



THE LARK BUNTING

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE DENVER FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

VOLUME 60 | ISSUE 02-03 | FEBRUARY-MARCH 2024

DFOBIRDS.ORG

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Already? DFO spring raptor count coming

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DFOer's road ramble thru Argentina, in pictures

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Photos top to bottom:
Song Sparrow, Cherry Creek SP
Dark-eyed Junco, Denver front yard
White-crowned Sparrow, Roxborough SP
Jim Esten



Jim Esten, photo editor of *The Lark Bunting*, took pictures on and

off for 35 years before getting his first digital camera in 2001. He didn't focus on birds until 10 years ago while visiting his sister in Florida. He is retired from network IT service.

ON THE COVER

A vertical triptych for cold winter: three familiar seasonal sparrows

Patrick O'Driscoll

As *The Lark Bunting* prepares for its annual midwinter break, we're shaking up our usual look with three cover birds instead of just one. Our New Year's gift to you is a trio of cold-tolerant sparrows seen regularly right now around Denver and the Front Range. We hope you'll enjoy these extra cover images (all captured by **Jim Esten**, our photo editor) until the newsletter returns in March.

The bird at the top is familiar in any season: Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*). When sparrows are generally scarce in winter's chill, a few Songs are likely to be hiding in thickets of reeds beside frozen ponds, lakes or streams, or even out foraging on open ground. One of our most widespread songbirds, the Song Sparrow has an astounding 24 to 38 different subspecies; they vary widely not only in the shade and tone of their plumage but also size (some subspecies are 1.5 times larger than others).

The bird at the bottom is another we find more often than just winter. The White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) is actually a year-round resident of Colorado's high country and Western Slope, but many occur across the eastern one-third of Colorado in non-breeding seasons. They sometimes flock in winter with other sparrows, from Song and American Tree to lingering rarities like Harris's or White-throated, and even the occasional Lincoln's, Swamp or Golden-crowned Sparrow.

Our cover wouldn't say "midwinter" without the bird nicknamed "snowbird," our truest winter sparrow of the bunch. The Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) in the middle of our cover is of the Oregon race, one of five kinds that occur in Colorado. After spring and summer breeding up the Pacific Northwest coast and beyond, Orecons come back to Colorado, the interior West and western Great Plains for winter. Of the others, one variety, the Gray-headed, lives in Colorado year-round.

"Snowbird" is an apt nickname. When the mercury drops and, especially, when snow flies, up to two dozen of these ground feeders flock to my backyard to gobble the birdseed I toss out for them daily. All the while, the opening lines of [*Snowbird*](#), **Anne Murray's** No. 1 pop-country hit of half a century ago, resound in the mind's ear:

*Beneath this snowy mantle cold and clean
The unborn grass lies waiting
For its coat to turn to green
The snowbird sings the song he always sings
And speaks to me of flowers
That will bloom again in spring*

Welcome back, snowbirds . . . and good winter birding, everyone!

— **Patrick O'Driscoll**, editor



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The Lark Bunting newsletter of Denver Field Ornithologists is published online monthly at dfobirds.org except for joint issues in July–August and February–March.

PUBLICATION STAFF

Editor

Patrick O'Driscoll

Assistant Editor

Mike Fernandez

Photo Editor

Jim Esten

Layout and Design

Jennie Dillon

Contributors this issue

Mark Amershek, Jason B. Bidgood, Tamie Bulow, Anne Craig, Carly Crow, Jared Del Rosso, Patricia DiLuzio, John Drummond, Jim Esten, Mike Fernandez, Mary Geder, Linda Hodges, Tony Leukering, Bill Maynard, Megan Miller, Janet Peters, Bonnie Prado, Dave Prentice, Rob Raker, David Suddjian, Sharon Tinianow, Jim Tolstrop, Michelle Trotter, Gigi Zarzuela

CONTRIBUTE TO THE NEWSLETTER

Submit original articles or story ideas to the editor at patodrisk@gmail.com.

Send image-file photos of birds or bird outings to the photo editor at 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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Next deadline: Thursday, Feb. 29, 2024



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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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Mary Geder

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Bill Turner

Historian

Kristine Haglund

Web Administrator

Jim Esten
admin@dfobirds.org

Zoom Coordinator

Jim Esten
admin@dfobirds.org

DFO ONLINE

Website

dfobirds.org

Facebook Group

facebook.com/groups/dfobirds

Instagram

instagram.com/denverfieldornithologists

CONTACT

Email

dfocommgroup@gmail.com

Via website (at bottom of home page)

dfobirds.org

US Mail

Attn: Kathy Holland
Treasurer, DFO
351 E Caley Ave
Centennial, CO 80121-2201

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

A New Year's resolution for *your* birds: replant a more bird-friendly yard

Sharon Tinianow

New Year's resolutions are traditional at this time of year. Typically, these center on health or financial issues. For DFO members, I can think of a few that deal with birding: expanding your life list . . . joining more DFO field trips . . . trying out new places to bird.

But what about a resolution that benefits the wider world? Granted, it's more challenging. Your own actions are the only ones you have direct power to control. But what if we really *could* do something, on our own, that can immediately benefit the larger world, particularly the larger realm of birdlife?

Here's one: If you have outdoor space at home, commit to a more bird-friendly landscape. Wildlife ecologist **Doug Tallamy**, author of several books and a [great biodiversity website](#), suggests that if 50% of US land in private hands were planted with native plants, it would restore the biodiversity of our continent. Given that 83% of the land in America is in private ownership, he may be right. Tallamy calls this ideal a "homegrown national park," one we can create now, in 2024, if we choose.

A number of DFO volunteers have already taken steps in this direction. In 2021, **Patrick O'Driscoll**, editor of *The Lark Bunting* and a field trip leader, replaced half the turf grass in front of his east-central Denver duplex with native plants. He'd been imagining what his neighborhood off East Colfax Avenue looked like 150 years ago, when bison still grazed along the Front Range. He researched plants to choose and created a rough plan. Then he hired helpers to remove the old sod, amend the soil, put in the plants and add pea gravel mulch. Two years later he has a patch of blooms and grasses that attract bees, butterflies and a variety of birds, from goldfinches to hummingbirds. Pat enjoyed the process and the result so much, he intends to tackle his backyard in 2024.

Pat recommends the [High Plains Environmental Center](#) in Loveland as a great source of native plants and inspiration. In fact, DFO's Feb. 26 program, *Gardening on the Wild Side*,

features center founder and director **Jim Tolstrup** as the presenter. His book *Suburbitat: A Guide to Restoring Nature Where We Live, Work, and Play*, details the center's efforts to bring native landscapes into everyday neighborhoods. Register for [Gardening on the Wild Side](#) today and join us for inspiration and concrete ideas about how to begin.

DFO vice president **Matt Rodgers** is systematically transforming his larger yard in Centennial for birds, too. His advice: create a whole-property plan that considers exposure to sunlight, the land's grade and slope, and how water flows across it. Then divide the yard into manageable projects you can tackle one at a time. Hold off on choosing plants until you know which microclimates exist around your house.

Planning, prepping and planting is an opportunity to be creative. The payoff is seeing pollinators visit the native plant blooms, and flocks of goldfinch, juncos, chickadees, and towhees feasting on native seeds throughout the seasons. Matt suggests plants and the resources from [High Country Gardens](#), the mail-order gardening company.

DFO Board member **Tina Jones** lives on an acre of land near Denver's Fort Logan National Cemetery. With deep knowledge of native-plant botany, she has transformed her acre into a haven for nesting birds and hummingbirds. If you seek to attract specific birds, she recommends common sense knowledge of habitat and elevation. Rufous and Calliope hummingbirds, for instance, migrate no lower than Evergreen or Golden, so don't expect to draw them to a yard down on the floor of the Great Plains.

Tina recommends visiting the [Colorado State University Extension website](#). She also suggests you consider having your soil tested. CSU offers many resources for gardeners, including [Plant Select](#) varieties that do well along the Front Range. To learn the plants, Tina says resources and classes are available through [Denver Botanic Gardens](#), the [Colorado Native Plant Society](#), and [Front Range Wild Ones](#).

Continued on page 6

Another resource is [Audubon Rockies](#)' 10th annual, day-long workshop, [Ways to Make & Keep a Garden for the Birds & Bees](#), scheduled for Feb. 3 via Zoom (or in person in Cheyenne, WY). Audubon Rockies also manages the [Habitat Hero](#) birdscaping program, and its website offers resources specific to our area.

