



# THE LARK BUNTING

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE DENVER FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

VOLUME 59 | ISSUE 04 | APRIL 2023

DFOBIRDS.ORG

## BIRDING

Bohemian *WAX*-sody:  
Waxwings everywhere!

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to be scant in 2025

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**dfo**  
DENVER FIELD  
ORNITHOLOGISTS



Bohemian Waxwings

Jim Esten  
High Line Canal  
Arapahoe County



A DFO member since 2014, **Jim Esten** is photo editor of

*The Lark Bunting*. He took photos on and off for 35 years before getting his first digital camera in 2001. He first focused on birds a decade ago while visiting Florida. He is retired from network IT service.

## ON THE COVER

# Bohemian Waxwing: Irruption's darlings are on everyone's winter 2023 checklist

What a season for unexpected bird species in the Denver area. In addition to the usual scattered reports of seldom-seens like Winter Wren (the cover bird in our previous newsletter), there was the sudden spate beginning in November of Cassin's Finches, higher-country birds not often spotted down here on the edge of the Great Plains.

But for sheer numbers and the widespread array of sightings, no one can recall a winter like this one for Bohemian Waxing (*Bombycilla garrulus*), that plump yet sleek, starling-sized, swarming fruit lover from points well north of Colorado. If you've seen one, you have not begun to see them all. Since mid-December, flocks from handfuls to a thousand or more have vagabonded up and down the Front Range, from Larimer and Weld counties to Pueblo. They're here for the winter food, feasting on crabapples, juniper berries and the black fruit of the Common Buckthorn, a shrubby invasive.

All this is just what Bohemian Waxwings do in winter: Move in unpredictable migration patterns (depending on where the fruit supply is or is not), often in huge numbers. In years like this, they may venture well south of Wyoming, their southern limit in "normal" times. Come spring, they return to a boreal subarctic swath around the globe to breed.

This month's cover birds were captured on Jan. 15 by **Jim Esten**, photo editor of *The Lark Bunting*, where the irruption was most visible early on: neighborhoods along the High Line Canal where southeast Denver and north Arapahoe County meet. Since then, they have ranged widely across metro Denver, adding a "lifer" to many local birders' checklists.

DFO member **Jared Del Rosso**, who contributes bird essays to this newsletter, delved into the species' surprising history in Denver in a recent post on the CoBirds list-serv. He quoted pioneer Denver birder **W.H. Bergtold**, who wrote more than a century ago that Bohemian Waxwings were "all over [Denver] in great numbers" in 1917. Del Rosso says Bergtold also had noted only a single sighting of a Cedar Waxwing since 1905. Jared also wrote a thoughtful post about this Colorado irruption on his blog, [The Lonesome Whip-poor-will](#). If you're hungry for more on Bohemians, it's a must read.

Another DFO member, **Gregg Goodrich**, crunched some eBird numbers to find 750 checklist reports from mid-December through January of irruption Bohemians in Denver and four adjacent counties around it. (*Read about how Gregg counted a flock of more than 800 Bohemians in the "Last Look, Last Word" feature at the end of this month's newsletter.*)

### Before we go, fun waxwing facts:

- Bohemians' bright, sealing-wax red tips, yellow and white streaks in wings, and yellow bands on tails get larger and more prominent with age
- Cornell's *Birds of the World* notes the species' susceptibility to collisions with windows and cars, in both cases because fruiting trees and shrubs are often planted near buildings and roads
- Called "Bohemian" for its far-flung wanderings, the species' scientific name blends Latin words to describe the bird: *Bombycilla* combines *bombyx* ("silk") and *cilla* ("tail") for the waxwing's silky-soft plumage, and *garrulus* ("chatter") echoes in the English *garrulous* ("extremely talkative") for the flocks' incessant, high-pitched trills

— **Patrick O'Driscoll**



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Send image-file photos of birds or bird outings to the photo editor at [jcesten@gmail.com](mailto:jcesten@gmail.com).

Editors reserve the right to accept and edit suitable articles and photos for publication.

## NEWSLETTER ADVERTISING

*The Lark Bunting* does not accept or contain paid advertising. DFO **AdBIRDtisements** are FREE to club members to seek or sell bird-related equipment, supplies, books and decorative items (artwork, photos, clothing, note cards, etc.).

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Send AdBIRDtisement materials to editor **Patrick O'Driscoll** at [patodrisk@gmail.com](mailto:patodrisk@gmail.com).

**Next deadline: Friday, March 31**



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## A community of birders, learning and acting together for avian wildlife

Denver Field Ornithologists is an all-volunteer organization that conducts hundreds of free birdwatching field trips throughout the year and welcomes participation and membership by all. DFO promotes enjoyment of nature, the study of birds, and protection of them and their habitats in greater Denver and beyond.

In addition to field trips, evening programs and birding workshops, DFO conducts community science in the field, including the spring Hawk Watch raptor migration count on Dinosaur Ridge.

DFO awards grants annually for bird-related research, education and conservation projects in Colorado. For more information, visit the [Research, Education & Conservation Grants](#) page on the DFO website.

DFO is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and financial contributions to DFO's three giving funds are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

# After winter's hard knocks, here comes the equinox!

By the time this issue of *The Lark Bunting* is available for reading, we'll be barely two weeks from Spring Equinox, aka the first day of spring. As its blend of the Latin words *aequus* and *nox* implies, *equinox* means "equal night" — a day with 12 hours of daylight and 12 of night. Twice a year, equinoxes mark the sun crossing the Equator, northbound in spring, southbound in fall.

It's a wonderful word for wonderful times, isn't it? And for most of us birders, our most anticipated times for birding. Can you feel it? *Spring migration!* Fall migration! Birds coming north, birds going south. To nesting grounds now, and back to wintering grounds later. And here below, we get to watch the seasonal parade.

I admit, however, that I'm *really* partial to *this* equinox. Aren't you? Where we live, we've made it past the slow U-turn in winter's cold and darkness. With spring's approach, we dream of three warming months ahead, daylight lengthening daily. More time for birds! And look! Here they'll come in breeding plumage . . . and oh, the birdsong! It all triggers our human chorus (with binoculars attached): "Oooh! . . . Omigosh! . . . Amazing! . . . Did you see that?" I get tingly just thinking about it. To go birding in shirtsleeves again! To slather the sunscreen once more! To . . .

*WHAM!* Fierce winds whip hard outside my window this late February evening, slapping me out of my reverie as I write. Out the back door, a 4-foot hogback of snow fills one-quarter of the patio. It was the only place left to put what I shoveled after back-to-back storms, with too little sun and warmth in between to melt them off.

After our hard winter, here now is March. But cruelly, spring's first month is also Colorado's snowiest. I can't begrudge, though, whatever more snow awaits us — not after 22 years of the worst drought in Colorado and the Southwest in 1,200 years ([a new scientific study tells us](#)). Meanwhile, avian flu has us counting dead birds for the first time since West Nile ravaged Colorado corvid populations two decades ago.

Still, there have been reasons to smile and rejoice this winter-into-spring. We've had two surprise irruptions of uncommon avian visitors along the Front Range: Thrilling flocks of Bohemian Waxwings and unexpectedly common sightings of Cassin's Finches. Thanks to birds' unpredictable travels (and to the sharp-eyed among us who spot the "vagrants"), Colorado has had a fairly regular roster this winter of rare sightings.

The coming weeks of early spring also mean checking for uncommon shorebirds, elegant cranes and early migrants of so many species, rather like kids hunting for Easter eggs. One of my favorite spring events is already underway since March 1: DFO's Hawk Watch observation of the annual raptor migration that flows, soars and dips northward along Dinosaur Ridge in Jefferson County. And really now: Who doesn't love hawks, eagles and other birds of prey? This annual effort is a great way not just to see these magnificent birds, but to learn, in the company of expert hawk counters, how to spot and recognize them, even at a distance. Spend a few days up on the ridge with chief watcher **Emma Riley** and her band of regulars, and you'll improve your raptor skills immeasurably. (*For details how, see our Hawk Watch update in DFO News Notes, on the following page.*)

For now, I'll be carefully poking around my garden, especially in the two or three places where snow crocuses usually emerge. In those slender green leaves and yellow petals will be confirmation of our sweetest hope that spring really is here.

Good, warm and wonderful spring birding to you all!

— **Susan Blansett**



Snow crocus, emerging  
©Annaigonina908 / Dreamstime

# DFO News Notes

Got blurbs on birds? Share with **DFO News Notes**: Colorado birding newsbits, eBird milestones, tales from the trail, birding life (and life birds!), etc. Send items, photos and any questions to newsletter editor **Patrick O'Driscoll** at [patodrisk@gmail.com](mailto:patodrisk@gmail.com).

