FROM THE PRESIDENT
No DFO field trips? Let’s STILL go birding

DFO NEWS
Bird in peace . . .
Robert A. “Bob” Spencer (1924-2020)

BIRDING CLOSE TO HOME
Deer Creek Canyon Park
Jefferson County

BIRDING WITH 20/20 VISION
Conservation inspiration? Look to like-minded birders elsewhere

PHOTO OF THE MONTH
Lark Bunting
Patrick O’Driscoll
Heron Pond, Denver
Dave Hill

I hope you are all safe and well. Have you been getting outside? Are you birding? Let’s go birding together!

OK, not together-together. But look what the combined efforts of so many Colorado birders in the field produced last month at the peak of an amazingly busy (and productive) spring 2020 migration. I know that birding can be kind of a pain in this time of Covid-19 – but one by one, we’re finding a way, aren’t we?

I’ve been birding sometimes by myself, but more often, I try to do so with a friend. We are careful. We keep the social distance. We wear the masks. Still, I find it difficult at times. The mask fogs up my glasses and muffles my voice, so I find myself pulling it down to my chin more than I should. I know that’s a no-no, increasing the risk of catching the virus. I struggle with all of this. Do you, too? We’re only human.

Then there are the times when my friend spots a bird whose exact location is not obvious. I circle around behind to get the angle of the sighting while listening to the directions. It’s hard to do and still remain 6 feet apart, isn’t it?

But I’m in that “at-risk” age bracket. I’d rather not imagine the consequences of getting the virus if I’m careless – and I’d rather not stop birding. So I’ll be more careful.

As Colorado gradually “reopens” from the coronavirus shutdown, Denver Field Ornithologists will adjust its field trip protocols so we can bird together again, but in smaller groups at first. We’ll travel alone, in separate vehicles. We’ll wear the masks. We’ll keep the distance. We’ll heed Colorado’s “Safer at Home” mandates.

But in the meantime, let’s go birding, together apart! I tried a new location last week with almost no other visitors around. It was less than an hour’s drive and empty of people – but not of birds. I listed 35 species that day, a good day free of any worry about an outing somewhere busy and congested.

I’ve also found a great way to get inspired. All you need is your smartphone or computer. Go to a YouTube channel called . . . you guessed it: “Let’s Go Birding.” It was co-created by our own Megan Miller, DFO field trip leader and Instagram director. Bird nerd Megan and her partner Jordan Spalding and their friend Satoshi Machihara (both film and editing wizzes) have posted three playlists of 15 LGB videos so far, with energetic and animated visits to familiar Colorado hotspots from the Audubon Nature Center at Chatfield State Park to Lower Latham in Weld County, as well as out-of-the-way spots with which you may not be familiar. Each episode offers birding tips for the location, interviews, and cool facts about Colorado species.

Go to their YouTube channel at this link: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1igJwKuxt6O-VJ-bt75Llw. Prepare to smile and laugh a LOT. It’s great fun.

Take care and see you again in two months after The Lark Bunting’s annual midsummer break. But if you have questions, concerns or suggestions as DFO members, I want to hear them and I’m always available.

You can reach me by email at: d_d_hill@comcast.net, or by phone at 303-870-4316.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

No DFO field trips? Let’s STILL go birding

let’s go birding
MONTHLY PROGRAMS

Pandemic permitting, DFO programs could resume in August

When the Covid-19 pandemic forced Denver Field Ornithologists to suspend in-person club gatherings last March, two evening programs planned for March and April were postponed indefinitely.

Now, with efforts underway to slowly and safely “reopen” public life and activity in Colorado, DFO is rescheduling one of those programs for October, and working to line up new programs for August and September. Any presentations, however, are still subject to assurances that by then, pandemic recovery conditions can allow DFO to stage public gatherings again without threat of spreading the virus.


Because of disruption by the Covid-19 shutdown, DFO is still seeking program topics and speakers for the scheduled Aug. 25 and Sept. 28 meetings. Meanwhile, members can enjoy the first-ever webinar sponsored by DFO – see the article by Susan Blansett on page 9 in this issue.

DFO evening programs are normally the fourth Monday of the month, January through April and August through December, with a summer break during May, June and July. Free and open to the public, they are scheduled for 7 p.m. at Unity Spiritual Center of Denver, 3021 S. University Blvd., Denver.

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Bob Shade
I discovered Deer Creek Canyon Park as a birding site when some men in our church went on a hike there in 2015. You get there by taking Deer Creek Canyon Road west from South Wadsworth Boulevard (past Denver Botanic Gardens Chatfield Farms) for about 3 miles, then turning left (south) onto Grizzly Drive and following the signs to the park’s spacious parking lot.