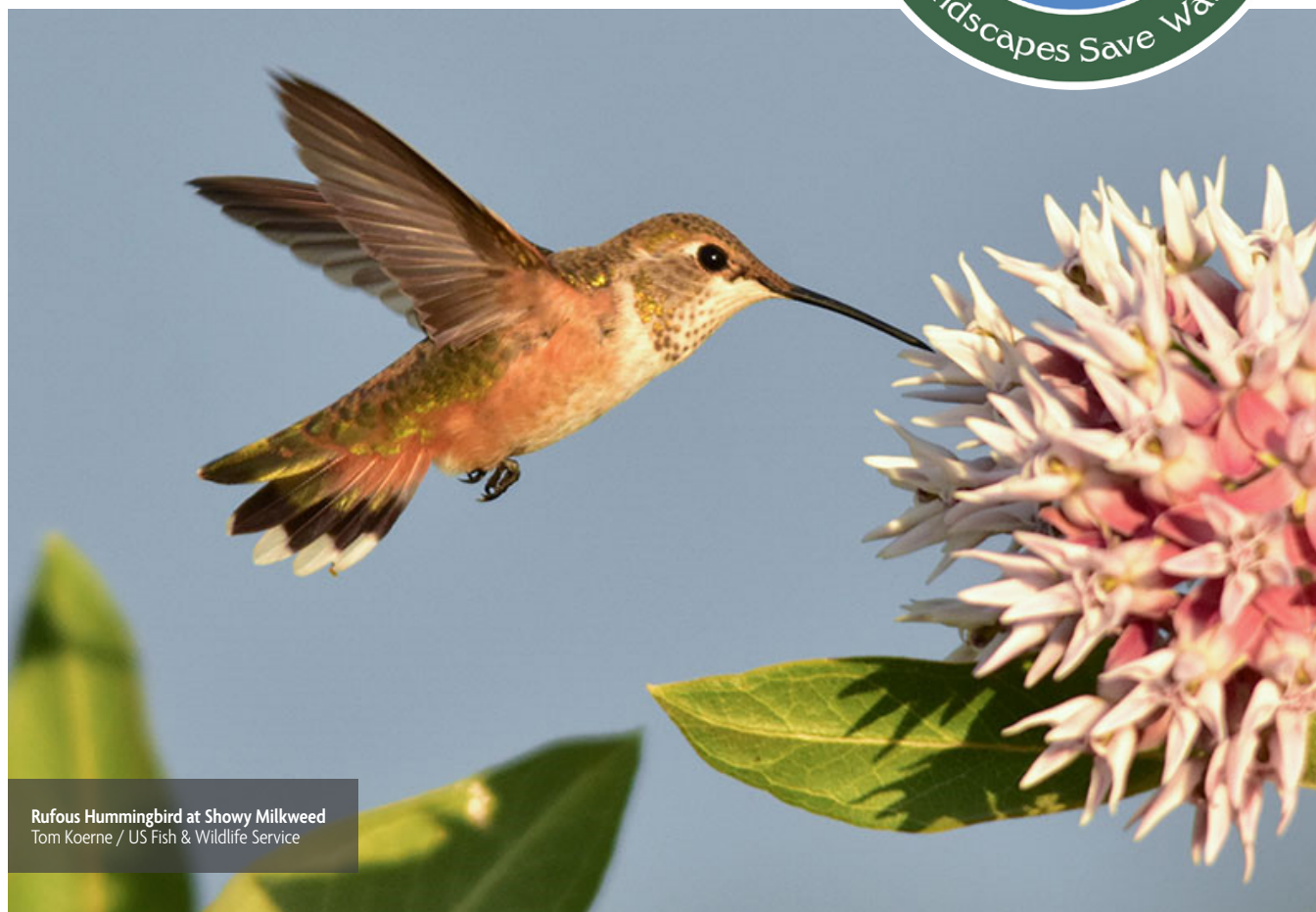
To purchase native plants in person next spring, also consider visiting [Harlequin Gardens](#) in Boulder. Additional mail-order sources include [Prairie Moon Nursery](#) and [Prairie Nursery](#). Plans also are underway for a DFO tour of private native-landscape yards in the Denver area this summer. Stay tuned here for more information.

It is a radical act to buck the trend of turf, tar and trees that defines so many of our public and private spaces. But maybe this is the year to get radical about supporting the birds we enjoy by creating habitat vital to their survival.

Happy New Year!

— **Sharon**

*DFO President **Sharon Tinianow**, who joined the club in 2016, was previously vice president (2021-23) and is a former editor of The Lark Bunting. She began birding in an ornithology class in college, and she retired as assistant director of CU Boulder's Museum of Natural History.*



Rufous Hummingbird at Showy Milkweed
Tom Koerne / US Fish & Wildlife Service



So long until March — but while we're away . . .

If it's January-February, it's time for *The Lark Bunting's* semi-annual hiatus.

This month and next, and again in July-August, our newsletter team takes a month off. We use it to refresh, restore, and re-load for another half-year of delivering news, photos, features and useful information to you, the Denver Field Ornithologists family.

This year, we're also using the hiatus for something else: Brainstorming a new format and role for *The Lark Bunting* itself. In the coming months, we aim to reimagine and redesign DFO's newsletter into a 21st-century re-embodiment of what is now a prior-century monthly. Even though this newsletter has been digital and online for years, today's *Lark Bunting* remains the very model of a mid-to-late-20th century, printed-on-paper magazine. In the 2020s, it's a structure and formula about as dated as that classic manual Underwood typewriter at the left.

In a word, we're overdue. This year marks the 60th year of DFO's newsletter. First published in late 1965, it had quite a title: *MONTHLY REPORT OF FIELD OBSERVATIONS of the Denver Field Ornithologists*. About six years later, someone (we're not sure who, but thank you) renamed it *The Lark Bunting* — after Colorado's state bird, of course.

In the five decades since then, the newsletter broadened, matured, was redesigned several times, and finally went digital. But that evolution always remained within the size, shape and look of something members once held in their hands: A printed, magazine-sized sheaf of paper pages, folded in fours, a vestige of the more than 500-year history of the printing press.

At the end of 2022, we printed and mailed the last few black-and-white paper copies of this newsletter to a dwindled handful of print subscribers. But our old-fashioned format persists. Some would say, "And why not?" Imaginatively fashioned (by our peerless design-layout artist **Jennie Dillon**) with a subtle palette and gorgeous color folios of birds, *The Lark Bunting* is still lovely to look at.. But is it still a *newsletter*? Immediate? Relevant? As timely as . . . a text, a social media ping, an email?

We aim to consider and reconsider all that — and fashion a new alternative. Numerous other organizations, both public and private, deliver their newsletters as emails chock full of clickable links, smart headlines and blurbs, and some of the same quality photography. But their readers don't have to scroll through the digital pages of a print-like PDF document to find what interests them.

So DFO's Communications & Outreach Committee will have that model in mind as we re-envision a better-organized, more user-friendly newsletter that's easier to read (and produce) and puts what you need and want right at your fingertips.

Stay tuned for updates as we work in 2024 toward a newsier, more immediate monthly dispatch with all of your needs in mind. And if you have ideas about that, drop me a note at patodrisk@gmail.com. **We want to hear from you.**

And enjoy your mid-winter birding. We'll be back in March.

— **Patrick O'Driscoll**

DFO News Notes

Patrick O'Driscoll

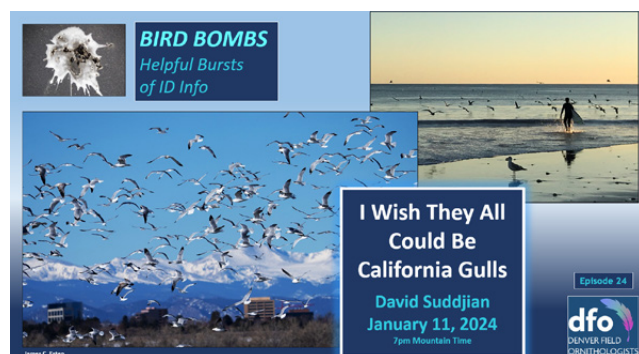
Got blurbs on birds? Share with **DFO News Notes**: Colorado birding newsbits, eBird milestones, tales from the trail, birding life (and life birds!), etc. Email your items, photos, links and anything else to patodrisk@gmail.com.

GULLS, GULLS, GULLS! NEW BIRD BOMBS DROP ON JAN. 11, FEB. 15

The first BIRD BOMBS bird ID mini-webinar of 2024 is set for **Thursday, Jan. 11 at 7 p.m. via Zoom**. [I Wish They All Could Be California Gulls](#) (click title for registration link) will help you identify and enjoy the wide variety of Colorado's winter gulls, with a focus on eight core species here this season.

Also upcoming: A February mini-webinar on Colorado bird taxonomy (generally stated, the physical, genetic and behavioral characteristics of a species). [BIRD BOMBS: Colorado Bird Taxonomy Made Simple](#) is set for **Thursday, Feb. 15 at 7 p.m. via Zoom**. (Click program title for registration link)

You can also check out the video of the previous gull ID session at [BIRD BOMBS: Get Gullable](#) to learn key basics of Colorado gull identification. As always, videos of all 23 episodes (and the January session on California Gulls if you miss the live webinar) are in [DFO's BIRD BOMBS video archive](#).



REGISTRATION ENDS JAN. 15 FOR DFO SEQUEL TRIP TO AZ SKY ISLANDS

A 12-day DFO field trip to the bird-rich southeastern Arizona “sky islands” habitats is planned for May 15-26 in the footsteps of an identical and successful trip last spring. Registration opened Dec. 15 for a random selection draw on Jan. 15 to choose seven birders to accompany veteran trip leader **Joey Kellner**, who planned and led the previous trip. Visiting one of the continent’s premier birding destinations, the all-inclusive trip will cost \$2,600 (rental vehicles, lodging, gas and food, leader’s expenses and land/access fees). Unspent funds at trip’s end will be refunded to participants who must first sign up via the usual DFO field trip registration process on the club website. Questions? Contact Kellner at vireol@comcast.net. An itinerary with locations and species targets is at https://dfobirds.org/FieldTrips/Documents/AZ_Trip_Details.pdf

DENVER'S BLUFF LAKE PLANS 2024 SUMMER CAMP FOR AGES 5-17

Early registration began Jan. 1, 2024 for [summer day camp at Bluff Lake Nature Center](#), the popular in-town Denver birding hotspot on the east edge of the Central Park neighborhood. The 10 weeks of themed, weekday summer camps will run between June 3 and Aug. 18, with separate sessions for ages 5-6, 7-12 and a “junior counselor” section for ages 13-17. Due to the camp’s popularity, this year families will be limited to pre-registering for one session per child so that more kids get a chance to attend camp (Bluff Lake will maintain waitlists). General registration is open until May 20. The program’s goal is for one-quarter of the campers to receive full needs-based scholarships to attend.



