

Last Chance: the oasis, the birds, and the people

by Joe Roller

On the Eastern Plains of Colorado, at the intersection of Highways 36 and 71, lies the hamlet of Last Chance.

It was homesteaded in 1904 by Charlie Harbert, whose descendants still live at the crossroads.

Charlie farmed it, and when US Route 36 was constructed in 1934, he built a gas station and cafe.

It was named “Last Chance” as a dire warning—your “last chance” to fill up with food and fuel before setting out for Kansas.

But Last Chance hit a speed bump and fell by the wayside in the 1950s when I-70 was built.

The old motel fell vacant, with Barn Swallows still checking in and out, but tourists no more.

Although only a handful of people still live in Last Chance, it is the heart of a thriving community, based on the Woodlin K-12 School, the Howard Methodist Church, and the Woodlin Lions Club, whose members in 1963 built the inviting Charlie Harbert Memorial Park, with picnic tables,



Yellow Warbler. Kay Niyo

shade trees, and a privy.

Why does Last Chance hold a special place in the hearts of birders?

There is permanent water in the small pond, so there are birds. And if birds are there, can the birders be far behind?

Summer breeders abound. But it is migrants for which Last Chance is famous.

We have been treated to Canada, Cape May, Connecticut, and, yes, Grace’s Warblers!

Common migrants include Yellow-rumped, Wilson’s, and Orange-crowned Warblers, Warbling and Plumbeous Vireos, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Western Tanagers, *Empidonax* flycatchers, House Wrens, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Swainson’s and Hermit Thrushes, and American Robins.

Without this patch of water and trees, where could they rest and refuel?

On June 25, 2012, a prairie fire, started by human folly, swept through Last Chance. Almost 50,000 acres of prairie and fields were destroyed.

Mile after mile of fences burned and need to be replaced at a cost of \$8,000 a mile.

Local ranchers and dozens of fire



On Clean-up Day, Tina Jones did the heavy lifting! Joe Roller

departments fought like hell to conquer the conflagration. It was the fourth largest burn in Colorado’s history at the time, but it was hardly noticed in the wake of the High Park and Waldo Canyon fires.

Nearly every green thing in the Last Chance Oasis was burnt to a crisp. The landscape turned black for miles in every direction.

As one rancher explained, “There was no rain all year, and now there is no grass.”

When I saw the devastation, I asked around and learned that the “birding areas” we had long enjoyed were privately owned. Who knew?

How could birders show their appreciation for that open access over the decades?

The upshot was the Last Chance Oasis Appreciation Day on Novem-

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Last Chance fire clean-up crew on November 3, 2012 included Woodlin Lions Club members and birders. *Lisa Edwards*



Fire destroyed Last Chance, but pond scum survived! *Joe Roller*



Phoenix Rising! *Joe Roller*

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ber 3, 2012, when two dozen birders worked with Lions Club members to clean up the area, removing everything from bottles to rusty oil drums.

On April 6, 2013, supported by donations and a generous grant from the DFO, we went back for habitat restoration, planting 130 berry-bearing shrubs and trees, installing a drip

irrigation system, and broadcasting native grass and wildflower seeds.

On each work day we brought food for a pot-luck lunch. (Nothing much happens at Last Chance without a casserole.)

The best part of the whole experience has been the friendships between birders and the great people who live near Last Chance.

What's next? We'll watch the oasis continue to rise from the ashes and support birds. And there will be no better place to find your next Life Bird—the Phoenix.

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