I love a glorious bright May or June morning, hiking up Meadowlark Trail with the sun behind me and camera in hand. The first half mile from the parking lot is grassland, but then it changes to oak-juniper woodland. On such mornings, I have to share the trail with many hikers and dog walkers, but that’s OK: the birds seem habituated to the presence of all the Homo sapiens, and the dogs are always friendly. My theory is that this avian habituation offers more photographic opportunities of birds that are unafraid to “tee up” in the morning sun.

And where they tee up, the terrain is cooperative. The park foliage along Meadowlark is not that high and the slope from the trail is such that the birds’ perches are at or even below eye-level. I find that the normally furtive and skulking Yellow-breasted Chat males I encounter are not shy about posing and singing for me. The juniper foliage offers a charming and frilly background for bird photos with a nicely out-of-focus backdrop, too.

Also easily photographable from the trail are Black-headed Grosbeaks, Lazuli Buntings, Virginia and MacGillivray’s warblers, Green-tailed Towhees, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Western Tanagers, and Lesser Goldfinches. Spotted Towhees, meanwhile, love the thickets of Gambel’s Oak, and I am never out of range of their persistent song. The best photos I have taken of most of these species came from this location. Those of you who are not photographers will get excellent views of these birds and will have plenty of practice learning their songs. Such is the unexpected excellence of this not-so-ordinary park in the Jefferson County foothills.

If you take the hiking loop counter-clockwise, you will come down off the slopes to Plymouth Creek, which sustains large trees like Douglas Fir. You will hear and probably see Plumbeous Vireo at the creek. You might also hear singing Overbirds, apparently on territory right now, on the upper reaches of Plymouth Creek Trail and near the small pond on Red Mesa Trail.

In short, Deer Creek Canyon Park is a simple – and simply great – destination with reliable birdlife and agreeable scenery. A couple of hours will do it, unless the spectacular landscape of distant red-rock formations and surrounding mountains distracts you from your birding mission. Then again, you may spot a distant, soaring raptor while gawking at the view. The park’s wildflowers are another pleasant distraction. Enjoy them. Enjoy everything here.

I only wish I could afford some of the large-acreage luxury properties along the east side of the park – then I’d have Deer Creek Canyon Park in view every day.

Yes, it’s a great place!

Have you adopted a local birding spot that has become your own “home patch”? Please share! Each month, The Lark Bunting plans to feature DFO member stories about the places they come back to again and again.

If you would like to write about YOURS, email TLB editor Patrick O’Driscoll at patodrisk@gmail.com or call him at 303-885-6955. Thanks!
DFO NEWS

Bird in peace . . .
Robert A. "Bob" Spencer
(1924-2020)

Patrick O’Driscoll
Former DFO field trip leader and club president Bob Spencer, a retired printer, admired Colorado birder, and fervent gatherer of unusual collectibles since his Great Depression childhood, died on May 11 in Morrison, CO. A longtime resident of Golden until infirmity overtook his mobility in 2017, he passed peacefully while in recovery from a recently broken hip.

Bob Spencer was 96, but his enthusiasm for birds and birding was ageless. He died with a Colorado life list of 453 species, added to as recently as 2018. “Dad was a very avid birder since the early 1960s, and went out every Saturday that his work, family and church responsibilities would allow,” said his namesake son, Robert L. “Bob” Spencer.

Growing up, Bob the younger had shunned his father’s passionate hobby. But over the past decade, he and his wife Sondra caught the birding bug while chauffeuring his dad to Colorado rare-bird stakeouts (American Woodcock, Purple Sandpiper, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Tropical Kingbird) and on other bird outings. When Bob’s need for a walker and then a wheelchair made outings on foot too difficult, his son took him on twice-monthly birding drives through Chatfield State Park and Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge.

“When we first started driving him, he really wanted to chase some good birds,” Bob the younger said of his dad. “Not just go for a drive but go and hunt a bird. We’re very grateful that in his later years we had the opportunity to spend time with him on these outings.”

Bob Spencer joined DFO before it was DFO. In 1962, he rewarded himself for earning his bachelor’s degree in business at age 38 after seven years of night school. “I graduated from DU and bought myself a membership in what was called the Colorado Bird Club,” he recalled in a 2007 interview with Colorado Community Newspapers. “Some days we would go out and see 100 birds a day.”


Continued on page 6
By December 1971, the newsletter was renamed *The Lark Bunting*, and it listed Bob as one of the club’s field trip chairs, a job he held for more than 10 years. (The other chair was Ruth Wheeler, then the last living charter member of the Colorado Bird Club.) Among the hundreds of field trips Spencer led was his annual overnight excursion to North Park and Walden over the Fourth of July holiday, a popular fixture for years on the DFO calendar. He also served as club president (1989-91), vice president (1987-89) and on the DFO Board.