## CYNDY JOHNSON IS NEW DFO MEMBERSHIP CHAIR

By unanimous online vote in January, the DFO Board appointed longtime DFO member **Cyndy Johnson** as Membership chair and as an interim member of the board. A Morrison area resident, Johnson will serve on the board provisionally until the club's April election of officers and board members and election to a three-year term.

Johnson, who retired in 2020 after nearly 40 years in information technology, now goes birding "every chance I get." She is a 15-year volunteer veteran of waterfowl counts and Breeding Bird Atlas surveys at South Platte Park. She also previously volunteered for years with Hawk Watch on Dinosaur Ridge (now managed by DFO) "until my back and knees wouldn't make it up that hill anymore!" She took up birding about 35 years ago while also taking up scuba diving. On Diving trips in the Caribbean, West Indies, Central America and the Pacific, she has birded a variety of islands and tropical jungle habitat. Of late, she has added more birding tours of South and Central America.

Welcome to the DFO volunteer team, Cyndy, and thanks for your willingness to help manage our growing club.



Cyndy Johnson

## BIRD BOMBS AWAY! "COLORADO BLUES," "SPRING SWALLOWS"

The next free DFO bird ID seminar, "**Colorado Blues**," focuses on Colorado's bluebird species (we have all three) just as bluebird migration begins. This short (30-40 minutes) Zoom session is set for **Thursday, March 7 at 7 p.m. MST**. [Click here to register](#). About a month later, fire up Zoom on **Thursday, April 13 at 7 p.m. MDT** for another new BIRD BOMBS session, "**Spring Swallows**," about the swallow species that nest here in Colorado. [Click here to register](#). And If you missed our most recent BIRD BOMBS blast on bird topography, "**Where's That on the Bird?**," [click here to view the archived video](#) on DFO's Past Programs web page.



## DFO'S HAWK WATCH SPRING COUNTING HAS BEGUN

On March 1, the DFO-led Hawk Watch at Dinosaur Ridge began counting migrating birds of prey along the foothills hogback location in Jefferson County. Led by lead counter **Emma Riley** (returning after last year's successful season), the ridgetop tally by a cadre of volunteers will run seven days a week through May 14. This annual movement of hawks, eagles, falcons and other raptors bound for nesting sites to the north is one of nature's most amazing and mysterious spectacles. Drop-ins are always welcome, and volunteers of all experience levels can participate.

This season and the next few years of raptor migration monitoring are of heightened importance because of the continuing epidemic of avian influenza in the West. It has been documented to spread to populations of raptors known to feed on carrion. Carcasses of stricken birds in the wild — mostly geese and other waterfowl that died on lakes and reservoirs still frozen over — have been easy pickings, especially for eagles.

*Continued on page 7*

The Hawk Watch team thanks DFO's partners — Colorado Field Ornithologists, Jefferson County Open Space, Denver Audubon and Nature's Educators — for successful efforts in recruiting volunteers. Anyone interested in joining the Hawk Watch effort can [click here to read more](#) about this community science program and contact DFO's coordinator for volunteers via our website.

## PIKES PEAK BIRDING & NATURE FEST COMING IN MAY

Peak week for spring migration along the central Front Range is also the time for this year's Pikes Peak Birding & Nature Festival in and around Colorado Springs, from **Thursday, May 18 through Sunday, May 21**. From the Plains shortgrass prairie to riparian forests, foothills and deep canyons, activities will include expanded "bonus birding" Thursday, three "Big Sit" birding events, a new class on mountain lions, a bug "walkabout," hummingbird banding, behind-the-scenes visits to working Plains ranches (including one with a trove of post-dinosaur and early mammal fossils), raptor ID, eBird how-tos, a Saturday night "Birds, Brews & Bites" mixer with music. Plus, the festival's usual wide array of other field trips, programs, speakers, virtual learning and other events with and about birds, insects, other wildlife, and native plants, wildflowers and other flora. Early bird registration (\$35) opens **Saturday, March 25**, 10 a.m. MT. Check the festival website then but not before for more details. <https://pikespeakbirdingandnaturefestival.org>



Joe Chen

## STATEWIDE RESULTS IN FOR 2022 CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Hundreds of birders tallied more than 670,000 birds of just over 200 species during the 2022-23 holidays for this winter's Colorado Christmas Bird Count. Final results in the annual effort were released March 1 by **Brandon Percival** of Pueblo West, the Colorado CBC regional editor. Results came in from 51 areas across the state, each confined to a 15-mile diameter circle in or near familiar city, town and rural locations. In a report posted to the CoBirds list-serv, Percival listed statewide totals of 201 species and 672,406 birds counted within the Dec. 14-Jan. 5 Christmas count window.

The top three count circles for total birds tallied more than 40,000 each: John Martin Reservoir (Bent County), 75,323 birds, Fort Collins (Larimer), 57,579 and Crook (Logan), 43,396. The next 10 circles reported at least 20,000 birds each: Longmont (36,215), Barr Lake (33,996), Boulder (33,905), Denver Urban (30,049), Grand Junction (28,437), Pueblo (26,225), Denver (26,214), North Jeffco (21,226), Pueblo Reservoir (20,574), and Weldona-Fort Morgan (20,456).

Top three locations for most species were Pueblo Reservoir with 131, Denver (119) and Boulder (113). Seven other count circles tallied at least 100 species: John Martin Reservoir (112), Penrose (107), Grand Junction and Monte Vista NWR (both 104), North Jeffco (103), Fort Collins (102) and Colorado Springs (100). [Click here for Percival's table](#) of all the Colorado count circle results.

## 2020 DFO PRESENTER DREW LANHAM ON NATURE'S INSPIRATION

One of DFO's most popular evening programs in the Zoom era was Clemson University wildlife ecologist, birder and [The Home Place](#) author **J. Drew Lanham's** November 2020 presentation, "[Coloring the Conservation Conversation](#)," which drew 350 viewer/listeners online and numerous others to the archived video on the DFO website. In a career of numerous honors, a new highlight came last year when Lanham was awarded a [2022 MacArthur Fellowship](#), also known as the "genius grant." Last month, public television's national *PBS News Hour* featured Lanham in an extended interview and feature in light of his MacArthur award. [Click here to watch the video](#) of Lanham's appearance as aired Feb. 8 on PBS, or [click here to read a written transcript](#) of it.

*Continued on page 8*



## DFO BOARD APPROVES BIRD RESEARCH GRANTS FOR 2023

Five avian research projects will receive a combined \$9,100 in grants in 2023 from DFO's Research, Conservation & Education Grant Fund. On recommendation from the club's Grants Committee, the DFO Board approved the slate of recipients at its quarterly meeting Feb. 26. As in 2022, this year's financial aid amounts to the largest single-year total since the grant fund was created in 1994. Notification of successful awardees was expected after the deadline for this issue of *The Lark Bunting*. Look for an article in an upcoming newsletter identifying the five recipients and their research topics, institutional affiliations, and funding amounts.

## COLORADO'S "SOOTY SPARROW" CATCHES ABC'S EYE

Each week, the [American Bird Conservancy](#) spotlights a "Bird of the Week" species to friends and supporters on its email list. The last week of February, Colorado's state bird (and the namesake of DFO's newsletter) filled ABC's spotlight: the Lark Bunting, aka "Troubadour of the Plains." Among the facts and figures in the conservancy's online tribute (population: 10 million but "decreasing") is a note that the species' name "is a serious misnomer: After all, this bird is neither a lark nor a bunting. So what is it then?" [Click here to read ABC's article](#) and find out. But here's a hint: The headline on that particular paragraph reads "Sooty Sparrow."



Lark Bunting female  
Patrick O'Driscoll

## DFO NEWS

# Annual DFO election coming in April

### Mary Geder

The Nominating Committee of Denver Field Ornithologists has recruited several candidates for the next election of club officers and board members, conducted annually in April.

As in previous years since the Covid pandemic, this year's voting will be via email. DFO members in good standing are welcome to nominate additional candidates, including themselves. (To nominate or ask questions, contact Nominations chair **Mary Geder** at [mfg5000@live.com](mailto:mfg5000@live.com). Members without an email address on file can contact Geder by phone at 303-981-8823.) The deadline for nominations is **March 21, 2023**.

Declared candidates so far include three of the current DFO officers seeking standard, renewable one-year terms for office. By customary club practice, the current DFO president, **Susan Blansett**, is completing her service after two years and will become immediate past president. Also by customary practice, the current vice president, **Sharon Tinianow**, will run to succeed Blansett as president. Thus, the position of DFO vice president will be open. As of this writing, no one has applied or been nominated for that vacancy.

**Kathy Holland**, the current DFO treasurer, also will run for re-election. **Nate Bond**, who was appointed earlier this year as interim secretary to replace **Peter Stoltz**, will stand for his first election to that office.

