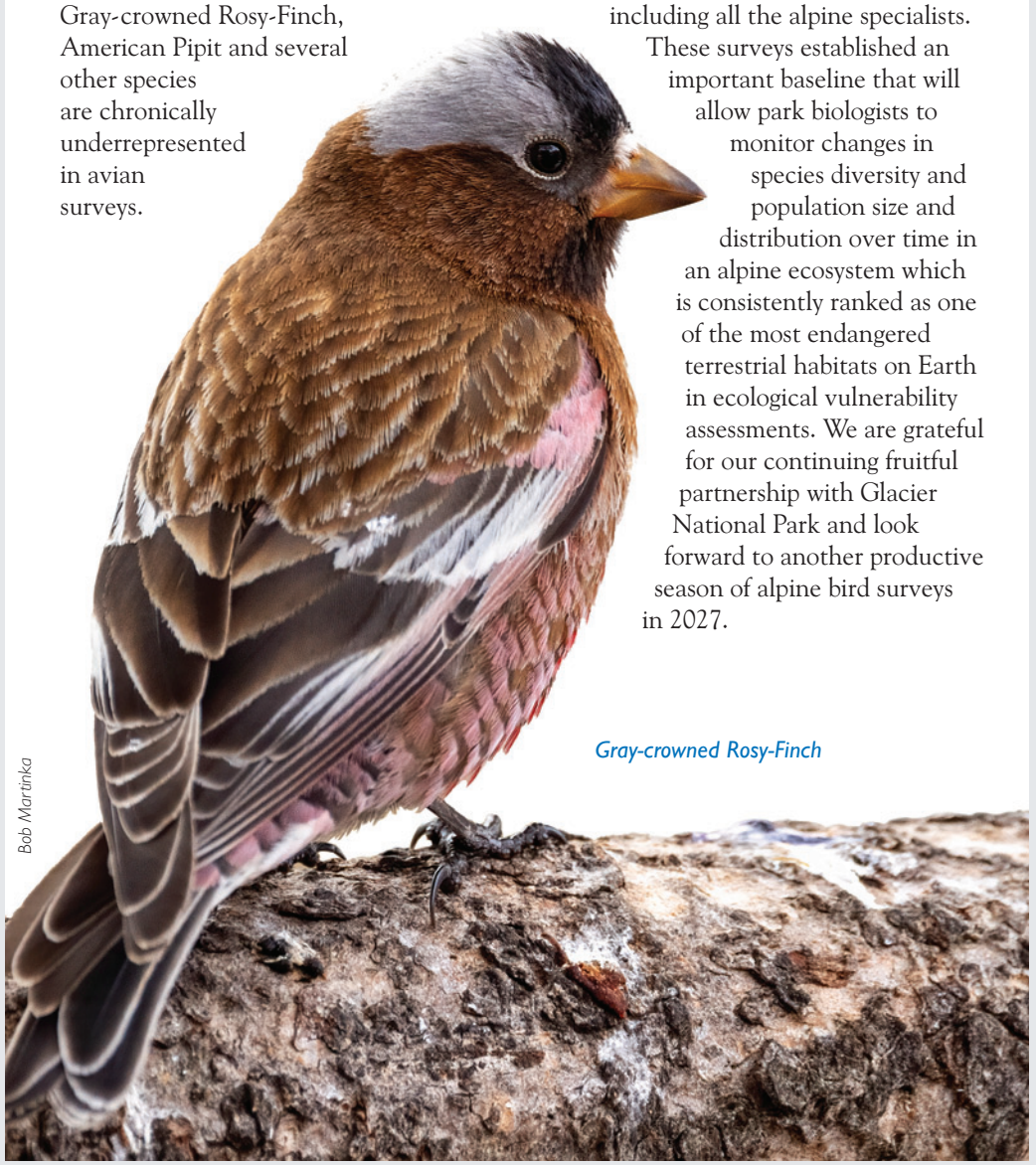
2026 The challenges facing Montana's birds, other wildlife and their critical habitats continue to evolve, and so must we.