In 1995, Spencer became the ninth recipient of the Ptarmigan Award, DFO’s highest honor and an accolade he helped create (Wheeler was one of the first two recipients). Two years ago, DFO granted him a rare lifetime membership. In 2008, he also received the Colorado Field Ornithologists’ lifetime achievement award at the CFO convention in Cañon City.

Atop all of that, Bob Spencer also printed *The Lark Bunting* from its early days into the 1990s. He was a printer by trade when, just married to Shirley Jackson, they moved to Golden from New York state in 1952. Spencer was the in-house printer for the Colorado School of Mines for 20 years before running his own print shop, Fairmont Printing, until retirement in 1995. His son said that when Bob moved into assisted living three years ago, the hoard of collectibles and odds and ends in his basement included “boxes and boxes” of old editions of *The Lark Bunting*.

In annual Spencer family Christmas letters, Shirley dubbed her husband “Bird watching Bob,” and she called 1992 “the year of the dove” for his finding of an Inca Dove, his 400th Colorado life bird, “a feather in his cap and a record for sighting this bird in Colorado.” Married to Bob more than 50 years, Shirley died in 2006.

Bob Spencer was born on March 31, 1924, to Clarence and Myrtle (Brown) Spencer in Lockport, NY, about 40 miles north of Buffalo, where he grew up the oldest of six children. Their father, a trolley-car conductor, died of cancer when Bob was just 12. Bob and his siblings spent years in an orphanage because their mother couldn’t earn enough to rent a place for them all. After high school, he worked 60-70 hours a week for a decade as main support for his mother and siblings.

Sometime during his young adult years in Buffalo, Spencer joined a hiking club. “It was not exactly a bird club, though certainly birdwatching was part of it,” his son said. “They were into nature. That’s what got him really started with the outdoors.” After Bob and Shirley married, “I think he saw Colorado was a great place to get out and do those things.”

Colorado birders who knew him recalled Bob Spencer’s kind, smiling manner, birding knowledge, and informal mentoring of young birders. Many especially remember his humor and wordplay, from clever twists of phrase to puns that drew as many groans as laughs.

“Bob was quite a character,” said longtime Boulder birder Joyce Takamine, who first met Spencer on his Independence Day overnighter. “He was known for his spoonerisms” – cleverly intentional slips-of-phrase that transpose the first letters or sounds of words for comic effect. Like saying, for instance, that someone had to endure a “blushing crow” instead of a “crushing blow.”

“The collective laughter and groans Bob was responsible for would drown out the cranes in Grand Island, NE,” Fort Collins bird and insect expert Dave Leatherman wrote on the Colorado Field Ornithologists’ Cobirds email listserv. Leatherman recalled the day he quietly scoped Hamilton Reservoir north of Fort Collins with Spencer and several other birders, in pursuit of a constantly diving Yellow-billed Loon. “No noise except for the shuffling of feet and cold breathing,” he wrote. “Then up rises a squeaky sing-song ditty: ‘Out in the boonies, lookin’ for some loonies.’ Guess who?”

Spencer’s son grew up with the wordplay: “He had no qualms about acting a little bit goofy . . . . And he was making puns up until the day he died.” Perhaps none was cleverer than one he coined in his late 70s when his son set up an email account for him. When asked what email name Bob wanted to use, “he sort of instantly came up with BOBOLINK,” son Bob recalled, still impressed. “All double-entendres were intended” – his name, a cool bird, and a “link” to the internet.

Besides birding, Spencer was an avid photographer, shooting thousands of 35 mm slides. Later in life, he became an amateur archaeo-astronomer, serving as an officer in the Denver Amateur Astronomy Club and as a member of the Loveland Archaeology Society. And he was a passionate collector of things other than birds.

Continued on page 7
Spencer kept thousands of stamped coin tokens used on buses, trolleys and subways, begun with a collection inherited at age 12 from his trolley-driving dad. He also acquired thousands of post cards and amassed tens of thousands of metal “good-for” tokens that 19th and early 20th century merchants gave customers to keep them coming back before paper coupons came along.

“He was one of those prototypical packrats,” his son said. “Very good at acquiring but not good at organizing. He would never let me throw anything out. Up to the day he died, at some level he thought that he was going to organize all of that,” including numerous notepads with bird lists from a lifetime of field outings.

Spencer also collected dozens of car license plates from every state, but only for the year 1935. His son thinks it was nostalgia for a happy childhood summer that year, when 11-year-old Bob and two younger brothers sought to spot plates on cars from (at the time) all 48 states. One year later, their father’s untimely death upended their lives.