A new session theme this year is “Future Scientist,” for kids who are jazzed about the idea of growing up to be a geologist, biologist or physicist. Some of the daily 9 a.m.-3 p.m. sessions include the option of three hours of pre- and post-camp day care. [Click on this link for registration](#), camp costs and other details. The camp director is DFO Hawk Watch volunteer **Ben Jacques**, an experienced wildlife educator.

Continued on page 9

FEDS WANT TO SHOOT 500K BARRED OWLS IN PACIFIC NORTHWEST

The Barred Owl, which has aggressively expanded its range into the territory of the endangered Northern Spotted Owl, is the subject of a remarkable federal proposal. The US Fish & Wildlife Service wants to recruit hunters to kill more than half a million Barred Owls in the region over the next three decades. Larger and more aggressive, the species disrupts spotted owl nests, outcompetes for food, and sometimes even kills or interbreeds with them. Spotted owls already have been in decline because of habitat loss. But the invasion of their cousins from the East is an existential threat.

“This is about conserving two species,” Fish & Wildlife’s supervisor in Oregon told Oregon Public Broadcasting. (E)ven if the service was able to remove that number of barred owls over the next 30 years, that would represent less than 1% of the global population of barred owls.” Actually, Fish & Wildlife has culled Barred Owls before on a smaller scale in California, Oregon and Washington since 2013. Now it’s asking for public feedback on its management strategy. For more on the proposal, read this [article in the Seattle Times](#).



“COLOR OF THE YEAR” STARTED WITH . . . BIRDS?!

Why does global commercial color influencer [Pantone](#) have a color of the year? It may have sprung from . . . birds. Specifically, a 19th-century ornithologist whose passionate pursuit to describe the innumerable colors of birds may have inspired mid-20th century printers and advertisers to standardize, catalogue and describe the shades, hues, tints and pigments in every aspect of commercial life. That’s *National Geographic*’s take, anyway. In an [article about color](#), it recounts how Smithsonian artist and ornithologist **Robert Ridgway** was assigned to describe America’s abundant birdlife. Doing that meant capturing in words and color swatches each bird’s plumage hues, “from the vibrant reddish orange of an American Robin’s breast to the wine reds of the Purple Finch.” He eventually published bestsellers on the subject: *A Nomenclature of Colors for Naturalists* and *Color Standards and Color Nomenclature*.

This year’s color of the year, BTW, is not birdy — it’s “[Peach Fuzz](#),” a shade Pantone says can help us all “find peace from within, impacting our well-being. An idea as much as a feeling, Peach Fuzz awakens our senses to the comforting presence of tactility and cocooned warmth.” OK, maybe — but to this eye, Peach Fuzz kind of reminds me of the comforting presence and cocooned warmth of the Say’s Phoebe, our kinda-sorta peach-breasted flycatcher. Or maybe, in the right light, some flamingos. I wonder what Ridgway would say?



HAWK WATCH

Hawk Watch 2024: Who's ready to help DFO count spring raptors on Dinosaur Ridge?

Janet Peters

In case you've missed it, the Front Range has seen a seasonal increase in the population of birds of prey this winter. Barr Lake SP and Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR are great locations to spot Ferruginous Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks (including handsome examples of the [Harlan's subspecies](#)), Bald Eagles, and Rough-legged Hawks.

But before long many of these will be migrating north to their breeding grounds as our summer raptor visitors, including Swainson's Hawks, arrive or pass through. Did you know that Colorado's population of Bald Eagles will then drop to barely 10% of its winter population?

Don't miss the chance to witness our spring migration of hawks, eagles and other birds of prey. Joining in Denver Field Ornithologists' 2024 Dinosaur Ridge Hawk Watch between March 1 and May 10 is a great way to do so. While enjoying the seasonal movement of these magnificent birds, you can increase your raptor identification skills and participate in DFO's largest community science project.

The data we gather from the count is fundamental for raptor conservation. Observers from the Dinosaur Ridge counting station in Jefferson County have compiled more than 30 years of data in one of the continent's few spring migration monitoring sites. Our Hawk Watch volunteers track 17 species of eagles, hawks, falcons and vultures.

Hawk Watch at Dinosaur Ridge engages experienced counters and weekend observers to ID species and record migration data. But it also relies heavily on volunteers to assist in spotting birds and engage with members of the public who visit the site. Prospective and returning volunteers and anyone interested in sharpening raptor identification skills are encouraged to participate in the following programs:

- **Informational Hawk Watch Zoom Webinar with Raptor Identification**

On Wednesday, Feb. 21 (7-8:30 p.m. MST), Hawk Watch trainer and former DFO president **Dave Hill** will lead a Zoom webinar, *Hawk Watch at Dinosaur Ridge: Community Science at Work*, on beginning raptor ID skills and details about volunteering for this annual project. Register in advance at [DFO Programs and Events](#) on the DFO website

- **Volunteer Field Orientation**

On Saturday, Feb. 24 (10 a.m.-12:30 p.m. MST), join experienced hawk watchers at the Dinosaur Ridge viewing platform for on-site orientation. Register in advance at [Hawk Watch Volunteer Resources](#) on the DFO website

Prospective volunteers can also visit [DFO Hawk Watch](#) for more information. To join the Hawk Watch Volunteer e-mail list and express your interest in volunteering, contact [Janet Peters](#), Hawk Watch Committee chair and volunteer coordinator.

Your eyes, after Hawk Watch training and orientation, help improve our data in this annual raptor count. And we are counting on you to help make 2024 another successful season.

***Janet Peters**, a DFO member since 2021, is chair of the Hawk Watch Committee. She has also supported Hawk Watch as a volunteer observer, coordinator and fundraiser. She took up birding about five years ago after an engineering career in the energy field.*





Tami Bulow

SPRING PROGRAM PREVIEW

Birding the Lower Rio Grande Valley: Top 5 Hotspots and More

Tamie Bulow

Monday, January 22, 2024

7 p.m. MST via Zoom

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER](#)

A birding adventure to deep South Texas can be one of the most exhilarating and rewarding trips in the continental US. Owing to its famous, border-defining river, the Lower Rio Grande Valley actually lies farther south than one-third of Mexico. That offers the opportunity to find vagrant bird rarities from Mexico on a regular basis, as well as the more than 500 species of birds that migrate seasonally through the area or call it home.

Former DFO president **Tamie Bulow** (2005-2007) calls it home, too. Before moving to the Lower Rio Grande Valley to manage the South Padre Island Birding & Nature Center, she worked as manager of conferences, conventions and tours for Colorado-based [American Birding Association](#). Now retired, Bulow lives in the border city of Harlingen, TX but continues to dabble in birding work.

In her evening Zoom presentation on Jan. 22, “Birding the Lower Rio Grande Valley: Top 5 Hotspots and More,” Bulow says she will reveal “five places that are a must visit” for birders, “and another 30 or 40 that won’t disappoint.” She also says there are “15-20 specialties that you must come to the Rio Grande Valley for,” including Great Kiskadee and Green Jay, Buff-bellied Hummingbird and Altamira Oriole, Groove-billed Ani and Green Kingfisher.

Bulow has more advice: “Spring migration is best, but a mild winter can’t be beat for delightful birding. Top tip: Avoid summer. You will thank me later.”

Although she was born in Boston, Bulow’s family moved around — Connecticut, Denver, Richmond, Atlanta. “Twelve

schools in 12 years,” she says. “Mom was a backyard birder, so I grew up filling feeders and calling out birds that were feeding there. When I got my first house, the first thing I did was hang a bird feeder, and then chuckled to myself, ‘I must be a birder!’ ”

She returned to Colorado as a student at the University of Denver and worked after graduation at local ice arenas, managing the DU Arena and its youth sports program. Later, her travel as a sales rep for skate maker Riedell Skates “fed my birding addiction.”

Still later, a transfer to Albuquerque led her to start “Thursday Birders” there — like Denver’s own Tuesday Birders weekly meetup. She would become president of Central New Mexico Audubon Society and VP of the state Audubon organization. She says that prepared her to be DFO president after she moved back to Denver.

Left jobless after years with ABA, she applied to be director of South Padre Island Birding & Nature Center in Texas and landed the job. During her years in south Texas, she also managed nature tourism for Chambers County east of Houston and as executive director of the Texas Tropical Trail region for the Texas Historical Commission.

Today she writes grants for Space Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival (Port Canaveral, FL), “But basically I am retired,” she says, though she does “some bird guiding” at local festivals and privately, and volunteers for the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival. A Texas Master Naturalist, she is working on learning the butterflies and plants of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.