DFO membership will also elect several members of the DFO Board of Directors for three-year terms. On the ballot are three current members who have agreed to seek re-election: **David Hill** (who is finishing his past presidency), **Roger Koester** and **Bill Turner**. A fourth candidate for the board is **Cyndy Johnson**, who was appointed as interim Membership chair and an interim board member in late 2022.

*The Lark Bunting* will publish election details, voting instructions, and information about the candidates in the next issue of the newsletter, due in early April.

---

Longtime DFO member **Mary Geder** is chair of the Nominating Committee.

# Communicator? Outreach? DFO needs YOU!

## Sharon Tinianow

The committee responsible for Denver Field Ornithologists' website, social media presence, newsletter, and other club messaging for DFO programs and events is seeking new members with an interest in communications to help with a variety of tasks. Come join us!

The DFO Communications & Outreach Committee meets four times a year. In between, committee members work individually and in small teams to help inform and update DFO members and the public about what our club is doing.

If you enjoy writing, social media and communications in general, this is the perfect place in DFO to contribute much-needed volunteer help for the club. We'll provide any training for specific C&O tasks, but we'd also love to know about your own "comms" strengths, interests and ideas to make our volunteer efforts even more effective.

Check out these brief descriptions of volunteer roles and tasks:

- **Publicity Coordinator** (2 hours/month): Updates the DFO website with information about monthly programs; posts about upcoming programs to DFO's Facebook Group, Instagram feed, and the COBirds birding group/list-serv on Google; writes text for direct email "blasts" about programs to DFO's mailing lists. For more details and to volunteer, contact **Sharon Tinianow** at [sharontinianow@gmail.com](mailto:sharontinianow@gmail.com)
- **Monthly Program Reviewer** (8 times/year): Attends DFO monthly programs via Zoom and writes a short (up to 500 words) summary/review of the presentation for publication in *The Lark Bunting* newsletter. Contact editor **Patrick O'Driscoll** at [patodrisk@gmail.com](mailto:patodrisk@gmail.com)
- **Instagram Administrator** (2 hours/month): Posts stories, video reels, and images to the DFO Instagram feed weekly and follows other related organizations, all to build and maintain DFO's Instagram presence. Contact Tinianow at [sharontinianow@gmail.com](mailto:sharontinianow@gmail.com)

If you've got other ideas or interests in more effectively communicating with our membership and the public, we'd love to hear them. Contact Sharon (or Pat for the newsletter) at their emails above. And thank you!

---

**Sharon Tinianow**, who joined DFO in 2016, began birding in an ornithology class in college. Now DFO vice president and previously editor of *The Lark Bunting*, she retired as assistant director of CU Boulder's Museum of Natural History.

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Alyssa Davidge  
Claire Harris

## How Historical Redlining Led Denver's Cooper's Hawks to Live Where They Do

Alyssa Davidge  
Monday, March 27  
7 p.m. MDT via Zoom

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER](#)

Once known as a feared and artful raptor mainly in the deciduous and mixed forests of rural and wildlands America, the Cooper's Hawk has pioneered outward to become a regular resident of urban and suburban landscapes since the 1970s. Cornell's *Birds of the World* calls it "likely the most common backyard breeding raptor across North America."

The species' remarkably successful adaptation to urban environments like Denver's is predicated chiefly on forest conditions in the neighborhoods where we find (and enjoy seeing) it. Designed by nature to maneuver swiftly through robust woodlands in pursuit of its prey, Cooper's is most comfortable where the trees are mature and numerous.

**Alyssa Davidge**, the Denver raptor biologist who will present March's provocatively titled program, finds it no coincidence that those places are neighborhoods intentionally favored by the historically segregationist "redlining" housing policies that date to the 1930s. One of those practices was "redlining," which made mortgage loans unavailable or unaffordable to people of color in the predominantly minority neighborhoods where they were largely confined by segregation.

How does racism affect wildlife? Davidge says she will explore "how Cooper's Hawks use Denver" and how land management of the city because of redlining policies "may play a role in (the birds') decisions." She will examine current Cooper's Hawk occupancy in redlined neighborhoods and other land attributes across the city "to explore the effect of historical policies on today's urban raptors." Her presentation is subtitled, "Impacts of Historic Redlining Policy on Wildlife Habitat and Cooper's Hawk Occupancy."

Davidge is a second-year master's student in the University of Colorado Denver's Integrative Biology Department. Before returning to graduate school, she was a condor biologist with the Peregrine Fund, managing the California Condor population on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. She also worked several seasons banding terns and plovers for the San Diego Zoo's Conservation Research Institute, conserving spotted owl populations in the Sierra Nevada, and monitoring migratory birds for HawkWatch International and Cape May Raptor Banding Project in Washington, New Mexico, and New Jersey. Her current focus is on smarter policy decisions for the future of conservation and biodiversity. She hopes to become a wildlife biologist, with a raptor focus, for Colorado Parks & Wildlife, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, or the U.S. Geological Survey.

[Click here to register](#) for this free March 27 webinar. You'll receive a link and subsequent reminders to connect to Davidge's program as the date nears.



Alyssa Davidge and Cooper's Hawk (Brian Millsap)





## SPRING PROGRAM PREVIEW

# Birdsong and Habitats: Updates from DFO-funded Avian Research

Leah Crenshaw, Olivia Taylor  
Monday, April 24  
7 p.m. MST via Zoom

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER](#)

The final installment in the winter-spring series of DFO monthly Zoom webinar programs (co-sponsored by Denver Public Library) will be a kind of show-and-tell session with recipients of grants in 2022 from the Denver Field Ornithologists' [Research, Education and Conservation Fund](#).

At least two of the six recipients of grants in 2022 will present updates on their research at this program. All grant winners agree to report back to the DFO membership in one of three ways: An article in *The Lark Bunting* newsletter, a DFO field trip planned around the theme and field location of the research, or an oral presentation at the April membership meeting, usually an evening gathering via webinar.

In this case, two of those who will present on April 24 are studying and analyzing birdsong in Colorado, but in different birds in very different habitats: Western Meadowlarks in the Pawnee National Grasslands, and Black-capped Chickadees in canyons above Boulder.

The grasslands researcher is **Leah Crenshaw**, a master's thesis student in the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley. She is analyzing grassland birdsong to determine the effect human landscape development has on birds' breeding success. Other previous studies have shown the effect on avian abundance and diversity. But in her [grant application narrative](#), Crenshaw said "a notable research gap exists" in determining what effect landscape changes may have on birds' individual behaviors and fitness. Her research is against a backdrop of three-quarters of North American grassland bird species in decline.

Her DFO-funded work seeks to provide new insights into what forces underpin population changes in grassland birds so as to improve conservation of those in Colorado. Crenshaw also aims to offer land managers "data useful to promoting diversity and abundance on their properties."

The other birdsong research presenter is **Olivia Taylor**, a student in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her focus is on measuring the effects of geographic isolation on differences in song between populations of Black-capped Chickadees as a way to understand further how isolation influences birdsong evolution.

In her [grant application narrative](#), Taylor noted the critical importance of birdsong for recognition within species, defense of territories and mating. "Much like human language, bird song is learned at a young age through exposure to parents or other neighboring adults," she wrote. She aims to explore the effects of canyons as "isolating mechanisms that drive song evolution." Her hypothesis: With lack of exposure to outside individual birds and less "cultural flow," the songs of populations isolated by canyons "will diverge," and divergence will increase with distance between those populations.

[Click here to register](#) for this free April 24 webinar. You'll receive a link and subsequent reminders to connect to the grant recipients' program as the date nears.

## BIRDING

# Bohemian *WAX*-sody! Since before Christmas, Colorado has had a wondrous waxwingding

David Suddjian

Two days before Christmas, I was out on my Ken Caryl driveway, and the sun had already dropped behind the nearby foothills. It was late enough on this short winter day — 4:15 p.m. Dec. 23, two days past the solstice — that my yard birds had departed for the night. Only Mountain Chickadees were still making last dashes to the feeders.

Looking west, I spotted a flock of about 25 birds coming my way fast. Small but not too small, they reminded me, in that first moment of discovery, of a tight flock of starlings. But in that same split-second, my brain was already doubting: “Too late in the day for a flock of anything. I don’t get starlings anyway. These aren’t that color.”

As the birds came near and began to turn south, I saw long, pointed, triangular wings — something like starlings. But this flock was more tightly arrayed, and the birds were pale gray, not dark. Stout as starlings? Sure, but they seemed a tad small. Then they banked, and I heard trilled whistles, down-slurred, like a finger flicking along the teeth of a plastic comb.

All of three seconds since first glimpse, the encounter clicked: Of course, *Bohemian Waxwings*! A couple of weeks earlier, a few had begun to turn up in Colorado, but I hadn’t expected that a flock would swoop over my driveway!