Bob and his wife were founding and lifetime members of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Arvada. Bob Spencer is survived by sons Bob (wife Sondra) and Jim (Connie), five grandchildren and one great-granddaughter. He was preceded in death by Shirley and their daughter Carol, and his brothers Edward, Clarence and Donald and sisters Nancy and Lilian.

The family has said donations in Bob’s name may be made to any of three organizations he supported: Denver Field Ornithologists (dfobirds.org), Colorado Field Ornithologists (cobirds.org) and Mountain Vista Senior Living Community (mountainvista.net).
Colorado birders remember Bob Spencer

The sad news of Bob Spencer’s passing May 11 brought an outpouring of tributes and memories. Here’s some of what Colorado birders had to say about Bob on the Colorado Field Ornithologists’ Cobirds email listserv.

Ted Floyd, Lafayette:
“The last time I went birding with Bob was March 30, 2014,” the day before Spencer’s 90th birthday. “It was a totally serendipitous thing; we just bumped into each other . . . at the Cottonwood Marsh boardwalk in Boulder County. I asked Bob what was new, and he wryly remarked that that day was the last day of his ninth decade on this earth, and that he’d better go birding in case he’d missed anything his first 89 years and 364 days in this life.”

Duane Nelson, Las Animas:
“I can give Bob no greater tribute than saying he was like a second father to me . . . (and) the first birder I ever met.” Having birded alone in Colorado and in Chicago during college, Nelson returned home wanting to find and share “some good birds with whoever might have been interested.” After joining DFO, Nelson discovered Bob Spencer in 1979 via DFO’s old “telephone tree” to report rare bird sightings. One day, “Bob called me about a Palm Warbler in his yard east of Golden, and a friendship was born. We did countless local and more distant trips together. We carpooled together to DFO meetings, picking up Ruth Wheeler and Freda Krolik on our way . . . Great times and great memories.”

Mark Obmascik, Denver:
“A few years back, Robert brought his dad in a wheelchair to see the Tropical Kingbird at South Platte Reservoir. On the roll back from the bird stakeout site to the car, it was hard to say who wore the bigger grin – the son or the father, who, if I remember correctly, had just seen Colorado bird No. 453. That day, only joy was contagious.”

Tina Brown, Littleton:
“Bob always made sure you saw the birds on his trips. What really amazed me were all of his different interests. I asked him how he kept them all up. He said he could not (keep them up), but you have to have more interests besides just birding.”

Doug Ward, Denver:
“I believe Bob was there on my very first birding trip led by Hugh Kingery down at Waterton way back in April 1973 when I was 8. Wow, time flies . . . He was a kind, funny, and caring man who you would always look forward to running into at a DFO meeting, or whenever and wherever folks were chasing down a rarity.”

Bob Andrews, Yekepa, Liberia, West Africa:
“Bob Spencer was one of the first three birders I ever met (the other two were Lois Webster and Patty Echelmeyer). (It) was a DFO spring count in the Barr Lake area on May 13, 1967 (53 years ago) . . . Bob’s infectious enthusiasm and laughter were one of the things that made that day so memorable, and on many subsequent days birding.”

Steve Larson, Northglenn:
“I remember meeting Bob when I was about 21 out at Bonny (Reservoir) in about 1973 or ’74. We were the only two people in the Foster Grove Campground and we sat around the fire and he was pointing out constellations to me. Something I have never forgotten.”

Peter Burke, Niwot:
“I’ve had the pleasure of running into Bob Sr. and Bob Jr. on several occasions over the years. Even from his wheelchair, Bob’s enthusiasm was contagious . . . The last time I saw them together was in fall 2018 out at Cottonwood Marsh in Boulder. After Bob filled me in on the birds that were around, I took this photo of him.”

Bob L. Spencer, Erie:
“Thank you all so much for sharing your fond memories of my dad! I wonder if there is some cosmic significance in the fact that he chose to pass on from this world during the peak of spring migration.”
DFO’s first
ZOOM program
June 23: Reducing
Bird/Window
Collisions

Susan Blansett
Do you know that preventable collisions of birds into windows are the second leading cause of bird mortality?

Or, that every year, between 350 million and 1 BILLION migratory birds perish in the U.S. because of lights and light pollution that lead to bird-window strikes?

Join us from the comfort home this month to learn about how smart people in cities all over the country, including Denver, are working to reduce needless bird deaths in urban building clusters where concentrated night lighting is a fatal attraction to migrating birds. You’ll also learn how you can help turn this tragic loss of birdlife around.

Mark your calendar now for “Reducing Bird/Window Collisions” on Tuesday, June 23 at 7 p.m. MDT (more details coming shortly). This FREE webinar will be DFO’s first online event using ZOOM, the popular videoconferencing app that has made live group communication easy for millions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our presenter will be Alex Halverson of Denver Parks & Recreation’s “Lights Out Denver” project. Presented by the DFO Conservation Committee, Alex will discuss Denver’s program, why it’s needed, how it got started, and how interested volunteers can help in the autumn cycle of study and collision prevention, which is set to begin in August.