Jim Tolstrup

SPRING PROGRAM PREVIEW

Gardening on the Wild Side

Jim Tolstrup

Monday, February 26, 2024

7 p.m. MST via Zoom

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER](#)

Join award-winning Colorado landscape designer/horticulturist **Jim Tolstrup**, director of the [High Plains Environmental Center](#) in Loveland, for a backyard garden-inspiring presentation focused on the relationship between native plants and wildlife. Tolstrup founded the center 20 years ago to promote wildlife-friendly landscape design and maintenance practices. The 275-acre center describes itself as “a unique model for preserving native biodiversity on the midst of development.”

Located in the heart of the Centerra planned community between Boyd Lake SP and the Interstate 25 corridor, the center is tucked between two habitat-rich reservoirs on the northeast side of Loveland in Larimer County. It contains a native-plant demonstration garden, heritage orchard, community veggie garden, workshops, educational programs, and greenhouses where it grows thousands of native plant seedlings for sale and distribution across northern Colorado and the Front Range. Centerra’s developers call the center their “nature spirit guide.” They boast that the community has been certified by the National Wildlife Federation as Colorado’s only Community Wildlife Habitat.

Tolstrup is author of [Suburbitat: A Guide to Restoring Nature Where We Live, Work, and Play](#), a book about the center’s efforts to bring native landscapes into everyday neighborhoods. He previously served as land steward of Shambhala Mountain Center in Red Feather Lakes, CO. He also ran his own landscape design business in Kennebunkport, ME, where he installed gardens at the “Summer White House” of **George** and **Barbara Bush**.

Tolstrup holds a certificate in gardening arts from the Landscape Institute of Harvard University and the Arnold Arboretum and has received awards for landscape design from Plant Select®, American Society of Landscape Architects, Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado, and Denver Water. He teaches widely throughout Colorado, has written numerous articles on gardening and environmental stewardship.

To view more about the center and its work in advance of Tolstrup’s presentation, visit High Plains Environmental Center’s [YouTube page](#), which has a dozen videos, including [this explainer on Tolstrup’s “Suburbitat” concept](#).



Jim Tolstrup at
High Plains Enviro Center
YouTube



Painted Lady butterfly on
rabbitbrush in bloom
Jim Tolstrup



FROM THE FIELD WITH DAVID SUDDJIAN

Without our record-setting 2023 trip leaders, DFO outings simply wouldn't be

David Suddjian

DFO's Field Trips program is life-changing. Consider the pleasure, thrills and beauty you experience in birding. Recognize the deep joy in sharing and learning with like-minded friends who also love being out in nature and birding. And appreciate a great team of field trip leaders, abundant trip opportunities and a fascinating array of birders, from newbies to veterans, who come together to enjoy lots of birds, many lifers, fun with new friends, and so many adventures.

Denver Field Ornithologists had a BIG year in 2023! No, we didn't *do* a "Big Year," but our field trip program had its strongest year ever. The most obvious superlative is the sheer number and scale of our trips, probably unique in the birding world. In 2023, we had **291 field trips** in a single year. Statistically, that's an average of more than 5-1/2 trips per week.

More than 525 individual birders participated (often multiple times) on those 291 free, public birding outings. We checklisted a record 384 species of birds (310 in Colorado) in a single year, and submitted about 1,600 eBird checklists with our results.

None of this would have happened without our DFO field trip leaders, all volunteers. Thirty-eight of them led field trips in 2023. I am thrilled that 14 new trip leaders participated in our training and certification process. Ten of them led their first trips in 2023. New trip leaders led four outings in December alone. I tip my cap to new leader **Gigi Zarzuela**, who in her first year led an amazing 11 field trips in 2023!

All that would be hard to top, but look for more exciting results from our growing Field Trips team in 2024.

In tribute to these hardworking volunteers, I invited some of the participants in their trips to offer shout-outs to our leaders and the program. Here is some of what they said:

I have traveled to so many new places, and I've learned so much more about birding with the help and expertise of the DFO leaders. Perhaps most important is the association and friendships developed while on the DFO field trips

— **Luke**

The value of expert guidance is immeasurable. I saw birds I could never find on my own, and I got to know other birders, too. I made fabulous memories

— **Ann**

DFO field trips have been an incredible boost into the birding world. The superb leaders are patient, generously sharing their knowledge

— **Joan**

"Passionate" is the best word I can find to describe DFO leaders. It's contagious and uplifting every time I go out

— **Winston**

DFO field trips provide an outlet to explore places with a fresh eye, ask questions that are never too silly, and connect with fellow bird nerds, many of whom I'll never forget

— **Michelle**

I really like DFO trips because of both the leaders and the fellow participants. The leaders (and many participants, too) love to share their knowledge — which is extensive — and to help people of different birding levels

— **Deb**

I like the chance to wander slowly with a knowledgeable leader and other good spotters, without rushing the process of "checking off" birds

— **Laurie**

Joining DFO was the best thing I did to continue learning about birds

— **Melody**

Thank you to our excellent troupe of experienced leaders, and especially to the younger people who are stepping up to lead the next generation of birders

— **Dana**

Oh, the places you can go on a trip with DFO!

— **Judy**

Continued on page 14



New leader Ajit Antony guiding his first DFO trip Dec 10
Jason Bidgood



New trip leader Courtney Rella, left, helping with a bird ID
David Suddjian



Sunrise birding Nov. 18 on Staunton SP field trip
David Suddjian

FROM THE FIELD *cont from page 13*

Finally, two more thank-yous by name to all our trip leaders who led outings in 2023 and those who joined the field trips team. As I noted before, we'd be nowhere without you:

10 OR MORE FIELD TRIPS

Jason Bidgood, Anne Craig, Joey Kellner, Diane Roberts, David Suddjian, Gary Witt, Gigi Zarzuela

5 TO 9 FIELD TRIPS

Nate Bond, Karen Drozda, Benjamin Jacques, Laura Steadman, Donna Stumpp

3 TO 4 FIELD TRIPS

Chris Blakeslee, Susan Blansett, John Breitsch, Charlie Chase, Jared Del Rosso, Jessica Miller, Patrick O'Driscoll, Bailey Parkhouse, Dale Pate, Peter Ruprecht, Bea Weaver

1 TO 2 FIELD TRIPS

Ajit Antony, Liza Antony, Carly Crow, Mary Geder, David Hill, Chuck Hundertmark, Clark Jones, Tally Kerr, Mary Keithler, Norm Lewis, Kip Miller, Megan Miller, Courtney Rella, Buzz Schaumberg, Paul Slingsby, Doug Ward

NEW TO THE DFO FIELD TRIPS TEAM

Ajit Antony, Liza Antony, Helen Butts, Wes Donnell, Clark Jones, Anna Joy Lehmiche, Tally Kerr, Jessica Miller, Kip Miller, Bailey Parkhouse, Courtney Rella, Denise Reznicek, Doug Ward, Gigi Zarzuela

David Suddjian, Field Trip chair since 2021, came to Colorado in 2013 from his native California. Since 2016, he has led several hundred DFO outings. He organized the club's 2018 "Big Year" and created DFO's popular "Bird Bombs" webinar series on bird ID

IN MEMORIAM

Ann Bonnell (1938-2023): Tuesday Birder, conservation activist, DFO honoree

Patrick O'Driscoll

Another tireless birding volunteer and passionate activist in metro Denver's conservation community has left us. **Ann Bonnell**, who led and popularized the decades-old "Tuesday Birders" weekly outings, died the day after Christmas 2023.

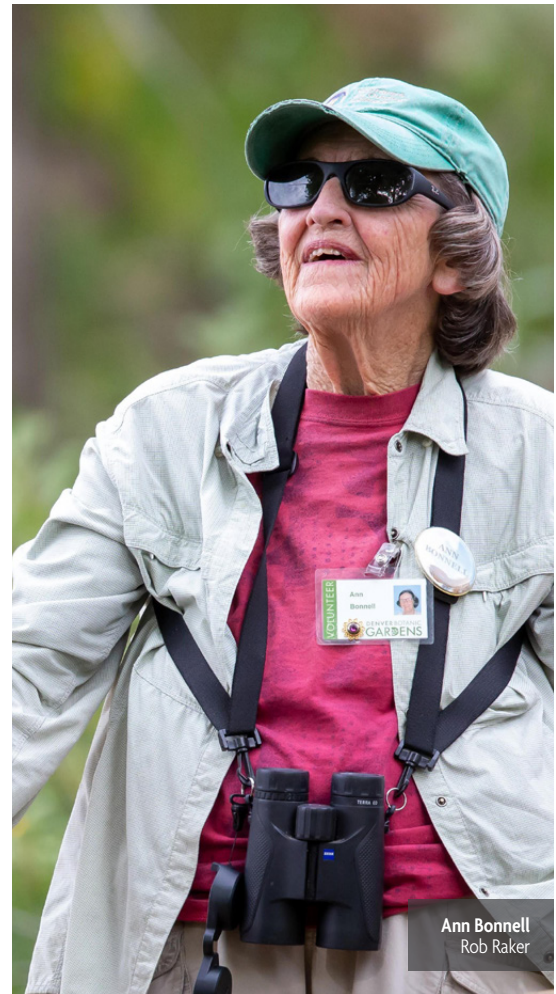
A DFO member for decades and recipient in 2009 of the Ptarmigan Award, our club's highest honor for volunteerism, Bonnell was 85. She passed less than a month before her 86th birthday (Jan. 18). Ann had been a resident of MorningStar at Applewood, an assisted living and memory care residence in Lakewood. Her daughter, **Mary Ann Bonnell**, and Tuesday Birders co-leader **Cynthia Madsen** were there "when she peacefully left us," Madsen said.