By early January, a full-scale irruption of rare Bohemians had arrived along the Front Range and some other parts of Colorado, along with good numbers of expected Cedar Waxwings. But to me, “irruption” sounds negative, and “invasion” even worse. I’m calling this happy event a fiesta. These flocks have brought high times for so many Colorado birders. We’re all reveling in the spectacle.

The waxwing flocks have appeared in many places along the edge of the mountains, swarming around widely and, sometimes, sticking a little longer in one spot or another. At the irruption’s peak, there were so many reports on eBird that nobody could really track how many had descended on the state. But clearly, it had to be many thousands.

DFO field trips didn’t miss this opportunity, first with a successful “chase” trip for Bohemians, led by **Gary Witt** on Jan. 7. We found them on seven more DFO outings in January and February, and they could still be with us into April.

As many of you can now attest, the waxwing flocks are spectacles to see and hear. They gather in dense ranks in the



Bohemian and Cedar  
waxwings, side by side  
Norm Lewis

*Continued on page 13*





DFO birders on waxwings  
in Wheat Ridge Greenbelt  
Anne Craig



Bohemians feasting  
on juniper berries  
Ken Fail

## BOHEMIAN WAXODY *cont from page 12*

crowns of deciduous trees, many flocks totaling 200 birds or more (and a few even counted at or near 1,000). Hungry and trilling, they drop down, seemingly in shifts, to feast in trees and shrubs laden with winter fruit — crabapples, junipers, buckthorns and other berry producers.

Then, often for no reason we humans can detect, the whole flock suddenly spooks and is gone in seconds. True to their “Bohemian” name, this winter’s visitors have wandered widely around town and along the Front Range, roaming from one feeding area to another in clouds of free-spirited waxwing magic.

All this is a rarity because the Bohemian Waxwing is a more northerly species than the Cedar. Most years, just a few, if any, make it south to Colorado. But every so often, something transforms the few into wave after wave, an infrequent spectacle.

This scale is not unprecedented; similarly large incursions have come before, though Colorado’s last one was 15 years ago. This season’s Bohemian numbers must reflect a lack of food farther north, which could also explain our larger flocks of Cedars and American Robins, too. Arctic and subarctic breeders around the globe, Bohemian Waxwings in North America usually winter no farther south than Wyoming and the uppermost reaches of the northern Rockies, Plains and Midwest.

Interestingly, the abundant winter fruits these Colorado visitors are devouring are not native to the region, except perhaps for one-seeded junipers. The waxwing swarms go for domestic crabapples, junipers, hawthorns and others planted far and wide across metro Denver and the developed Front Range. They also make meals of common buckthorn, an invasive exotic that grows in large thickets with millions of berries.

Were we to venture back in time before the Front Range was settled and urbanized, none of these resources, except the native juniper, existed here — and it was mostly limited to parts of the foothills. Before Colorado bird records were first kept, waxwings would have found little or no reason to visit here.

So, as belatedly as this may be: Welcome, Bohemians, and thanks for visiting us!

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**David Suddjian**, DFO’s Field Trips chair, came to Colorado in 2013 from his native California. Since 2016, he has led well over 320 DFO outings. He organized the club’s 2018 “Big Year” (362 species on DFO trips) and created DFO’s “Bird Bombs” webinar series on bird ID.





## CONSERVATION

# At disputed ex-golf course, a call to conserve urban bird habitat for Denver

**Mike Fernandez**

For the second time in two years, Denver city government will ask voters in the April 4 municipal election what they want to do with the former Park Hill Golf Course, a 155-acre patch of urban green space that closed in 2018. Voters answered a [similar ballot question](#) in November 2021, voting 64 percent against proposed redevelopment for businesses and housing and for conserving the open space for recreation.

This sort of thing will come as no surprise to DFO members. Wildlife habitat and migratory bird corridors are threatened by development everywhere, all the time, and this time won't be the last. Habitat loss is one of the main causes of bird mortality and species decline worldwide.

We can help fight that locally. Here in Denver, there are nearby examples of successful protection of urban open space for wildlife — the preservation of [Bluff Lake](#) and [Babi Yar Park](#), to name two. And there are parallel efforts elsewhere in Colorado. In Fort Collins, local activists succeeded in 2021 with a ballot question for the city to purchase and rezone the land where Colorado State University's Hughes Stadium once stood. Nearly 70 percent voted in favor, and soon after, the City Council unanimously rezoned it as public open lands. But as with Denver's Park Hill, land-use questions continue for that [stadium site reuse](#).

In the case of Park Hill, the Denver City Council and the [property's owner](#), Westside Investment Partners, Inc., want to remove a conservation easement that prohibits redevelopment of the defunct golf links. At best, their vision would preserve less than half the property as a city park. Green-space advocates want all of it to remain undeveloped. In mid-February, several of them (including [Save Open Space Denver](#)) sued in district court to preserve the parcel as "protected land."

**History:** In 1997, Denver paid \$2 million to place use restrictions on the land via a state-authorized conservation easement. Such measures serve to protect open space by reducing its potential value to commercial developers. But the current effort to remove the easement poses a powerful threat. With Denver's support, Westside wants to build up to [3,200 new homes plus retail businesses](#).

**A birding hotspot:** In 2010, while still operating, Park Hill Golf Course was listed as an [eBird hotspot](#), with 61 species recorded since then. Birders who have strolled the property have encountered, in season, songbirds like Western Kingbird, Red-winged Blackbird and Yellow-breasted Chat, raptors from Red-tailed and Swainson's hawk to Great Horned Owl, and wetland species from Great Blue Heron to Snowy Egret.

*Continued on page 15*



Rendering of redeveloped golf course site  
Westside Investment Partners



Redevelopment opponents' vision  
Yes for Parks and Open Space

**What you can do:** If you're a Denver voter, learn where the candidates for City Council and mayor stand on Park Hill development. Then vote accordingly in the same April 4 municipal election. The council is a key player. It recently approved a variety of rezonings that could clear the zoning path for development.

Don't be fooled by campaign points that redevelopment would boost affordable housing and fill in a "food desert" neighborhood. Many nearby properties are available or under development for lower-cost homes and business infill. Although the developer's numbers frequently shift, dwelling units dedicated for low-to-moderate income residents comprise just 25 percent of the total.

**What bird advocates say:** Last year, Denver Audubon supported saving the site for parkland, saying Denver needs "large, unfragmented green space, outdoor recreation (and) play spaces," more vegetation to sequester carbon, and a larger urban tree canopy "to combat the heat island effect." It noted Denver's location in the Central Flyway that supports millions of seasonal migrant birds. In a January 2023 letter to members who live in Denver, it urged this action to stop loss of "stop-over habitat" for those birds and the "162 species that either nest or winter here." There are other places homes and commercial development can be built, "but open space, once lost, cannot be replaced, and is lost forever," it added.

The Conservation Committee of Denver Field Ornithologists has urged the city to maintain open lands as critical for migrating birds. "Regrettably, the proposed zoning essentially extinguishes" the open-space easement by designating "an urban, development-centered landscape over about one-half of the property," the committee wrote. The redevelopment scheme, it added, shows "little to no interest in providing the public a viable open space area that allows the experience of nature in the city."

DFO welcomes your thoughts and questions about this vital Denver issue. Write to me at [mike@curu.org](mailto:mike@curu.org).

**A post-script:** As *The Lark Bunting* went to publication in late February, a *Denver Post* editorial urged voters to reject the easement change in the April 4 election — not to save open space but because the plan is "a sweetheart deal" that needs proper accounting for the value of the city's easement. "But the city can put the question on the ballot (again) in November," the editorial added.

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A DFO member since 2014, **Mike Fernandez** edits the mid-month DFO Digest and is assistant editor of *The Lark Bunting*. A neighborhood and education advocate for 40 years, he is a retired Interior Department communications manager.



# Will 10 weeks a year be as good as future birding gets at Chico Basin Ranch?

Patrick O'Driscoll

A bird-oriented nature blog on the [website of Chico Basin Ranch](#) describes the cattle operator's outlook in words that for years have been music to the ears of Front Range birders: "[Where the Gate Is Always Open.](#)"

Twenty-one months from now, that philosophy will change abruptly. On Jan. 1, 2025, a new and different livestock and agriculture lease will take effect at the state-owned ranch in El Paso and Pueblo counties, southeast of Colorado Springs. Access to one of Colorado's richest birdlife locales (more than 350 species recorded) will shift radically — for birders perhaps most of all.