The project aims to improve birds’ lot chiefly by curbing unnecessary nighttime lighting inside downtown Denver high-rises during spring and fall migration. For reasons not entirely understood, such lights distract or attract nighttime migrant birds, including most songbirds, into dangerous collisions with windows. Advocates for the birds seek to persuade building owners to DIM LIGHTS and treat windows to minimize collisions.

Again, this webinar is FREE for DFO members – but registration will be required. Watch your email inbox, the DFO website, DFO Facebook page or DFO Instagram feed for exact details soon about how and when to register.

In the meantime, if you haven’t already done so, go to the ZOOM website at zoom.us and download the free version of the ZOOM app for your computer or smartphone. It’s easy and fun.

Thanks in advance for joining us!
DFO’s 85th Birthday: Snippets from the Past

My most thrilling bird experience: Thank you, Mr. Lewis

Denver Field Ornithologists turns 85 in 2020. To mark this milestone, *The Lark Bunting* is publishing monthly “Snippets from DFO’s Past” – personal remembrances, member stories, photos, bits of club history and trivia, and the like.

Robert Righter

About 15 or 20 years ago, I visited the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology in Cambridge, MA to verify two Colorado specimens of *Dusky-capped Flycatcher*, an exceedingly rare species north of the Mexico border. Originally collected in the 1880s, the birds had somehow wound up in the Harvard collections.

The specimens had been authenticated previously by a well-known ornithologist not from Colorado, so the record had been accepted to Colorado’s state bird list based on someone else’s say-so. Since I was co-author of *Colorado Birds* with Bob Andrews, I had an interest in the Dusky-capped Flycatcher record. And since my brother Jim lived in Boston and I was going to visit him, I thought I could take a look at the specimens while there, as it was an easy hop over to Cambridge. No one had asked me to do this, but I had always thought the original verification was inadequate. My goal was to come up with first-hand, measured proof, which I did. I brought along my measuring equipment, took photos of the specimens, and later wrote an article for the *Journal of the Colorado Field Ornithologist*, describing what I had seen and measured.

Before leaving for Boston, however, I had another specimen in mind. I was aware that, housed somewhere within the museum’s vast collection, was what is believed to be the original type specimen for one of the West’s most striking birds, the *Lewis’s Woodpecker*.

Yes, original as in, the first-of-its-kind known to ornithological science. The species was first seen by explorer Meriwether Lewis himself on July 20, 1805, somewhere north of present-day Helena, MT, as his famous expedition with William Clark passed through. In his journal, Lewis wrote this:

> We saw a black woodpecker or crow today about the size of the lark woodpecker as black as a crow. I indevored to get a shoot at it but could not. It is a distinct species of woodpecker; it has a long tail and flys a good deal like the jay bird.

About a year later, the expedition did “collect” a specimen of the bird. Five years after the explorers returned home, the species was named for Lewis by America’s first ornithologist, Alexander Wilson. Nearly two centuries later, Lewis and Clark scholars at the University of Nebraska wrote this footnote to Lewis’s original 1805 journal entry: “Perhaps the only remaining zoological specimen of the expedition is the skin of a Lewis’s woodpecker, now in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.”

I have always been interested in the discovery of new bird species, and the possibility of glimpsing a rare and famous American specimen of one excited me. So, after I was through verifying the flycatchers I had come to examine, I asked the collection manager if I could see the Lewis’s Woodpecker specimen. Since I was the only one in the museum, she looked around and said, “Let’s do it.”

As we walked over to her desk, the excitement began to rise within my fragile nervous system. Opening a drawer, she took...
out a metal box and unlocked it with her keys. Inside was another key. She removed it, and from there, I followed her around to a cabinet in the rear of the department. With that special key, she unlocked the cabinet, opened the door and slid out a tray.

After asking me to hold out both hands, she draped a cotton cloth over them and pulled a pair of cotton gloves onto her own hands. Reaching into the cabinet tray, she removed the Lewis’s Woodpecker and placed it in my cloth-covered hands.

I cannot begin to describe how exciting this was. Everything was on the verge of shaking as it dawned on me what I was now holding. Meriwether Lewis had probably collected this specimen, William Clark had looked at and possibly handled it, and their guide Sacagawea may even have helped dress it. When the expedition returned to Washington, many luminaries of the past, most obviously Thomas Jefferson himself, would have proudly handled this first known Lewis’s Woodpecker – a dark bird with an unusually colored belly and breast that Clark himself had described as “a curious mixture of white and blood red” so vivid it looked “artificially painted or stained.”