Avian Alpine Surveys in the Crown of the Continent

Breeding activities of most bird species in Montana peak from late May to early July, so the vast majority of breeding bird surveys, including those carried out by Montana Audubon staff, are conducted during this period. But what about species that nest a bit later in the year? Birds that nest in the alpine and subalpine usually begin their nesting period when our lowland species are wrapping up their breeding efforts. Due to this timing mismatch and the challenging, rugged alpine terrain, high elevation specialists like the White-tailed Ptarmigan, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, American Pipit and several other species are chronically underrepresented in avian surveys.

This past summer Montana Audubon partnered with Glacier National Park to conduct alpine bird surveys at five high elevation sites throughout the park.

From the 2nd week of July through early August our hardy technicians conducted nearly 30 surveys of 10 stops each. Our survey sites were at Logan Pass, Piegan Pass, Siyeh Pass, Firebrand Pass and Scenic Point. We hiked into prime subalpine and alpine habitat well before sunrise (encountering several Grizzly Bears!), and observed 63 bird species, including all the alpine specialists. These surveys established an important baseline that will allow park biologists to monitor changes in species diversity and population size and distribution over time in an alpine ecosystem which is consistently ranked as one of the most endangered terrestrial habitats on Earth in ecological vulnerability assessments. We are grateful for our continuing fruitful partnership with Glacier National Park and look forward to another productive season of alpine bird surveys in 2027.



Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch

Bob Martinka

Gearing Up for the Montana Legislative Session



The 70th Montana Legislative Session is just around the corner, and Montana Audubon staff are gearing up for another year of advocacy for Montana's wildlife and landscapes. In 2025, we saw session-long battles over conservation funding, MEPA, exempt wells, land use, and environmental quality bills, with some big wins, like HB 932, which secured over $32 million for Habitat Montana, habitat restoration, non-game wildlife, and wildlife highway crossings. Simply put, many of these issues will be re-litigated next year.

Not only did key pieces of legislation, like the comprehensive exempt well package, fail to pass in 2025, but the upcoming session hinges upon a state budget deficit. With less federal funding coming into the state and the Governor's flat income tax proposal, pressure will be put on legislators to cut funding for conservation programs across the board. Fish Wildlife and Parks' 10-year licensing reform package could alleviate some of the budget shortfall, but you can expect the funding passed in HB 932 to come under scrutiny.

Additionally, you can expect some new topics, like data centers and their associated land, water, and energy use, to be central to discussions about Montana's environmental regulations. What hasn't changed, however, is that we need you! We saw a deluge of sweeping policy changes at the Federal level that required action throughout 2026, and we're so appreciative of the time and energy that you all committed to protecting this great state. If you want to provide comments yourself, follow along, or reach out about issues that are important to you during the legislative session, please go to our website to sign up for Action Alerts. We look forward to keeping you up to date through chapter outreach and in the spring newsletter!

THE CINNABAR FOUNDATION HONORS MONTANA AUDUBON'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY

We are so honored to announce that we have been awarded the 2026 Sargent Legacy Grant in recognition of our 50th anniversary. The Cinnabar Foundation is the extraordinary legacy of Len and Sandy Sargent. Through their vision and generosity, and the philanthropy of others, the Foundation was created in 1983 to support the constitutional right of Montanans to a clean & healthful environment.

CINNABAR FOUNDATION

The Cinnabar Foundation supports organizations that effectively conserve, preserve and restore the natural environment in Montana and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Take My Hand: The Power of Intergenerational Nature Connection

Muddy feet and curious minds – these are a few of our favorite things. Children deserve to be outside – getting their hands dirty, asking endless questions, and discovering the wonder of the natural world. While young minds are inherently curious, sometimes that spark needs an adult to take the time to step outside alongside them.

Remember when...
Take a moment to reflect on when you first fell in love with the natural world. Who was by your side? Perhaps it was a parent letting you splash through rain puddles, a grandparent teaching you bird calls, or a mentor guiding you down a quiet trail. These shared moments likely shaped how you view the world today.