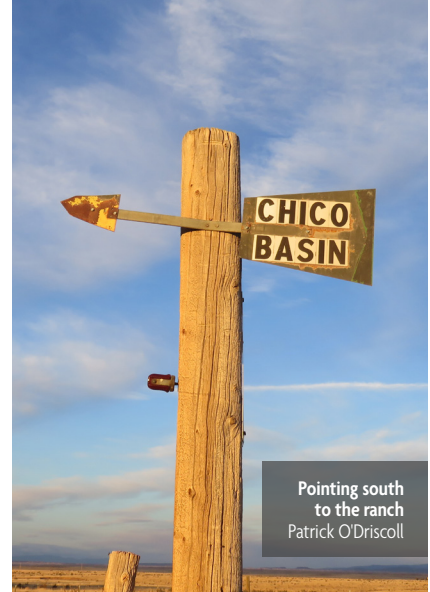
Although the status of birding thereafter is still under discussion, the present practice of self-guided, anytime visits is certain to end. As the Colorado State Land Board prepares to advertise for bids on the next ranching lease for the 86,000-acre spread, its vision of tighter control on non-agricultural activity is stark.

The land board staff wants to limit birding to just 10 weeks a year, all during spring and fall migration. That's 42 fewer weeks — 80 percent less availability for birding — than was possible annually for the past two-plus decades. It also wants to limit entry to 20 birders a day. It wants a birding leaseholder to carry two kinds of insurance, pay for portable toilets, set up a registration system, create and post signs, and more. It even proposes that the lessee grade the ranch's dirt-and-gravel roads.

Only one entity is in conversation with the land board about such a lease. Aiken Audubon, the Colorado Springs chapter of National Audubon, is the birding group closest geographically to the ranch. Some of its members visit Chico Basin weekly, if not more. But the state's initial demands for a birding leaseholder are a heavy lift for a volunteer organization with limited resources.

"I asked our prime birders that spend time at Chico, 'What would you settle for?' " said **Linda Hodges**, Aiken's conservation chair, treasurer and lead contact in lease discussions. "So we asked for (at least) 12 weeks of access" to catch peak migration mid-April through May and mid-August through September. "But (land board staff) said they would like to limit our time there to the same 10 weeks that the banding station folks would be there. The Bird Conservancy of the Rockies is there just 10 weeks a year, mainly in May and September."

Ten weeks is better than the land board's preposterous original suggestion — 2-4 days of birding a year under a lease costing \$2,500 to \$5,000 — but it is still severely limiting. Meanwhile, DFO and Colorado Field Ornithologists both have expressed support to help Aiken Audubon with funding and other assistance if it takes on the lease.



Pointing south  
to the ranch  
Patrick O'Driscoll



Sunrise at Chico Basin  
Ranch gateway  
Patrick O'Driscoll

*Continued on page 17*





Self-serve kiosk for birders  
Patrick O'Driscoll



Ladder-backed Woodpecker  
Patrick O'Driscoll



Chico Basin steer amid the cholla  
Patrick O'Driscoll

Although the state now says it won't charge for the birding lease, the lessee would have to cover insurance, toilet rental and various other expenses from whatever it can collect from birders. Birding is *not* a money-making activity. The land board, however, wants the leaseholder to split any revenue 50-50 with the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (which would be under its own lease) and provide a volunteer to help whenever school groups visit BCR's banding station.

This drastic shift is the result of a fundamental change in the state's leasing philosophy for Chico Basin, one of numerous properties the land board manages across Colorado for revenues to support public schools. It wants a stronger hand over all activities on its holdings.

Under the present lease, [Ranchlands](#), a multistate livestock business owned by the **Duke Phillips** family and based at Chico Basin, is free to regulate non-agricultural uses however it pleases. Once that lease expires, the land board will directly oversee all non-ranching activities itself. Birding, hunting, the banding station and more would be under individual leases. Even if Ranchlands successfully rebids to remain Chico Basin's livestock operator, its benevolent management of non-ag activities will cease.

That prospect was already bad news for birders, who have recorded collectively more than 9,500 eBird checklists for the ranch's eight hotspots. They include scores of DFO members who visit on club field trips that fill up quickly several times a year. Welcoming and birder-friendly, Ranchlands has made access open and easy: Drive in, sign in, leave a modest \$10 to \$15-a-head fee at a self-serve kiosk outside ranch headquarters, and go birding.

The land board staff has indicated that separate agreements with non-ag users are meant to minimize conflicts with ranching operations. Hodges and Aiken have asked: What conflicts? Whenever it needs to, Ranchlands closes access, notifies Aiken and posts why on the ranch website — whether moving and managing cattle near key birding spots, for instance, or when bad weather renders some ranch roads impassable. The rest of the time? Birders are out of sight, out of mind.

"The Phillips family has said we have caused no problems as birders," said Hodges. "We've been (birding at the ranch), most of us, for over 15 years and some of us longer. The thought that somehow we're going to interfere with cattle operations, I don't know where they get such wild ideas. I've told (land board staff) that in all these years, I have never *even* seen cattle when I've gone there."

Still, Hodges said, "they want the (next) lessee to know that in these months or on these days, there may be birders on these parts of the property. They've even suggested that birders let the ranch know 48 hours in advance when they're coming — each individual birder. As I've told them, when we have a group going out there, we always let the ranch know — and they don't care. We're not in their way."

*Continued on page 18*

For one thing, the ranch sprawls across more than 134 square miles, but birders use only a tiny fraction of it. They visit half a dozen or so ponds and a creek, groves, meadows and other locations that birds favor, almost all within 10-15 minutes' drive from the main gate. "In my 15 years, maybe three times I've seen ranch staff out there," said Hodges. "It's just . . . you don't run into people or livestock. We've encountered a few horses and a donkey. None cared."

For now, Aiken Audubon is on the clock. The land board wants to button up non-ag leases before it issues a formal "request for proposals" (RFP for short) to prospective ranch-lease bidders sometime this spring or summer. "We have gone back and forth many times," Hodges said. "There are a couple of issues we're still working out."

One is the potential loss of year-round birding data at such an important location. Hodges said she has asked to have at least one day of birder access in each non-migration month to lessen that loss and keep a bare semblance of year-round birdlife observation: "It's not like we really *want* to go out there in the January depths of winter, but we do want to know what's there."

Roads are another issue. "They said we should pay for grading, pedestrian gates and 'signage.' That was very vague," Hodges said. Birders' cars may have some nominal effect on ranch roads, but Ranchlands "thought it excessive" that anyone other than the cattle operator be responsible for that. If the land board insists, a birding lessee would have to pay someone — perhaps the next ranch operator onsite, or a road grader from somewhere else — to perform that duty.

In addition, Aiken Audubon members need ranch access every June for the annual Breeding Bird Survey, a decades-old assessment of nesting bird populations statewide. If the land board won't budge on its 10-week offer, "we might have to contact the ranch directly" to ask for future permissions, Hodges said.

Still other questions await answers. What to charge birders to cover new costs that are just ordinary overhead under the ranch's present lease? Will birding have to be by appointment? Escorted? Groups only? And will Aiken have enough volunteers to help at the banding station? "Most of our board works," Hodges said. "We have one of the younger boards of any Audubon chapter that I know. But due to location, we're the ones."



Pronghorn pair  
Patrick O'Driscoll



Townsend's Solitaire  
Patrick O'Driscoll





FROM THE FIELD WITH DAVID SUDDJIAN

# March Madness? How 'bout February Funniness?

## David Suddjian

A stated aim of every Denver Field Ornithologist field trip is for birders to have fun. It's right there in our club's list of standards for field trip leaders:

*Field trips should be interesting to and inclusive of all levels of birding skill. Strive to make field trips informative and **fun***

In the frozen depths of February's ebb, birding can still excite and satisfy, but given the conditions, it's usually a bit less than fun. Winter's cold edge is still hard. Few "new" birds are being seen. Some winter rarities have left altogether, even died. Migration and its thrilling variety are still far off.

Against that rather foul backdrop, DFO's field trips in this February made for the most fun ever in the shortest month of the year. For one thing, we led TWENTY-TWO trips in just 26 days! — way more than either of the two 31-day months before it. We also introduced a "little big week" of short, daily, geographically focused daily field outings. Plus, two words: Bohemian Waxwings!

If you missed some or all of the February Funniness, enjoy this recap of the highlights — and join in the "funness" next year!



DFO field trippers during  
February Little Big Week  
Gary Witt



More Little Big Week birding  
David Suddjian

## FEBRUARY 5: NORTHEAST RAPTOR TOUR

Longtime trip leader **Joey Kellner**'s annual northeast Colorado excursion for prairie raptors logged [20 eBird checklists](#). Boy, did it ever deliver. Besides three dozen other species, there were 12 species of birds of prey: Golden and Bald eagles, Cooper's Hawk, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed, Rough-legged, and Ferruginous hawks, Eastern Screech-Owl, Long-eared Owl, American Kestrel, Merlin, and Prairie Falcon. And for good measure, a Northern Shrike (perched with a Greater Prairie Chicken).