As I stood there, mind and heart racing as I held a historic birdskin two centuries old in my hands, the collection manager turned to me and smiled. She understood the connection with history I was feeling. It was the most thrilling bird experience of my life.

Retired field ornithologist and author Bob Righter is a former long-time DFO treasurer, board member and field trip leader, and the 1994 recipient of DFO’s Ptarmigan Award.

Celebrate DFO’s past, present and future! Please share YOUR “Snippets” stories, photos or memories from ANY era, from 1935 to now. Memorable first field trip? Best birding lesson you’ve learned as a member? Favorite DFO birding destination? Email TLB editor Patrick O’Driscoll at potodrisk@gmail.com or call him at 303-885-6955. Thanks!
R.I.P., Colorado Rare Bird Alert, inspired by DFO

Patrick O’Driscoll
In the beginning, a “telephone tree” of dedicated DFO members spread word-of-mouth news of rare-bird sightings around Colorado in the 1960s and ’70s. Then came the telephone voice-message “hotline,” with volunteers recording updates from the field that birders far and wide could dial in to hear.

Finally, in the early 2000s, the Colorado Rare Bird Alert brought these updates into the digital age, with daily postings to CoBirds and an email listserv of hundreds of birders in and out of state.

For more than 13 years, Boulder-based birder Joyce Takamine tirelessly compiled and posted the list of rarities from across the state by date, place and county. After she retired from Colorado RBA duty at the end of 2018, DFO resumed active management of the service with a patchwork team of volunteers led by longtime DFO member Joe Roller.

Unfortunately, this revolving duty – each compiler taking a seven-day shift, sometimes working late at night to post after midnight – became harder to staff in recent months. Some could volunteer no more than quarterly participation. A few committed to several months or a year before moving on to other priorities.

Despite periodic calls for more helpers, the effort could no longer sustain itself. “Our team of volunteers is no longer large enough to continue this information service, which has been sponsored for years by the Denver Field Ornithologists,” Roller wrote on May 26 in a “Rest in Peace” post to CoBirds. “In the past we invited volunteers to join the RBA team of compilers, but we are no longer seeking those, as the RBA is over now.”

The Rare Bird Alert was born of early notification work by a legion of dedicated birders, including Norm Erthal, David Martin, Duane Nelson, Dick Schottler, Lynn Willcockson and Doug Faulkner, among many others. At first, it was the DFO-sponsored telephone “tree” notification list. “Each birder in the tree,” said Roller, “would get a call from an excited birder up the list: ‘Hey! Bruce Webb found a Little Gull at Union Reservoir today. First state record! Call the next two birders on the list to let them know!’” Thus, word of each find gradually disseminated through the ranks of interested birders.

DFO’s longtime historian, the late Warren Finch, wrote of the RBA: “The statewide Colorado Rare Bird Alert sponsored by DFO, and since 2002 cosponsored by Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, was established in 1983 to replace the existing telephone tree.” Finch described the DFO system as “one of the best, if not the best, in the country because it (was) updated regularly, often daily, especially during migration seasons and for particularly rare species as soon as possible.”

Longtime birder Larry Modesitt of Arvada said it was the envy of the birding world in those days. “‘Daily’ might not seem special now, given the hourly alerts by eBird we now enjoy,” he wrote in a post to CoBirds after Roller’s announcement. “(But) when my business took me to different places,” including birding hotspots like McAllen, TX and south Florida, “I would call the local RBA and hear the rarities as of a WEEK ago.” Other birders out there told Modesitt he was lucky to be a birder in Colorado, “and three times I heard, ‘You have the best RBA in the country.’”

Continued on page 13
Takamine said the phone-in system was still in use after the RBA migrated to email via CoBirds. A Denver native who worked mid-career in New Mexico, she got involved after returning to Colorado in the early 2000s: “I think I went to some DFO meeting, probably in 2004, and they mentioned that they needed people to do the RBA because Doug Faulkner and whoever else was helping him” needed relief.

After Takamine contacted Faulkner to volunteer, “he gave me sort of instructions and said, ‘OK, we’ll give you a trial period’ – and he never took it back,” she said, laughing.

The recorded-message system continued until the equipment began breaking down and eventually quit altogether. “I can’t remember what year it died, but I did both (phone and email) reports until then,” she said. “It was funny. I have that clock that chimes on the hour with a bird song? So when I was recording the phone message, I would have to time it to finish either before the top of the hour or start recording after the top of the hour so the clock birds wouldn’t chime in.”

Meanwhile, the growth and popularity of eBird’s reporting of rarities by state, county and hotspot created a rising tide of data to sift through daily for the RBA. CoBirds and Facebook postings and other sources added to the flood. “Before it got so overwhelming, I’d get up an hour or so before I was going to post in the morning, check the Western Slope birding, and all those other things and then compile it,” Takamine said. “That was sort of doable until maybe 4 or 5 years ago. There were just so many (reports) to filter through. It got to be too much work.”