These intergenerational connections are more than fond memories – research shows an adult's shared love for nature is the single strongest predictor of whether a child builds a lifelong bond with the outdoors. Early outdoor experiences support youth well-being, boost classroom engagement, and foster emotional resilience. When we share the outdoors with children, we don't just create happy memories—we help bridge the gap between generations and nurture future environmental stewards.

We see this magic every day in our education programs. Through initiatives like our Audubon Naturalist in the Schools (ANTS) program, Adventure Summer Camps, and Fledglings Preschool, our dedicated staff and volunteers mentor students as they explore river ecosystems, observe local wildlife, and experience the joy of discovery. These engagements demonstrate that nature connection is not a one-time lesson – it is an evolving, generational continuum.

As we enter a new school year, we encourage parents, guardians, and community members to step outdoors with the young people in their lives. You don't need to be an expert naturalist to make a difference – just step outside, ask curious questions, and let them lead the way. You might just create a "remember when" moment that lasts a lifetime.







Our dedicated staff and volunteers mentor students as they explore river ecosystems, observe local wildlife, and experience the joy of discovery.

Evening Under the Big Sky

THANK YOU to everyone who came out to support our conservation education efforts at the Center, even on one of the wettest days of the year! This year, we used our amazing indoor spaces to create an intimate, cozy atmosphere for the event.

We couldn't have achieved this without the incredible support of our sponsors: the Roberts Foundation, Darryl Wilson, and First Interstate Bank. With their help, and the support of everyone who joined us, we raised over $12,000 for youth in the greater Billings area. These funds will directly support nature-based learning initiatives that will connect children, families, and schools throughout the year.

SPECIAL THANKS
to the Fortin Family Foundation for their continued support of the Montana Audubon Center.

the FORTIN FAMILY FOUNDATION

WILDLIFE GRANT APPLICATION PERIOD NOW OPEN

Montana Audubon will once again make available grants from the Audubon Wildlife Fund of Montana, a permanent endowment. The application deadline for the 2027 grant cycle is January 15, 2027.

Projects funded through our 2026 grants were Jewel Basin Hawk Watch, Hoot Owl Project, Jack Creek Preservation Fund, Riparian Walks Program, Montana Wild Wings, and MOTUS Tower in the Helena Valley.

For more information and the grant application, visit ***mtaudubon.org/about/wildlifegrants***



Bob Martinka

Swainson's Hawk



CREATING A CONSERVATION LEGACY

Common Merganser

Bob Martinka

Montana Audubon's vision is that birds and other wildlife are protected for generations to come.

Planned gifts are critical to helping our organization achieve this future, and help you leave a lasting conservation legacy. Please consider Montana Audubon in your estate planning. Your generous gift will benefit Montana's native birds, wildlife, and their habitats today and into the future.

For more information please contact Larry Berrin lberrin@mtaudubon.org.

Montana Audubon is a 501(c)(3) non-profit. Tax ID (EIN) is 81-0412530.

BECOME A MEMBER OF MONTANA AUDUBON

Your membership helps support core operations for one of the most effective conservation organizations in Montana!

Enjoy a year of benefits including: timely conservation updates; invites to special events; discounts to programs, events, and our annual birding festival; and and two print newsletters per year (Spring and Fall) mailed directly to you.

As a Montana Audubon member, you'll be actively contributing to the protection of birds, other wildlife, and their habitats across our vast state.

For more information, see our website or contact us at info@mtaudubon.org or call 406-443-3949.

ANNUAL *conservation* FUND

Northern Three-toed Woodpecker

Bob Martinka

EXPANDING OUR FLOCK

Adam Cupito
ACR Ecologist



Adam is from Cincinnati, Ohio, and became enamored with the natural world from a young age going camping and hiking. His conservation career has been focused on avian ecology and habitat management, pursuing an interest in learning how birds respond to changing landscapes. Adam has held positions in a dozen states and at a bird banding station in Sweden, and conducted his master's thesis on bird and plant community responses to prescribed thinning in pinyon-juniper woodlands. Outside of work, he can be found biking, birding, skiing, or enjoying a movie or show.