Bonnell's family plans to host a "celebration of life," which Ann and her daughter had already mapped out together. After she moved into assisted-living in January of 2022, members of Tuesday Birders donated a park bench in Bear Creek Lake Park to honor Bonnell's contributions to their informal birding meet-up group.

During more than 40 years in the Denver area, Bonnell was a schoolteacher, trainer, volunteer and member of numerous conservation groups (DFO, Colorado Field Ornithologists, Denver Audubon, PLAN Jeffco, Sierra Club). In 25 years as Tuesday Birders coordinator, Ann led about 50 bird walks a year. She also educated countless people about birds and environment issues through her work at Roxborough SP, South Platte Park, Denver Botanic Gardens and the years-long "Save Chatfield" campaign that tried to block habitat destruction by a reservoir expansion project. In 2019, CFO presented her its Lifetime Achievement Award.

Because she passed within days of the end-of-December deadline for this issue of *The Lark Bunting*, we plan a more complete remembrance of Bonnell in the next newsletter. In the meantime, to read a tribute at PLAN Jeffco, the nonprofit open-space conservation group where Ann volunteered for more than 25 years, [click here](#).

Her survivors include daughter Mary Ann and son **John Bonnell**, his wife **Sarah Benson**, and their sons **Max** and **Jacob**; and nephew **William Krummes**, his wife **Brigitte**, and their daughter **Lucia**. In lieu of flowers, donations in her memory can be made to [Bird Conservancy of the Rockies](#), [Denver Audubon](#), or [Denver Field Ornithologists](#).



Why dozens of North American bird species are getting new names: Every name tells a story

*Editor's note: This essay by DFO member **Jared Del Rosso** was first published by [The Conversation](#), an independent, nonprofit collective that edits and posts explanatory writings of academic experts on events, discoveries and issues that matter. It appeared on Dec. 7, 2023 and is republished here with permission. Visit [The Conversation](#) for the [complete posting with illustrations and related content](#).*

Jared Del Rosso

This winter, tens of thousands of birders will survey winter bird populations for the National Audubon Society's [Christmas Bird Count](#), part of an international bird census, powered by volunteers, that has taken place every year since 1900.

For many birders, participating in the count is a much-anticipated annual tradition. Tallying birds and compiling results with others connects birders to local, regional and even national birding communities. Comparing this year's results with previous tallies links birders to past generations. And [scientists use the data](#) to assess whether bird populations are thriving or declining.

But a change is coming. On Nov. 1, 2023, the American Ornithological Society announced that it will [rename 152 bird species](#) that have names honoring historical figures.

Soon, Christmas bird counters will no longer find Cooper's Hawks hunting songbirds. They won't scan marshes for Wilson's Snipes. And here in Colorado's Front Range, where I'll participate in a local count, we'll no longer encounter one of my favorite winter visitors, Townsend's Solitaires.

New names will take the place of these eponymous ones. With those new names will come new ways of understanding these birds and their histories.

Names matter

In my time birding over the past decade, learning birds' names helped me recognize the species I encounter every day, as well as the ones that migrate past me. So I understand that it may not be easy to persuade people to accept new names for so many familiar North American species.

This naming had consequences. Generations of [poets](#) and naturalists, like [John Muir](#) and [Mabel Osgood](#)



Eastern Whip-poor-will
Louis Agassiz Fuertes

Continued on page 17

Wright, associated the species with whippings. Their writings often tell us as much about 19th and early-20th century Americans' views of morality and punishment as they do about this remarkable bird.

What's wrong with eponymous names

The whip-poor-will's name translates the species' song, leaving room for interpretation. Eponymous names based on a specific person, like Audubon's Oriole or Townsend's Solitaire, are less descriptive. Even so, these names [shape how people relate to birds](#) and the history of ornithology.

Many of these names honor people, usually white men, who engaged in racist acts. For example, **John James Audubon** [owned slaves](#), and **John Kirk Townsend** [robbed skulls from Native American graves](#). Changing these names helps separate birds from this harmful, exclusionary history.

But for multiple reasons, the American Ornithological Society is [changing all eponymous names](#), not just those linked to problematic historical figures. First, the organization decided that it did not want to make judgments about which historical figures were honorable. Second, it recognized that all eponymous names imply human ownership over birds. Third, it acknowledged that eponymous names do not describe the birds they name.

Change as a constant

While birders certainly will have learning to do once these changes become official, change is a constant in how people relate to birds.

Consider the technologies birders use. In the early 20th century, binoculars became more affordable and readily available. As Texas A&M historian **Thomas Dunlap** [has shown](#), this helps explain why birders now "collect" birds by spotting them, rather than by shooting them, as Audubon and others of his time did.

But as a [scholar of politics, culture and denial](#), I also know that language shapes our understanding of history and violence. This includes bird names, as I've learned through my ongoing research into one [iconic species' place in American culture](#): the Eastern Whip-poor-will.

Eastern Whip-poor-wills are nocturnal birds who nest in forests of the eastern US and Canada. English colonialists named the species for their [distinct, repetitive call](#), which sounds like a malicious command to inflict punishment: "Whip poor Will, whip poor Will, whip poor Will."



Townsend's Solitaire
Jared Del Rosso



Wilson's Snipe
Bettina Arrigoni via Wikipedia

Continued on page 18

Field guides, too, have come a long way. Early guides often relied on dense written descriptions. Today, birders carry compact, smartly illustrated guides, or we use smartphones to check digital guides, share sightings and [identify birds from audio recordings](#).

Names, too, have long been open to revision. When the American Ornithological Union, the predecessor of today's American Ornithological Society, created an [official list of bird names](#) in 1886, it erased untold numbers of Indigenous names, as well as local folk names.

Since then, some names have come into use and others have fallen out of fashion, especially as ornithologists lump and split species. Consider the ongoing adventure of just one species: Wilson's Snipe, a round marsh bird whose name will be among those changed.

In the American Ornithological Union's original checklist of North American birds, Wilson's Snipes were a distinct species from the Common Snipes of Europe and Asia. Then, in the mid-1940s, the Union decided the two were one, and Wilson's Snipes became Common Snipes. In 2000, the Common Snipe was split back into two species, and Wilson's Snipes again became Wilson's Snipes.

Either way, many early accounts of the North American species simply call these birds "snipes." This is the name **Alexander Wilson**, for whom the bird is named, himself used in [his account of them](#).

Names reflect new knowledge and values

Science has greatly expanded human understanding of birds in recent decades. We now recognize that birds are [intelligent](#), with rich [emotional lives](#). Radar, lightweight transmitters and satellite telemetry have helped scientists map the [transcontinental migrations](#) that many bird species make each year.

Trading eponymous names, which treat birds as passive objects, for richer descriptive names reflects this sea change in our understanding of avian lives.

Our thinking about race and racism has evolved dramatically as well. For instance, we no longer use folk names for birds based on [racial and ethnic slurs](#), as Americans of the 19th and early 20th centuries did. The decision to change eponymous bird names reflects this shift.

It also reflects broader efforts to reckon with the legacies of racism and colonialism in our relationships with the natural world. There is increasing recognition that legacies of racism shape our natural landscapes. Just as public monuments can have "[expiration dates](#)," so can names for species, [geographic features](#) and places that no longer reflect contemporary values.

Birders no longer live in Audubon's world. We rarely consult his heavy, multi-volume folios. We celebrate that we list birds that we have seen in the wild and left unharmed, rather than collect their bodies as specimens.

Soon, we'll also stop using some of the names that this world gave to birds.

Jared Del Rosso, a birder since 2012, is a sociologist who dabbles in nature writing. Besides The Lark Bunting, he contributes to the Center for Humans and Nature's [Stories & Ideas](#) section and blogs about birds at [The Lonesome Whip-poor-will](#).



Wilson's Warbler
Jim Esten



Steller's Jay
Patrick O'Driscoll

Welcome to new DFO members

Pete and Ann Christensen, Denver; Marcelo and Lisa Forte, Highlands Ranch; Brian Huculak and Paula Rosson, Arvada; Luke Jaramillo, Littleton; Eric Perryman and Lori Potter, Boulder; Mark Sather, Denver; Lynn and Kevin Schutz, Monument; Beverly and Fred Trail, Henderson; and Peggy Wait and Lowell Baumunk, Littleton

Thank you for your contribution

Research, Education and Conservation Grants Fund

Helen Berkman; Mary Beverly; Susan Blansett and Mark Peyton; Jill Boice; Pete and Ann Christensen; Jean and Charlie Curlee; Jeff Dawson; Mary and Dave Driscoll; Laurie Duke; Deborah Hebblewhite; Sharon Hines; Doug Hodous; Roy Hohn; Edie Israel; Darcy Juday; Debra Lentz; Robert and Wendy Miles; Barbara Retzlaff; Kris Saucke; Mary and Charlie Saunders; Lori Sharp; Mary Ann Tavery; Michelle Trotter; Laura and Wayne Wathen; Suzanne and Bill Wuerthele, and Scott Yarberry

Friends of DFO

Janice Arey; Mary Beverly; Andrea Cahoon; Dale Campau; Pete and Ann Christensen; Martha Eubanks; Elizabeth Fischer; Newell Grant; Sonja and Grace Hahn; Ashton and Dana Hiatt; Roy Hohn; Kathy Holland; Darcy Juday; Meg and David Kenny; Robert and Wendy Miles; Barbara Retzlaff; Mary and Charlie Saunders, and Jan Justice Waddington

DFO's Dinosaur Ridge Hawk Watch

Kathleen Bahr; Mary Beverly; Carol Cwiklinski; David Hill; Roy Hohn; Diane Hutton; Cynthia Madsen; Robert and Wendy Miles; Mary and Charlie Saunders; Janet Shin; Mary Ann Tavery; Laurie Tripp; Debra Lentz, and Suzanne and Bill Wuerthele





FIELD TRIPS IN FOCUS

In Focus: Sweet 17 of December's trips!