The death of the RBA has been mourned far and wide. In another CoBirds post after Roller’s announcement, Colorado birding authority Bob Andrews wrote on May 29 from Yekepa, Liberia: “Since I spend most of the year thousands of miles away from Colorado in West Africa, I don’t get any direct use of the RBA for birding. But I did enjoy seeing a compilation of the most interesting or unusual bird sightings from Colorado as a way to keep up with what is happening in Colorado. Many thanks to Joyce and then Joe and his team of volunteers and all of the other compilers who have provided this service.”

In the year and a half since Takamine passed the RBA baton to Roller, others who volunteered for the team included Allison Hilf, Gregg Goodrich, John Drummond, David Leatherman, Patrick O’Driscoll, Dean Shoup, Burke Angstman, Cheryl Teuton, Lynne Forrester, Ira Sanders, Bill Kaempfer, Laura Steadman, and Donna Stumpp.

In his May 26 announcement, Roller signed off with: “On behalf of the current team of RBA compilers, thank you for allowing us to share the joy of discovery through the decades . . . and good birding!”
BIRDING WITH 20/20 VISION

Conservation inspiration? Look to like-minded birders elsewhere

Susan Blansett
Knowing how much DFO members care about making Colorado and metro Denver a better place for birds and other wildlife, the DFO Conservation Committee has been researching possible activities to fulfill that part of our club’s mission. That means looking for things that you, our members, can support – projects about which we all can feel pride and a sense of accomplishment.

Curiosity led me to wonder how other birding clubs like DFO approach this aspect of conservation. I focused primarily on clubs not affiliated with Audubon, where conservation activities are already baked in. A quick scan of the American Birding Association list allowed me to choose several clubs from around the U.S. with metropolitan centers like Denver in their service areas. I picked these five:

- Central Valley Birding Club (CA) (www.cvbirds.org)
- Chicago Ornithological Society (www.chicagobirder.org)
- Delaware Valley Ornithological Club (PA) (www.dvoc.org)
- Georgia Ornithological Society (www.gos.org)
- Iowa Ornithological Union (www.iowabirds.org)

I also added the Denver and Evergreen Audubon chapters into my scan. As DFO shares significant crossover membership with both, our club’s own efforts ought to be complementary to theirs and add value for our members.

What I quickly found was an abundance of worthy conservation activities in these other clubs, ranging from “easy, low-effort and low- or no-cost” to “ambitious, high-effort and high-cost.” A key factor in determining the level of effort is the supply of active member-volunteers interested in carrying out such projects.

For instance, easy, low-effort, low-cost activities include loads of useful information that clubs can simply publish online for members and the general public to use on their own, whenever they want. In DFO’s case, think gardening guidance for birds and pollinators, building and placing nest boxes, reducing housecat predation on birds, and preventing bird window-strike injury and death both at home and around commercial buildings. A couple of examples:

- Georgia Ornithological Society publishes its own guide to bird-friendly trees, shrubs and plants, including a resource list of nurseries. It also is one of more than a dozen birding groups nationwide that have adopted a four-point “feral cat policy” endorsed by the American Bird Conservancy in its Happy Cats, Healthy Birds campaign
- Chicago Ornithological Society publicizes bird-strike prevention tips and data. It also has adopted the same ABC-endorsed feral-cat policy as the Georgia society

In the vein of moderate-effort, medium-cost are grant-making funds somewhat like DFO’s own Research, Education and Conservation Grants Fund, but with a stronger, more specific conservation focus and active fundraising. For DFO, perhaps that could include adopting a local Important Bird Area (IBA) or favorite habitat and taking responsibility to pick up trash regularly or maintain trails and signs annually. Or perhaps building, placing, replacing and maintaining nest boxes for a specific habitat or species. Or even partnering with other bird clubs on larger-scale projects on important issues, species and habitat. Another example:

- The Iowa Ornithologists’ Union partners with public and private conservation groups statewide to sustain Bird Friendly Iowa, under which cities and counties can earn “Bird Friendly” certification. In fact, the program has helped and recognized the City and County of Denver and other municipalities outside of Iowa for achieving and maintaining healthy ecosystems.

Continued on page 15
For clubs with enough ambition, imagination and resources, opportunities abound for tackling high-effort, high-cost conservation agendas, from broader advocacy at state, regional and even national levels to paying for, conducting and publishing research in habitats and species, hosting scientific conferences, promoting birding tourism, funding conservation fellowships and scholarships, and protecting a specific habitat or species.