## FEBRUARY 10-12: DFO'S SUPER BOWL WEEKEND

A four-trip blitz over the three-day Super Bowl weekend showed off DFO's expert field skills, with outings into four parts of Colorado for a total of [86 species checklisted on eBird](#). On Friday, I led to Park County for mountain birds. On Saturday, **Nate Bond** and **Diane Roberts** did Pueblo for its specialties and good winter waterbirds. On a two-fer Sunday, **Donna Stumpp** and **Peter Ruprecht** led their popular Boulder County raptor tour, while **Anne Craig** and I refereed a different kind of game on the Clear Creek Trail in Wheat Ridge.

*Continued on page 20*



## FEBRUARY 12: SUPER DUCK SUNDAY

The Clear Creek Trail trip kicked off Super Bowl Sunday with our own big game: Dabblers vs. Divers! Each duck species we found scored a 7-point touchdown for that kind of duck's "team." So Gadwall meant 7 points for Dabblers, while Common Goldeneye was a TD for Divers. Spotting courtship behavior scored a 3-point field goal, and any act of duck copulation this early scored a touchdown, too. DFO oddsmakers had diving ducks as 2:1 favorites (more diverse at Clear Creek), but dabbling ducks are friskier on the mating field. Late in the fourth quarter, Divers led by one, 42-41, when we all saw an unexpectedly early coupling of Mallards in a pond south of the creek. SCORE! The final: [Dabblers 48, Divers 42](#). MVP? Mallard, of course, with two critical courtship field goals to go with that copulation TD.

## FEBRUARY 14: AVIAN LOVE IN THE AIR

To warm winter's chill on Valentine's Day, we made this theme field trip a hunt for bird romance: How many of Cupid's arrows would we spy? Frisky courting ducks, songful finches, drumming woodpeckers, and maybe even nest building. We humans shared chocolates and homemade Valentines.

## FEBRUARY 20: DENVER DUCKS

**Jason Bidgood** led this "Developing birder" trip with guest guide **George Ho** to help birders enjoy ducks in Denver's Washington Park and Overland Park hotspots. Archived video of Our BIRD BOMBS "Better Duck" session was used as a pre-trip resource, and there was lots of time for questions, discussion, and quizzes. The group recorded 12 species of ducks. Check out George's wonderful images on the trip's two eBird checklists: [Wash Park](#), [Overland Park](#).

## FEBRUARY 20-26: LITTLE BIG WEEK

As mentioned above, this was something different: Seven straight days of seven short trips, all in Littleton, all led by me. We had a great time finding scarce winter birds in many spots inside a limited area. Our goal was at least 60 species. We found 63! Seven trips in seven days is challenging, especially when a snowstorm strikes in the middle, plus three days of cold near zero or below. From our pre-trip wish list of 93 possible species, our Little(ton) Big Week found 44 of 45 "expected," 16 of 25 "maybes," and three of 23 less likely possibilities. [Click here for the week's complete eBird report](#), and [click here for the day-by-day updates](#) posted on the DFO Facebook Group page.

## FEBRUARY'S "WAXWING FIESTA"

Nothing was more fun this month than finding flocks of Bohemian Waxwings (and Cedar Waxwings, too) during what has become Colorado's Great Waxwing Fiesta for winter 2022-23. Although there were many big flocks, smaller groups and individuals across metro Denver and the Front Range, they were still unpredictable and a challenge to find. DFO has tallied Bohemians on eight field trips this winter (and still counting). We've helped many birders claim and enjoy a "lifer" bird, and several encounters were spectacular . . . and (all together now) FUN!

## FIELD TRIPS

# DFO, Aiken Audubon explore partnership for joint field trips

Denver Field Ornithologists and [Aiken Audubon](#), the Colorado Springs chapter of National Audubon, are working to create shared field trips focused on destinations in Aiken's Pikes Peak region. DFO Field Trip Committee chair **David Suddjian** and Aiken field trip coordinator **Melanie Helton** have mapped out a proposed partnership to integrate the bird-focused organizations' field trip programs.

Under the plan, some or all Aiken field trips would be offered jointly with DFO, with registration hosted on DFO's webpage. An icon and special designation on the signup page would indicate a jointly sponsored field trip. Like all participants in DFO's field trip program (members or not), Aiken members would sign up there for these and any other trips.

Aiken Audubon trip leaders also would be certified to lead bird outings for DFO (several leaders have been already). Besides training, certified leaders would benefit from DFO website features that aid trip management, as well as the program's best practices and structure. A collaboration also would allow DFO to gain new affiliate leaders who live and lead trips south of the metro Denver area, adding more outings and new and varied birding locations.

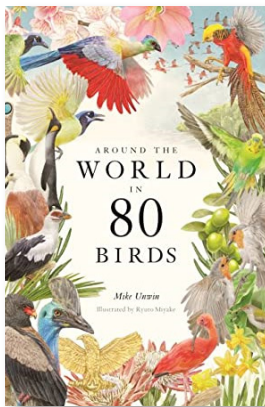
Watch here for further details as the two clubs work to create this new partnership.



# Inspiration: Four bird books with travel in mind

**Jill Boice**

What birder doesn't enjoy daydreaming about new target species or traveling to new locations for a bonanza of new species? Here's a selection of bird-related books that will feed your daydreams with a cornucopia of ideas and destinations. Even if you're not planning to visit far-flung points abroad or closer places here in the US, these books will provide hours of enjoyment for armchair travelers as well.



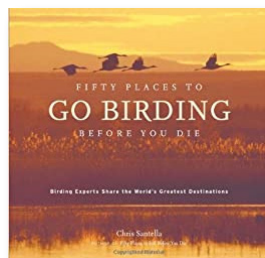
## ***Around the World in 80 Birds***

By Mike Unwin

Laurence King Publishing (2022)

224 pages

I'm listing this book first because, in all honesty, it's the one I read the most. **Mike Unwin** selected birds that have special meaning culturally in a wide swath of countries. There are 2-3 pages of text about each bird and charming illustrations by Ryuto Miyake. All are very readable and contain information that often was entirely unfamiliar to me. A good example is the "avian Pied Piper," the Greater Honeyguide. This pink-billed passerine guides the people of the Kafue woodlands of Zambia to beehives in tree cavities and feasts on the larvae and wax after the humans take the honey. I particularly like Unwin's style and would also recommend his *The Atlas of Birds*.



## ***Fifty Places to Go Birding Before You Die***

***Birding Experts Share The World's Greatest Destinations***

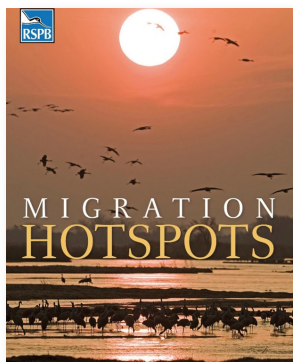
Edited by Chris Santella

Stewart, Tabori & Chang (2007)

224 pages

**Chris Santella** has written other books in this series, e.g., *Fifty Places to Go Golfing Before You Die* and so on. He even admits he is not an "avid birder" himself. But he interviewed a host of people in the birding world who are. He has assembled their accounts in a fun-to-browse picture book. The segments for each of the destinations are 3-4 pages long, with good photos and an "If You Go" section that covers best times to visit, suggested birding guides and accommodations. For instance, **Kenn Kaufman**, the renowned guidebook author and naturalist (one of DFO's first guest speakers via Zoom back in 2020), describes here the joys of the Tandayapa-Mindo valleys in Ecuador. Although this book is a little dated after almost 16 years, the birding opportunities are likely to be as fresh as ever.

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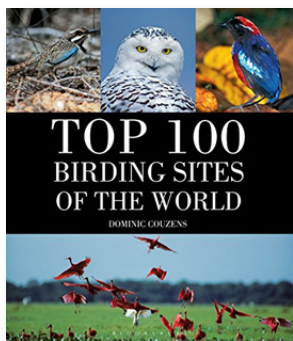
## ***RSPB Migration Hotspots*** ***The World's Best Bird Migration Sites***

By Tim Harris / Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Windmill Books (2013)

224 pages

If ever there was a browsable book for international bird travelers, this is it. **Tim Harris** presents 29 of the world's greatest hotspots for birds on their seasonal journeys. He writes that he chose these locations to include at least one along each of the world's eight major flyways "while maintaining a balance between spectacular wildfowl flyways, raptor bottlenecks, and passerine" sites. Each selection has an overview of major birds by season, a map, the key locations in the area and nearby, and, to some extent, conservation threats. Excellent photographs accompany an interesting text. Many birders may already know some of these hotspots, but there are sure to be new ones for birders of any level. How about Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt in autumn for the White Stork migration, Beidaihe, China for a fallout of chats, or Eliat, Israel for migrating [Squacco Herons](#) and other spring waders?