Wow, what a way to end the 2024 DFO birding year: "Birders birding" photos from SEVENTEEN of the 21 field trips we sponsored during December. This is our latest (and largest) installment of *Field Trips in Focus*, where we mark DFO trips with pix of what the birds see: US birding.

Let's keep it going! If you're on a DFO outing in January and February, take a few shots of your fellow birders and send us the best. It could be hiking the trail, taking a lunch break, scoping a distant bird, or just a candid moment. Have fun with it! We'll run them in the next issue of *The Lark Bunting*, due out in early March.

Send your .JPG or .PNG photo files, with date/location of your DFO trip and any individual IDs (if needed), to editor **Patrick O'Driscoll** at patodrisk@gmail.com and cc: to photo editor **Jim Esten** at jcesten@gmail.com. Deadline is the last day of the month, no later than **Sunday, Jan. 31** or **Thursday, Feb. 29**. Again, photos of field trip *people*, not *birds*. Thanks!

DECEMBER 4

South Platte Park + Chatfield SP (Arapahoe and Douglas COs)

Leaders

David Suddjian and Scott Somershoe

Participants

Lynn Slaga, Patricia Diluzio, Anne Craig,
Linda Purcell, Dave Prentice, Julia Gwinn,
Bonnie Prado, Luke Jaramillo, Ginny Gulakowski,
Roxana Rogers De Sole

Field trippers scan Chatfield Reservoir on Dec. 4 trip
(Anne Craig)



DECEMBER 5

Aurora Reservoir + Cherry Creek SP (Arapahoe)

Leader

David Suddjian

Participants

Bonnie Prado, Cynthia Cestkowski,
Edward "Buzz" Schaumberg, Luke Jaramillo,
Patricia Diluzio, Jill Perry, Peggy Gonder

Aurora Reservoir crowd on DFO field trip Dec. 5
(Bonnie Prado)

Continued on page 21



DECEMBER 6
**South Platte River Trail @
E. 88th and I-76 (Adams)**

Leader

Liza Antony with David Suddjian

Participants

Ajit Antony, Luke Jaramillo, Patricia Diluzio,
Rae Jones, Marie Mager, Morgan Kahle, Greg Smith

All eyes on a Merlin bathing in the
South Platte River on Dec. 6 field trip
(David Suddjian)

DECEMBER 9
**Prewitt + Jackson Reservoirs
(Morgan and Washington)**

Leader

Ben Jacques

Participants

Edward "Buzz" Schaumberg, Michelle Trotter,
Luke Jaramillo, Timothy Condon,
Kristin and Brad Tallis, Carly Crow

Huddled against cold, field trippers watch an eagle
hunting a goose on icy Jackson Lake on Dec. 9
(Michelle Trotter)



DECEMBER 10
**Denver Airport "Raptor
Alley" (Denver/Adams)**

Leader

Ajit Antony with Jason Bidgood

Participants

Patricia Diluzio, Sofia Prado-Irwin,
Deb Piranian, Winston Liu,
Mary Fran O'Connor, Laurie Tripp

First-time trip leader Ajit Antony draws a bead
Dec. 10 on a bird of prey in Denver raptor loop
(Jason Bidgood)



Continued on page 22

DECEMBER 10
Waterton Canyon (Jefferson)

Leader
David Suddjian

Participants
Mary Ramsey, Melissa Wetzig,
Ginny Gulakowski, Lynn Slaga,
Roy Catalano, Brent Gordon, Chloe Smith

Watching a Golden Eagle soar above
Waterton Canyon on DFO trip Dec. 10
(David Suddjian)



DECEMBER 12
Grand County

Leader
Chris Blakeslee

Participants
Linda Purcell, Donna Stumpp,
Karen Clark, Mary Geder, Edie Israel

Participants birded across Grand County
on Dec. 12, ending in Grand Lake's Point Park
(Mary Geder)

Continued on page 23

DECEMBER 17
**Bluff Lake Nature Center
(Denver)**

Leader
Jason Bidgood

Participants
Rebecca Heath, Lisa and Marcelo Forte,
Patricia Diluzio, Deb Piranian,
Amy Manning, Debby Miller

Patricia Diluzio and Deb Piranian
seek elusive Golden-crowned Sparrow
on Dec. 17 trip to Bluff Lake
(Jason Bidgood)



DECEMBER 17
**Pueblo (Lake Pueblo SP,
Valco Ponds, et al.)**

Leader
Jessica Miller

Participants
David Suddjian, Anne Craig,
Debra and David Strike, Melissa Wetzig,
Winston Liu, Jenya Fox,
Megan Miller, Dave Prentice,
Ian de la Rosa

Scoping Pueblo Reservoir for
Pomarine Jaeger on joint DFO-
Aiken Audubon field trip Dec. 17
(Megan Miller)



DECEMBER 20
**Southwest Metro Area
(Jefferson)**

Leader
David Suddjian

Participants
Judy McKeon, Michael Yuan,
Adelia Honeywood, Mark Bennett,
Rae Jones, Archer Silverman, Patricia Diluzio,
Zach, Luke and Sara Jaramillo

Scoping Chatfield Reservoir on Dec. 20 trip
through SW metro area
(David Suddjian)



DECEMBER 22
**Clear Spring Ranch
Open Space (El Paso)**

Leader
Megan Miller

Participants
Courtney Rella, Angela Trnka,
Michelle Trotter, Sarah Leavesley,
Archer Silverman

Field trippers focus on White-crowned Sparrow
flock on Dec. 22 outing to Clear Spring Open Space
in El Paso County
(Michelle Trotter)

Continued on page 25



DECEMBER 23

Ken Caryl Valley Area (Jefferson)

Leader

David Suddjian

Participants

Michelle Trotter, Gigi Zarzuela, Dallas Branum,
Nadiyah Watts, Michelle Puplava, Scott Levine

Spotlighting Northern Saw-whet Owls
on a pre-dawn DFO trip Dec. 23 in
Ken Caryl Valley area
(Gigi Zarzuela)

DECEMBER 24 Stearns Lake + Coal Creek (Broomfield + Boulder)

Leader

Courtney Rella with David Suddjian

Participants

Anne Craig, Lynn Slaga, Linda Purcell,
Elizabeth Fischer, Adelia Honeywood,
Lori Potter, Eric Perryman

Christmas Eve birders check American Tree Sparrows
on Stearns Lake field trip
(Anne Craig)



Continued on page 26

DECEMBER 27

Littleton (Arapahoe)

Leader

David Suddjian

Participants

Marie Mager, Julia Gwinn, Andrea Duran,
Donna Feldman, Bonnie Prado,
Diane Highbaugh, Greg Smith,
Joon Huhn, Linda Purcell

Focusing on a Golden Eagle along
South Platte River during Dec. 27 field trip
(David Suddjian)



DECEMBER 29

Cherry Creek SP (Arapahoe)

Leader

Edward "Buzz" Schaumberg
with David Suddjian

Participants

Meg Reck, Mark Gawn,
Dave Prentice, Holly Sollod,
John Chanin, Winston Liu,
Donna Feldman, Kathleen Bahr,
Amy and Shmuel Korengut

Loon-spotting from shore at
Cherry Creek SP on Dec. 29
DFO outing
(Dave Prentice)

Continued on page 27



DECEMBER 30
Aurora Reservoir (Arapahoe)

Leader

Carly Crow with David Suddjian

Participants

Jennifer Randall, Angela Trnka,
Anne Craig, Patricia Diluzio, Susan Shamos,
Timothy Condon, Lisa Forte, Marcelo Forte,
Ann Christensen, Isaac Ho, Kris Saucke

Group selfie at Aurora Reservoir on Dec. 30 trip
(Carly Crow)

DECEMBER 31
**South Platte Park
(Arapahoe)**

Leader

David Suddjian

Participants

Bonnie Prado, Cynthia Breidenbach,
Sofia Prado-Irwin, Patricia Diluzio,
Judith Cohen, Patricia Kuzma Sell,
Amy Manning, Kyle Sandersen,
Michael Charney, Gigi Zarzuela,
Holly Sollod, John Chanin, Alison Kondler,
Brent Gordon, Melody Serra

New Year's Eve birders mark DFO's
record 291st trip of 2023 in South Platte Park
(Patricia Diluzio)





Ranch entrance at sunrise
Patrick O'Driscoll

CONSERVATION

Birding's final winter at Chico Basin Ranch: So long to that anytime access we loved

Patrick O'Driscoll

Over the past two decades, Colorado birders have filed nearly 11,000 eBird checklists from Chico Basin Ranch and its eBird hotspots.