One of DFO’s oldest and richest counterparts is the Georgia Ornithological Society, co-founded by Roger Tory Peterson in 1926 (just seven years before DFO was born). In a congenial conversation with GOS president Larry Carlile, I learned that over time, legacy donations have built the society’s endowment to $2.5 million. “We’re fortunate to be able to grant about $100,000 annually to worthy conservation projects,” Carlile told me.

By contrast, the Central Valley Birding Club’s Waldo Hunt Fund in California is smaller but has paid for such meaningful work as publication of birding trail maps and research on the Tricolored Blackbird, declared endangered by international experts and a candidate for U.S. protected status.

The good news for DFO? Having high-level impact in pursuit of conservation does not require massive amounts of money. In partnership with like-minded organizations and individuals and by strategic pooling and deploying of people, time and money, we can do amazing things.

Here’s another example: The Bird Conservation Network (www.bcnbirds.org) includes 21 birding organizations representing about 35,000 members in greater Chicagoland, southeast Wisconsin and northern Indiana. Funded with annual dues (just $100 per organization) and donations via the network’s website, BCN pursues and wins grants for bird monitoring, advocacy, conferences, “green paper” research and publication, bird tourism, species protection and conservation education for elected officials. Key to its credibility and success in local conservation is a vigorous cadre of volunteers.

All the clubs and examples I have cited here are sources of real inspiration. In reaching out to them, I was strongly reminded about the sense of community and shared purpose we enjoy with birders everywhere. DFO can be one cog in a vast network of nature enthusiasts who make a difference every day for the birds we love. As we work to increase our conservation profile and pull our own weight for birds and habitat, we will recognize the extraordinary reservoir of knowledge, talent and passion already present within our membership, ready to be tapped for good use.

An indomitable and ambitious amateur birder named Rosalie Edge founded the world’s first raptor sanctuary (Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania) in 1934. She famously said: “The time to protect a species is while it is still common.” I think we can all agree on that.

Birding with 20/20 Vision is a series of monthly articles this year dedicated to exploring what conservation means to DFO – as a club, as birders and as citizens of metro Denver and Colorado. They aim to inform and inspire us to do more to protect birds and their habitats. Have an idea for this series? Send it to Susan Blansett at susanblansett@gmail.com.
Wilson's Warbler
David Prentice
DFO NEWS

Mid-summer update on DFO field trips

After continuing to schedule field trips – but then cancel them on the first of each month as the Covid-19 pandemic shutdown has continued – DFO will not try to schedule trips again until the end of summer.

Field Trip Director Karen von Saltza announced that, after consultation with the DFO Board, trips will not be scheduled for posting until Sept. 1. She said this is out of continued caution and lack of information about whether trips can go forward safely by then. Von Saltza also said it was “hard to get our field trip leaders interested in planning a trip when the likelihood was that it would be canceled.”

In an email letter May 31 to all DFO field trip leaders, von Saltza wrote: “I know this is discouraging for leaders and participants alike. But we remain concerned for the health and safety of our membership and do not want to encourage any group behavior that may be risky at best.”

Of chief concern, she said, is the potential for a bounce-back of infections during the gradual reopening of public life in Colorado now just beginning. “Because there is a strong possibility that a second wave of the virus may occur in late summer, Denver Field Ornithologists does not want to resume our field trip program only to shut it down again,” she explained.

At the same time, von Saltza was encouraged by anecdotal responses back from DFO members who continue to go birding on their own “in a careful and responsible manner.” She noted that a number of members bird in “groups of two or three, wearing masks and respecting Centers for Disease Control guidelines for social distancing, and not sharing binoculars, scopes and other equipment or riding together in cars.” These also are components of the protocols von Saltza and the DFO Field Trip Committee have set for the resumption of public field trips, whenever that takes place.

“This is necessary birding behavior until the virus has abated,” she added, “and we have no idea at this time how long before that will be.”

Von Saltza asked trip leaders, and all DFO members, to “please continue to enjoy your summer in safety. DFO will return with a modified schedule of field trips as soon as we can, but not before it is safe to do so. The DFO Field Trip Committee will continue to closely monitor this situation and will advise you when circumstances change.”
Denver Field Ornithologists Membership Application

Join online at https://dfobirds.org, or by mail.

DFO memberships expire Dec. 31; valid for the next year if paid after Oct. 1. DFO provides grants to individuals or organizations whose mission includes ornithological research, education, and conservation. DFO is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and contributions are deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Annual family membership (electronic The Lark Bunting) $25
Annual family membership (printed The Lark Bunting) $60
Student membership (age ≤ 26) $10
Research, Education, & Conservation Grant Fund donation $_____
Friends of DFO donation (general fund) $_____

Total $_____

Name(s) ____________________________________________________________

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