
October Program Review

By Sharon Tinianow

Seth Gallagher, program manager for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), delivered a compelling program to 55 DFO members and guests on October 1. He outlined for us how his development of a personal conservation ethic informs his current work managing conservation programs out of NFWF Rocky Mountain Region Office in Denver. As this was the first time Gallagher shared this presentation, we can call it the world premiere of *Sage Grouse Conservation: One Conversation at a Time*.

Gallagher experienced what is sometimes referred to as a “free range childhood” growing up on Staten Island, NY and in Virginia’s Piedmont region. The suburban settings in which he lived were augmented by plenty of outdoor experiences, including visits to his grandmother’s home in the Catskills. Along the way he witnessed the human impact on the land from the Fresh Kills Landfill in Staten Island to the massive oil refineries of Linden, NJ. The beach where he and his friends fished for bass were littered with medical waste, including syringes and IV bags.

He became so outraged that he joined Greenpeace when he was in the fifth grade. The anger led to confusion and despair as he took in what seemed like insurmountable environmental challenges. Then an aptitude test in school suggested he pursue a career as a rancher. This helped him identify for himself his deep love of wild places and for rural landscapes.

Many other experiences over the years led Gallagher to ask tough questions and wrestle with the guilt of being human. Can we live resource dependent lives and rectify the hypocrisy? Can we maintain a quality of life and not utilize land in ways that are harmful? Is it always “us” against “them”? And, who is us and who is them?

His desire for collaborative work on environmental issues led him take a position with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, which funds projects that are public/private partnerships seeking collaborative solutions. The three-year-old Northern Great Plains Grasslands project is one such project that is studying and protecting the sagebrush landscapes of North America.

Gallagher provided some background on the Sage Grouse – symbol of the Western Plains – and the habitat on which it depends. Many believed this bird would be the next Spotted Owl as populations declined due to an assortment of land use pressures. The historic population of Sage Grouse was somewhere between 1.6 million and 6 million individuals. Today there are approximately 450,000 birds.

Their landscape needs are very specific and are different depending on the season. In the spring, male Sage Grouse perform their mating display on leks. They are notoriously loyal to the leks, returning to them year after year. Females nest within a half mile of the lek in habitat that features sagebrush cover and grass for food.

When the chicks fledge they seek the protein that an insect diet provides. That requires wetter areas that support the forbs that attract insects. In Winter, the birds migrate locally to sagebrush habitat that supplies both food and cover.

Any surface disturbance is a threat to the Sage Grouse. That includes wind power development, oil and gas extraction, roads, and agriculture. Fire regimes that suppress the natural cycle of fire can allow conifers to grow. Even one conifer per acre will discourage Sage Grouse. Cheat grass, an alien grass species that greens up early in the spring but turns brown in summer, threatens the sagebrush habitat on which the Sage Grouse depends.

A controversy over the Sage Grouse came to a head in 2015 when federal government opted to not list the Sage Grouse as an endangered species. While it may sound like the wrong move, it actually put the power to manage the land for Sage Grouse in the hands of state game and fish agencies. This made it possible for private land owners to work with local government agencies to develop the most appropriate plan for each locale.

Some of the techniques employed are conservation easements where the government purchases the development rights to private land, ensuring the land will stay intact in perpetuity. Conifer removal programs

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not only help the Sage Grouse, they also help the rancher. Conifers compete with forage plants for water, so removing the trees makes it possible for cattle to graze on the land.

In the Gunnison Basin, wet meadow hydrology is being improved through the construction of masonry structures that slow the flow of water across the land. This is another win-win solution as it provides the rancher with a wet hay meadow – a perfectly fine place to raise young Sage Grouse. Changes in the energy development sector are promising. A smaller footprint for oil and gas wells minimizes the impact on the land from traffic and noise.

Gallagher is optimistic about the future for the Sage Grouse. He believes that the way to manage for this species is not “us against them.” It is all of us in it together. And, by the way, the Fresh Kills Landfill is now park land, no doubt supporting a variety of bird species and a place for humans to connect with the natural world.

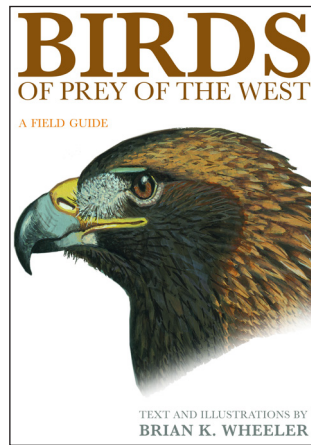
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This is a pretty hot list for DFO field trips. It includes two species found for the first time ever on a DFO trip, the Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and the Ruby-throated Hummingbird; six species found for the second time ever, the Black-bellied Plover, White-eyed Vireo, Mew Gull, Parasitic Jaeger, Prothonotary Warbler and Palm Warbler; and two species found for the third time, the Caspian Tern and Long-tailed Jaeger.

There are still two months left to our Big Year. Join in the fun!

Raising the Bar on Raptor ID: A review of Wheeler’s new guide

By Chuck Hundertmark



Birds of Prey of the West: A Field Guide
Brian K. Wheeler
Princeton University Press (2018)

Brian K. Wheeler’s *Birds of Prey of the West: A Field Guide* together with its eastern companion volume brings an exciting new level of detail and challenge to the joys of raptor watching. From the opening preface and introduction to the final discussion of “Reasons for the Aplomado Falcon’s Demise and Difficulties in Reestablishing Populations,” the western guide is packed with compelling information and helpful insights.

The “Introduction” begins with a discussion of recent changes in the classification of diurnal birds of prey. The most significant change was the separation of falcons from the other diurnal raptors, placing them closer to parrots and passerines than to ospreys, eagles, and hawks. Wheeler’s discussion of the reasons for this and other changes is the clearest and most concise I have read.

Central to the organization of the book are the 85 color plates. Careful observers will note that unlike most field guides with their uniform white background on all plates, Wheeler has employed different background colors for various species that work best with each illustration. Artful illustrations depict each species in multiple flight and perched views. For each species, and in many cases subspecies, Wheeler also illustrates the range of age and sex classes that can be recognized in the field.

As a result, the Swainson’s Hawk, which gets a single plate in *The Sibley Guide to Birds* second edition, receives four full plates in Wheeler’s western guide. The Red-tailed Hawk, with its multiple subspecies and color morphs, is treated in 14 plates and 48 pages.

Opposite each plate, a page of text begins with an overview of the species age class illustrated, then provides brief details of each illustration on the plate. In years of watching Northern Harriers to determine their age and sex, I never paid attention to the “spectacle.” But on page 80, accompanying Plate 10, Wheeler notes, “Pale ‘spectacle’ encircles eye on all ages and sexes.”

The large range maps that accompany each species account are another plus for the reader, allowing a more granular presentation of range for species and, in some cases, subspecies.

Wheeler currently lives in Firestone, Colorado. His love of raptors shows in the careful detail of every illustration and every line of text. Birders will find that the guide opens new challenges and delights in observing raptors. Raptor monitors will find the guide indispensable, as well, as they ask, “Is that very pale Red-tail really a Krider’s or simply a light Eastern subspecies? Or might it be an Eastern x Krider’s?”