It comes as a cold slap, then, to see each of those eight hotspot listings online now labeled with a parenthetical red-flag warning: **(CLOSED TO PUBLIC BEGINNING 1 MARCH 2024)**

That's true, though not entirely accurate. After Feb. 29, anytime, drop-in birding at one of Colorado's richest birdlife habitats will cease. After that, the state-owned ranch on the shortgrass prairie of El Paso and Pueblo counties southeast of Colorado Springs will be open to birders only 10 tightly restricted weeks a year. In spring and again in fall, narrow five-week windows during seasonal migration will be limited

to just 20 people a day, by pre-registration only, and only six hours from morning to midday each day.

So if you still want to show up whenever and register at the ranch's rustic, self-serve kiosk for a day of unscheduled, unsupervised birding, you're on the clock: only seven weeks remain, give or take a day — weather permitting, of course.

Winter isn't the best time to bird what may be Colorado's greatest known bird migration waystation. But in any season, Chico Basin has its charms. Year-round species like Ladder-backed Woodpecker and Curve-billed Thrasher mini-migrate in winter out to the ranch's brushy expanses of cholla cactus. Other ranch regulars, hardy holdovers and winter birds of prey (Ferruginous and Rough-legged hawks, Golden Eagle, Prairie Falcon, Merlin) are around. If there are open pools in iced-over ranch ponds and lakes, waterfowl are possible.

"It's *really* quiet in winter," says longtime Chico Basin birder **John Drummond**. "You can be there on your own and never see *anybody*."

But unless the Colorado State Land Board changes its mind someday, no one will ever bird there again in winter — let alone early spring, mid-summer or late fall either. Whatever the season, Chico Basin was a good reason . . . to go birding. But not for long.

Losing migration "shoulder" seasons

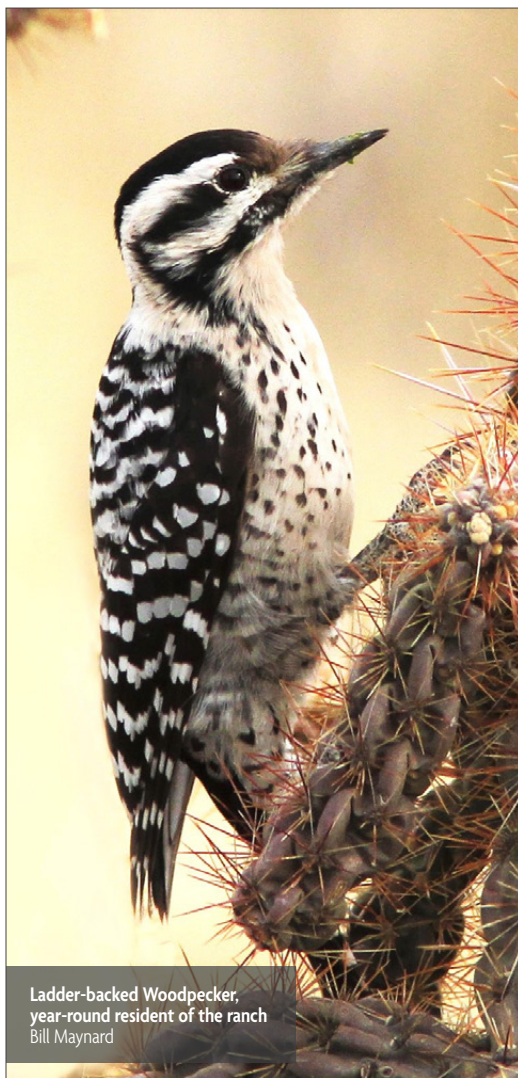
"We lose those shoulder months. We lose April, the first week of June, late August, and the three weeks in October when migration is still going on," laments Drummond, a Colorado Springs resident who calls the land board's birding policy "a really strange thing . . . What was so great was the freedom to cover it all," the run of the entire ranch. "There were no restrictions. Gates? If the gate is open, leave it open. If not, leave it as you find it."

Then, in 2023, the land board retooled its leasing scheme. With the current 25-year umbrella lease on the ranch due to expire at year's end, the board has split off non-agricultural uses like birding, fishing, hunting and guest-ranch services from the cattle operation. The thin excuse for drastically narrowing birder access from 52 weeks to 10? The potential "conflict" of roaming birdwatchers getting in the way of ranch work and livestock. The present birding-friendly leaseholder, the **Duke Phillips** family, says no such run-ins have ever occurred.

Continued on page 29



2nd Acadian Flycatcher in state, May 2023 in ranch's Bell Grove, soon to be off-limits
Bill Maynard



Ladder-backed Woodpecker, year-round resident of the ranch
Bill Maynard

CHICO BASIN *cont from page 28*

"The Phillipses, they worked with us," Drummond adds. "They never complained about harassing cattle or affecting their operation, because we didn't."

But even if the family had won the bidding for the new 10-year, agriculture-only lease (it did not), the land board's takeover of all other uses would have blocked them or anyone else from continuing to invite birders in anytime, as the Phillipses still do now.

It was the family, in fact, that first invited birders to Chico Basin, while negotiating to lease the 87,000-acre spread in 1999-2000. One of the very first was **Tony Leukering**, then a bird bander for the Colorado Bird Observatory (now Bird Conservancy of the Rockies). "I was invited in" by the Phillipses "to provide data and information on bird occurrence," says Leukering, an ornithologist and eBird reviewer now living in Dodge City, KS.

So many birds

What he found astonished him. "We conducted general bird surveys during the following winter and spring," Leukering says. He placed featherlight nets to capture and band birds near the grove where the conservancy's long-running banding station now stands. "On May 19, 2001, we erected just six mist nets in the early morning, but captured in excess of 100 individual birds, including, if memory serves, 75 Swainson's Thrushes." About the same time, Colorado Field Ornithologists got permission to lead a single field trip during its 2001 convention in Pueblo.

"I've never seen so many migrant land birds on the ground in the western US, before or since," Leukering marvels. "Additionally, 20-plus species of warblers were detected that morning, including Golden-winged, Magnolia, Blackburnian, Palm, Mourning, and Hooded."

"That single morning," he adds, "created the legend of Chico Basin Ranch."

The Phillipses would soon welcome birders and the banding station, and the legend grew. Today the ranch's list of recorded birds exceeds 350 species. Over the years, more birders learned of Chico. DFO began leading field trips there, which became so popular they sometimes filled up within minutes of posting.

"I've got fantastic memories of that place," says DFO member **Mark Amershek**. "That used to be a trip that **Paul Slingsby** (another longtime leader) ran for years. I inherited it." Amershek remembers taking a large group out to see Sprague's Pipits in a remote part of the ranch that will soon be permanently off-limits. "It was phenomenal. For 90 percent of the attendees, this was a lifer bird. I'll miss that."

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60 birders pursued rare Nelson's and Leconte's sparrows at Chico Basin in October 2012
Bill Maynard



DFO field trippers seeking pipits at Chico in 2015
Mark Amershek

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Losing bird hotspots

Closed, too, will be three less-visited but important eBird hotspots: close-in Bell Grove (where Colorado's second-ever Acadian Flycatcher was recorded last May) and Twin Ponds and May Ranch, two farther-afeld spots more popular with ranch regulars.

Bill Maynard of Colorado Springs, another birder from the earliest days, also roamed the Chico outlands for ground-nesting Short-eared Owls, pipits, longspurs and Mountain Plovers, among many others. He counts himself “extremely unhappy” with the land board’s moves. “I stopped going to Chico this past summer.”

Maynard said Leukering knew from the start that “Chico was the place, and he got permission” for birding from the Phillips family. “After the first year, (Tony) invited me and **Mark Peterson** and maybe **Brandon Percival** out. If the Phillipses knew that birders weren’t going to steal stuff and leave (pasture) gates open, they might let us out there.” Thus began the ranch’s birding program.

Maynard went on to create Chico Basin’s first printed checklist for birders, and he “used to write little two-paragraph articles on the ranch’s website” about birds and birding. “They let me go anywhere I wanted to.”

Aiken Audubon, National Audubon’s chapter in Colorado Springs, holds a “no-fee” lease to oversee birding and register visitors once the spring and fall migration birding periods open in late April and again in late August. (Those five-week slots will coincide with the banding station’s periods of operation.) Given the 20-birder daily limit, Aiken will try to schedule multi-birder group visits on weekdays to ease maxing out on weekends.

No room for every birder

Drummond foresees bumpy going and bruised feelings. “During hot birding weekends, you might easily get 20 birders, unless there’s a super rarity and then everybody will be upset because the first-comers will get there and then no more,” he predicts. “And last year, Chico Basin got put on the map by an American Birding Association website. A lot of out-of-state people were coming in, more than ever. ABA may have to put up a notice about the new restrictions.”

No one knows yet whether, on March 1, an actual physical gate will go up at the ranch’s iconic, wide-open north entrance — or if “NO TRESPASSING” or “NO BIRDING” signs will be posted to ward off the uninformed.

With 10 months left on their lease, it’s unlikely the Phillipses will physically bar entry. The land board already blindsided them when it arbitrarily chose to begin the new restrictions on birding and other non-ag uses as of March 1 instead of Dec. 31, 2024, when their lease formally expires.