## ***Top 100 Birding Sites of the World***

By Dominic Couzens

University of California Press (2008)

320 pages

**Dominic Couzens** has produced a beautiful coffee table book, because this large-format volume really is something to just leaf through. He writes that he chose these places based on "the sheer quality of birds" in them, "the degree to which the site is good for birding all year," and the "possibility of delighting in other features," among other factors. He devotes 2-3 pages to each, with good photos and the highlights of each spot. Three fun examples: the "superb collection of owls" at Oulu in Northern Finland, the [Cape Sugarbirds](#) at Sir Lowry's Pass in South Africa, and Cotingas at the Canopy Tower in Panama.

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*Jill Boice, who joined DFO in 2001, leads occasional slow field trips. She is also a volunteer raptor monitor at Cherry Creek State Park.*



# Why cranes? Rich Beilfuss has a *crane-ucopia* of answers to share

Patrick O'Driscoll

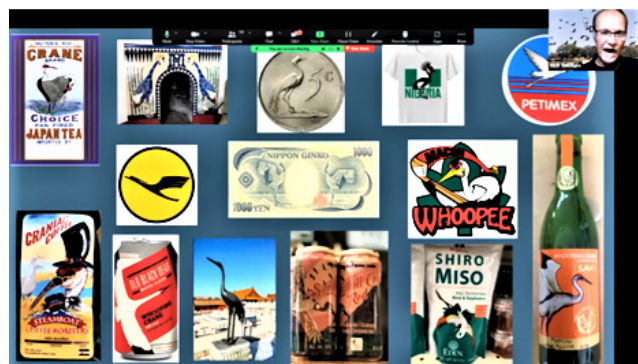
Traveling the world for more than a decade as head of the [International Crane Foundation](#), **Rich Beilfuss** has acquired an encyclopedic trove of biological data, cultural knowledge, natural history, political perspective and fascinating trivia about one of the most charismatic families of birds on the planet.

On the evening of Jan. 23, Beilfuss downloaded much of his crane knowledge aloud, in pictures and on video in an 80-minute DFO monthly program via Zoom. “Cranes are an ancient, elegant, and inspiring part of our culture,” the foundation’s president and CEO told an audience of about 110 online attendees for “Cranes: Ambassadors for Conservation.”

A self-described “crane-iac,” Beilfuss delivered an enthusiastic tribute to the world’s 15 species of crane (small groups of which all live on the grounds of the foundation’s headquarters in Baraboo, WI). He gave special emphasis to southern Africa’s perilously endangered Wattled and Gray-crowned Cranes, and North America’s Whooping Crane and Sandhill Crane, two high-profile native species at opposite ends of the rarity spectrum.

But first, he delved into cranes’ place in human culture — as endearing and surprising birds as well as patriotic, religious, and commercial icons. Who knew that all crane species have two-part harmony “unison calls” between sexes? Or that, besides performing dances and displays both goofy and graceful, both males and females pick up and toss objects with their bills to attract mates?

Elegant, tall and very nurturing parents, cranes “resonate with people,” Beilfuss said. “They’ve been with us for millennia.” More than 30 crane festivals celebrate the species around the world, including two in Colorado (Monte Vista and Yampa Valley). And cranes are embedded in so many countries and cultures: In government (on flags, 70 countries’ postage



stamps, bank notes, coins), religion (Buddhism especially), sports (from Uganda’s national soccer team, The Cranes, to Macon, GA’s former minor-league hockey team, the [Macon Whoopees](#)), commerce and products (beer, wine, tea, coffee, banks), art (from prehistoric rock drawings in southern Utah to Asian vases to modern gallery pieces), even the military. Beilfuss showed a video clip of two Gray-crowned Cranes strutting in step alongside the Zambian army’s marching band.

He underscored cranes’ role as global ambassadors for the environment and as “flagships” and “sensitive indicators” for habitat decline (and improvement). Cranes need large wetlands and room not just to survive but thrive.

A hydrologist, Beilfuss has worked on water management and wetlands restoration to benefit cranes in more than 20 countries across Africa and Asia. He also has contributed to restoration and management of prairie and savanna landscapes in the US Midwest to benefit our own Sandhill and Whooping cranes. “We’re working together for cranes at a time when we’ve never needed to work together more,” he said. Two-thirds of the 15 species are endangered.

He singled out efforts to preserve Africa’s rare Wattled Crane (10,000 birds) and Gray-crowned Crane (30,000), which inhabit Kafue Flats, a 1,500-square-mile floodplain of wetlands in Zambia. It is also home to herds of aquatic antelope,

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wildebeest, water buffalo, zebras, hippopotamus, 470 other bird species — and more and more humans. Cattle grazers, poachers and a brisk urban market for bushmeat are squeezing out the antelope. Most wild species are in alarming decline, with “a catastrophic effect on a lot of the birdlife.”

A glimmer of hope is a 20-year agreement to restore and manage the wetlands. It involves and employs local communities in removal of invasive weeds and floodplain management and research. “Cranes inspire us to solve big problems,” Beilfuss said, including protecting and restoring “healthy landscapes that we need for cranes, but for people, too.”

Closer to home, he spotlighted the Sandhill Cranes that migrate over Colorado and the rarest-of-rare Whooping Cranes, some of which mingle with Sandhills. He reviewed the painstaking recovery of Whoopers from the brink of extinction, “a conservation story in progress” with 863 total birds today. Sandhills, too, “are definitely a success story,” having recovered from widespread decimation by 19th century marketing hunting.

Beilfuss credits the Migratory Bird Treaty Act with ending that trade. He also credits “the willingness of farmers to support crane recovery” in the Midwest. Sandhills today are the most numerous crane species on Earth. More than 1 million birds migrate annually through Nebraska, where their stopping over makes the Platte River, he added, “kind of the Serengeti of the United States.”

Click here to view the complete video of  
“**Cranes: Ambassadors for Conservation**”  
with Rich Beilfuss in the Past Programs archive



## Sage-Grouse program review next month

The Feb. 27 evening program — “Greater Sage-Grouse: Largest Conservation Effort in US History” with **Daly Edmunds** from Audubon of the Rockies — fell too close to *The Lark Bunting*’s publication deadline to include a written review in this issue. We will publish our review in next month’s newsletter.

In the meantime, if you were unable to attend her presentation live on Zoom, you can view the program recording via this link to the DFO “[Past Programs](#)” [webpage](#).



Sandhill Cranes  
Jim Esten

# Welcome to new DFO members

## January

Jessi and Jose Barrientos of Westminster; Mark Bennett, Arvada; Terry Bezouska, Denver; Ellen Bracchi, Arvada; Emily Bray, Hygiene; Pete and Ann Christensen, Denver; Carol Kay Condit, Loveland; Sonjia Enck, Denver; Rachael Falgout, Denver; Wendi Fisher, Arvada; Kate Frost, Centennial; Deb Geolat, Monument; Jacqueline Gorman, Denver; Scott Hammel, Englewood; Kathy Hawkins, Denver; Heather Ingraham, Denver; Luke Jaramillo; Littleton; Janet Johnston, Centennial; Sally Paler and Jodi Chambers, Denver; Jannette Guerrasio and Lara Juliusson, Denver; Debbie and Matthew Kozak, Littleton; Shari Leyshon, Boulder; Krissie Lynch, Ravenna; Katherine Roben, Centennial; Nitha Ujwal, Daya Dipu and Dipu Sukumaran, Parker; Joseph Tuttle, Fairplay, and Phil Waltz, Littleton

## February

Joan Akiyama, Denver; Brady Anderson, Greenwood Village; Erica Borresen and Jeff Birek, Westminster; Alison Bishop, Sarasota, FL; Roy and Joann Carrillo, Thornton; Susan Cooper and Jim Long, Boulder; Nathan Crow, Parker; Virginia Dickinson, Denver; Colleen Dorczuk, Arvada; Deb Durand – Erie; Donna and Terry Flageolle, Westminster; Hannah Huse; Boulder; Leslie Jagoda, Englewood; Jackie Jazo, Lone Tree; Anna Joy Lehmickie and Clark Jones, Colorado Springs; Amy Manning, Lakewood; Kaitlyn Parkins, Fort Collins; Amanda Parramore, Denver; Andi Poland, Highlands Ranch; Bonnie Prado, Littleton; Kelli Reidford; Lakewood; Paula Rosson and Brian Huculak, Arvada; Becky Russell, Denver; Michelle Trotter, Denver, and Patricia Wilson, Denver

# Thank you for your contribution

## Research, Education and Conservation Grants Fund

Kevin and Diane Birks, Chris Blakeslee, Karel Buckley, Nathan Crow, Linda Doran, Janet and A.J. Gest, John and Peggy Gonder, Jacqueline Gorman, Scott Hammel, Sharon Kermiet, Roger Koester, Brian Johnson, Tina Jones, Richard Maslow, Philip McNichols, Tamra Moore, and Elaine Wagner

## Friends of DFO

Kathy Barnum, John Chanin and Holly Sollod, Nathan Crow, Scott Hammel, Terry and Becca Hammons, Tina Jones, Mary Beth Searles, Jennifer and Charles Thornton-Kolbe, and Robyn and Jeremy Winick

## DFO's Dinosaur Ridge Hawk Watch

Bev Baker, Kathy Barnum, Scott Hammel, Tina Jones, Cynthia Madsen, Colleen Nunn, Andi Poland, and Michelle Trotter







LAST LOOK, LAST WORD

## In skies filled with Bohemian Waxwings, how to count the biggest swarms?

*Before this winter's epic irruption in Colorado, DFO member **Gregg Goodrich** had seen Bohemian Waxwings only twice before — a single bird both times. But since New Year's Day, he has seen the species more than 17 times (and counting), including two of the largest flocks reported this season. We asked Gregg to explain how he counted them, and why Bohemians captivate him so.*



Top: **Two Bohemians take flight** (Gregg Goodrich)  
Bottom: **Bohemian Waxwing at Lakewood's Main Reservoir** (Rob Raker)



## Gregg Goodrich

Like just about every other birder this winter, **Ann Troth** and I joined the Front Range chase for irrupting Bohemian Waxwings in early January. We never expected, though, to encounter what we found along East Hampden Avenue, on the boundary between south Denver and north Arapahoe County.