Casey Zacney
Communications & Development Specialist



Casey was born and raised in the Greater Philadelphia area and moved to Helena in January 2025. She joined Montana Audubon as a Big Sky Watershed Corps member earlier this year where she worked on citizen science and conservation projects. Now, she's excited to join the Montana Audubon team full-time as the Communications and Development Specialist! Casey has a background in environmental studies and a passion for conservation, wildlife, and connecting people with the natural world. Outside of work, she enjoys reading, writing, exploring Montana's landscapes, and spending time with her beloved cat, Buttercup.

Andrea Dougherty
Teacher Naturalist



Andrea grew up in Oklahoma, where she spent her childhood exploring, playing at Grand Lake, and rowing in the Oklahoma River. In 2023, she moved to Montana and quickly fell in love with the landscape and the chance to spend her days outdoors as a teacher naturalist. With her background in occupational therapy, she loves seeing children build strength, confidence, and curiosity through sensory play and movement in nature. In her free time, Andrea enjoys exploring new trails with her family.

MOBILIZE YOUR PASSION FOR BIRDS

Make a meaningful impact for the birds of Montana by choosing the Bird Habitat License plate, which features an American Avocet, Ruddy Duck, Lewis's Woodpecker, and a trio of Black-billed Magpies – on a Rocky Mountain Front backdrop. For an affordable price, you can support Montana Audubon and our bird conservation work while cruising under the Big Sky.

For more details visit mtaudubon.org



Amazing Birds of Costa Rica

With Roaming Naturalists

This exclusive journey combines some of Costa Rica's most spectacular birding destinations with a chance to explore areas that most birders never experience.



Snowy-bellied Hummingbird

April 1–14, 2027

$5,750 for double occupancy

MERLIN BIRDING TOURS

For more information, visit the Merlin Birding Tours website (merlinbirding.com) or contact Steve Hoffman at 406-461-5741.

WE BEGIN at high elevation in San Gerardo de Dota, where you're virtually guaranteed to see the magnificent Resplendent Quetzal, along with several high-elevation specialties, including Volcano Junco, Volcano Hummingbird, and Timberline Wren.

We continue south to Wilson Botanical Gardens, an Organization for Tropical Studies site that ranks #17 among Costa Rica's eBird hotspots. The gardens can produce some exceptional birds, including White-bellied Coquette, Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, and Rosy Thrush-Tanager, among other rarities.

Perhaps the highlight of the trip is our three days on the edge of Corcovado National Park, which National Geographic has called "the most biologically intense place on Earth." This is one of the only realistic places to search for the elusive Jaguar, along with Ocelot, Jaguarundi, and an incredible variety of birds.

One of the avian stars of the region is the spectacular Turquoise Cotinga.

This small-group adventure is limited to eight birders, giving you four participants to guide ratio. Steve Eshbaugh, owner and guide of Roaming Naturalists, will lead the journey. This will be Steve's 28th trip to Costa Rica, bringing years of experience and knowledge of the country's birds, habitats, and birding locations.

Our main birding guide and driver will be Luis Barrantes. Luis is an amazing birder – and an even better person. His knowledge of Costa Rica and his ability to find birds make him an invaluable part of the experience.

If you're looking for an intimate Costa Rica adventure with outstanding guides, spectacular scenery, and the opportunity to see some of the country's most sought-after birds and mammals, this is a trip you won't want to miss.

A HEARTFELT THANK YOU to everyone who joined us for this year's Wings Across the Big Sky Bird Festival in Kalispell! From early-morning birding and inspiring speakers to exploring Montana's incredible landscapes, we're grateful to everyone who came together to celebrate birds, conservation, and wild places.

WE'LL BE TAKING A BREAK NEXT YEAR to give us more time to plan and promote, but Wings Across the Big Sky will return in Billings 2028! We can't wait to gather with you again for another memorable celebration of Montana's birds, landscapes, and conservation community. Thank you to our attendees, speakers, field trip leaders, partners, staff, and supporters for making this year so special.

SEE YOU IN 2028!

wings MONTANA AUDUBON across the big sky

WINGS ACROSS THE BIG SKY WILL RETURN TO BILLINGS IN 2028



Sharp-tailed Grouse

MONTANA AUDUBON

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