Lapland Longspur in livestock water tank
location to be off-limits
Bill Maynard



Anna Joy Lehmickie with Northern
Saw-whet Owl at banding station
Bill Maynard



Rustic check-in kiosk for
birders at Chico Basin Ranch
Patrick O'Driscoll



Tony Leukering showing hummingbird
to children at banding station in 2006
Bill Maynard

LAST WORD, LAST LOOK

Drive. Stop. Bird. Repeat: Denver birders motor 2,000 miles through Argentine spring

Photos by Mark Amershek

Below: Some of the thousands of flamingos at Laguna
Mar Chiquita inland lake northeast of Cordoba



Patrick O'Driscoll

DFO member **Mark Amershek** has been around South America a bit. Of its 12 countries (13 if you count French Guiana, an “overseas department” of France), he has birded in seven, from Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Brazil, Bolivia and Peru in the north to the Patagonian reaches of Argentina, South America's second-largest nation (and the world's eighth-largest).

But until this fall, Mark hadn't visited Argentina's north, which shares a zig-zaggy boundary with Bolivia and borders Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Brazil, too. Nor had he covered as much birding territory on the ground as his Colorado-based tour group would on a three-week trek through northern Argentina to the Bolivian border this past October.

Once they had recovered from the 5,900-mile overnight flight Oct. 12 from Denver to Buenos Aires, the seven-member expedition (organized and led by expert Denver-area birder **Norm Erthal**) caught an hour-long flight inland Oct. 14 to the foothills hub of Córdoba. “And from there,” Amershek says, “it was basically driving, driving, driving, driving — north, north, north, north. We spent a lot of time in transit.”

Not that he's complaining. All the way up and back, they were stopping, stopping, stopping — and birding, birding, birding. With their van driver and guides, they logged more than 2,000 road miles — from the wide, paved, north-south spine of National

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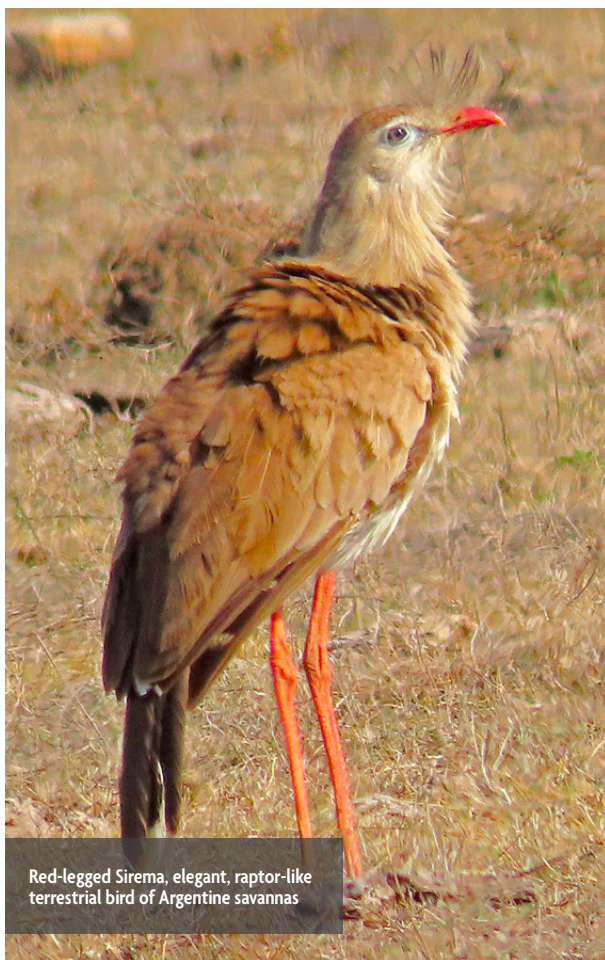
Red-face Guan, one of Mark's 65 lifers on the trip



Buff-breasted Wren



Jabiru, massive-billed stork of the tropics



Red-legged Sirema, elegant, raptor-like terrestrial bird of Argentine savannas

LAST WORD, LAST LOOK *cont from page 32*

Route 9 to lesser side roads and dirt and gravel tracks branching off into scrublands and wetlands, canyons and gorges, steppes, cloud forests and high Andean desert. And being south of the Equator, they were in the midst of Argentine spring, with lovely weather, flowers abloom, and birds everywhere.

They parked at vast, desert-basin lakes where tens of thousands of plovers and phalaropes shared the shallows with three kinds of flamingos. They crept along twisty canyon edges where Andean Condors (the world's largest birds of prey) swooped by at eye level. They hunkered together against the wind at a cairn of boulders marking a 15,000-foot pass through the Andes. "We never got skunked," Amershek says. "We always were getting good birds."

No kidding: Upon their return to Buenos Aires on Nov. 2 for the flight home, the group had recorded an astonishing 400 species on 179 eBird checklists. The birds ranged in size from the ostrich-like [Greater Rhea](#) (the continent's largest bird) to the [Red-tailed Comet](#), an Andean hummingbird spectacular even among exotic hummers. For Amershek, 65 of those species were new lifers, from the turkey-like [Red-faced Guan](#) to the intricately feathered [Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe](#).

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The group at 15,000-foot Andean pass. Mark Amershek is front right, in floppy hat.



Plush-crested Jay



Day 1 birding in downtown Buenos Aires, where flocks of parrots and thrushes flew

LAST WORD, LAST LOOK *cont from page 33*

But lifers and amazing tallies weren't the main point for Amershek. "I just love birds. I *love* birds," he says, having pursued them the length of the Western Hemisphere — from Nome, Alaska to Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego — since catching the birding bug just 14 years ago. He's already planning another three-week trek next autumn to Chile, where he was set to go in 2020 until the COVID-19 pandemic shut everything down. "It's going to be challenging," he says.

But first, a more immediate challenge: Sorting through and editing several hundred of the photos he took in northern Argentina. After his first swipe through them, Amershek shared with *The Lark Bunting* a tantalizing fraction of the images he made of the birds the Colorado group saw. From that Red-face Guan to the Red-tailed Comet, here's a gallery of some of Mark's best.



Red-tailed Comet, striking Argentine hummingbird



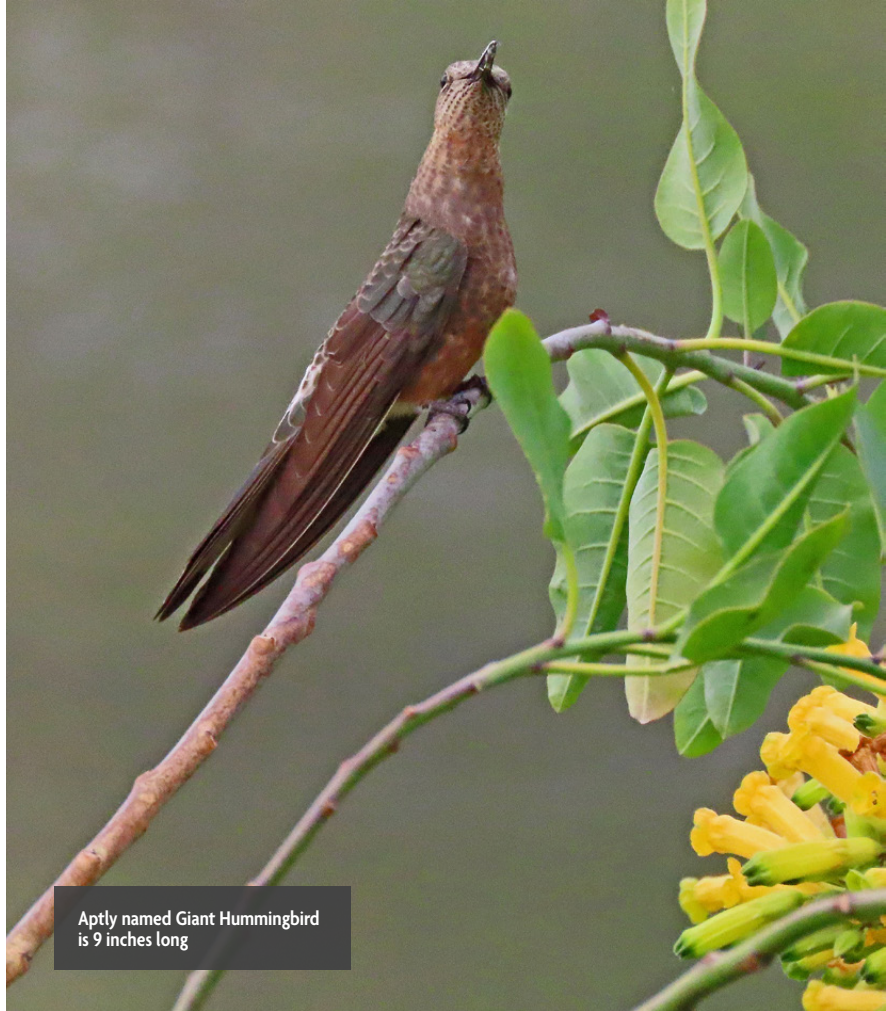
Blue and Yellow Tanager



Puna Teal, distinctive ducks of high Andes



White-tipped Plantcutter



Aptly named Giant Hummingbird
is 9 inches long



Lunch stop in Cafayate, a northwest
Argentine hub of vineyards



Road sign off the main highway



Weary Colorado birders await flight home from Buenos Aires airport



Until the next Lark Bunting . . .
HAPPY MID-WINTER BIRDING!

Andean Condor, world's largest
bird of prey, floats above canyon
just off Argentina's Highway 9