It was mid-morning on Jan. 17, and we had already tried for the species at what had become a front-row seat on the Bohemian storm: [Mamie Eisenhower Park](#) and a wooded stretch of the High Line Canal between South Colorado Boulevard and I-25. It seemed like everyone was seeing them there. That included me, by myself, eight days earlier. So I had brought Ann back there early to see them.

Just our luck: Not a waxwing in sight. Leaving the park, we turned west onto Hampden to drive home. As Denver's [Wellshire Golf Course](#) came into view on the right, I noticed masses of birds clustered in the tops of several trees. Starlings? No, too numerous. Robins? No, too close together. I suspected Bohemians.

After finding a side street south, we jaywalked across Hampden (scary). From outside the west edge of the course, I got several pictures of Wellshire's treetop flock. My first thought was 250, maybe even 400 or 500 birds. But I like certainty. As I snapped more pictures, we scanned them in the trees and on the ground. We found only one Cedar Waxwing among all those Bohemians. Hard to believe, right? But we looked very carefully, and I reviewed all 29 photos later to confirm it.

We knew the huge flock could fly off at any moment, so when it did minutes later, my camera was ready. As the flock circled back and forth before departing, I fired off shots with my zoom lens at 300 mm. Quickly realizing I wasn't capturing the whole swarm, I pulled back to 70 mm and managed several more shots of a sky filled with birds. That left the tricky part: How to count the hundreds of dots in those camera images?

When we got home, I took a low-tech approach, enlarging and printing my best in-flight shot on an 8½ x 11 sheet of paper to count by hand. But when I kept losing track in the cloud of dots, I tried another low-tech trick. With pencil and ruler, I crisscrossed the image into 1-inch blocks (70 squares in a 7 x 10 grid), then counted the distinctive specks inside each of them, block by block. It took me a while, but when I finally added them up, the actual count for my [eBird checklist](#) was astonishing: 823 Bohemian Waxwings — two to three times my first guess!



Bohemians on pine branch (Gregg Goodrich)

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At that point, it was the largest sighting of this irruption. Eleven days later, I would count 841 just a block from my house in Highlands Ranch (a much harder tree count, branch by branch). I've since heard of other estimates over 1,000.

Most of the time when I chase a rare bird, I am content to see it once. But these guys were so frequent, so relatively easy to find, and just SO cool, I wanted to see them again and again. I love this bird!

Perched up high with silky plumage, boldly colored accents, black masks, and swept-back crests, they appear almost aloof, standoffish. Maybe even mean-looking, as our late DFO friend **Joe Roller** said in one of his eBird sightings years ago. But Bohemians actually are very social. They fly and perch in tight-knit groups. They share with the whole flock the food resources they discover.

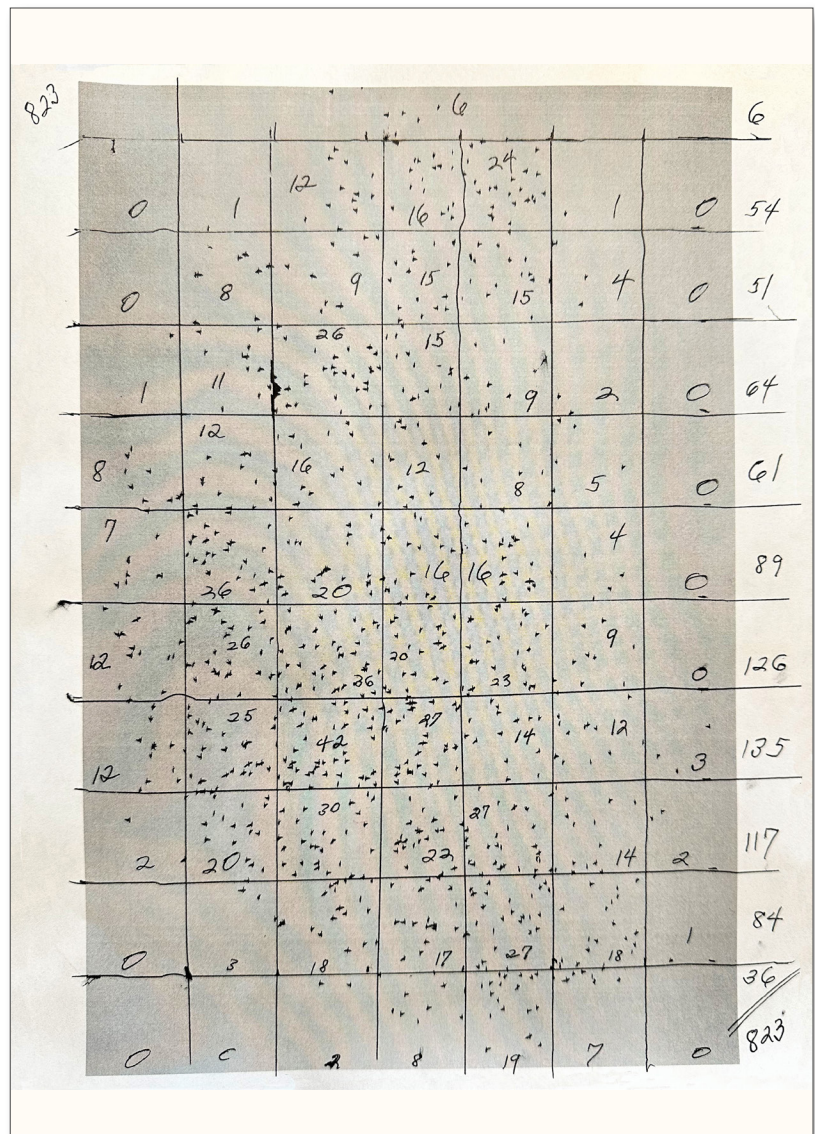
Using the group “radar,” they are expert at finding fruiting plants (crabapples, junipers, buckthorns and more). They perch in taller trees near the fruit source, then take turns dropping down in groups to consume the bounty. Cornell's *Birds of the World* says they are monogamous and non-territorial on their breeding grounds. With no need to sing in defense of territory, they emit cool calls instead: distinctive, ringing trills.

My irruption obsession has taken me back through 75 years and 215 checklists of eBird sightings of four or more Bohemian Waxwings (**Hugh Kingery's** suggestion) in the six-county Denver metro area. Of 11 irruption years in that span, I found the closest previous was 15 years ago, in winter 2007-08. Two years prior to that there was a large irruption from late November to late March, including one “conservative” sighting of 2,000 birds in Adams County. The 1990s had just one irruption (winter 1990-91), but the 1980s had five, including Kingery's own sighting of 1,000 birds in early 1988. Since eBird didn't start until 2002, the older records are incomplete. So thank you to **Bob Andrews** for entering your historical data into eBird from the 1960s through 1980s. As more historical records are entered and more birders use eBird, the data will improve.

Statewide, Colorado averages an irruption every three years. And the Boulder Christmas Bird Count once held National Audubon CBC's all-time highest Bohemian Waxwing count in the continental US: 11,284 individual birds in one day in 1987!

So pardon the irruption and enjoy this one while it lasts. It sure has been fun.

**Gregg Goodrich**, a birder for about two decades, joined DFO in 2015 and has led field trips and served on the Field Trip Committee. A retired computer network analyst, he also enjoys bicycling and has climbed all 58 of Colorado's 14'ers.



Goodrich drew a grid over this photocopy of his shot of the massive flock





*Until the next Lark Bunting . . .*  
**GOOD ALMOST-SPRING BIRDING!**

Bohemian Waxwing in Littleton (Rob Raker)