



# THE LARK BUNTING

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE DENVER FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

VOLUME 60 | ISSUE 12 | DECEMBER 2024

DFOBIRDS.ORG

## PTARMIGAN AWARD

Longtimer Ira Sanders  
wins DFO's top honor

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in pursuit of Sprague's

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**dfo**  
DENVER FIELD  
ORNITHOLOGISTS



Common Mergansers  
Rob Raker  
Chatfield State Park, Douglas Co



## ON THE COVER

# Common Merganser: uncommon beauty on our winter waters

**Patrick O'Driscoll**

A Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) in flight — or on this month's cover, seven of them — is a wondrous sight. Their streamlined bodily extension, sleek and stretched to the limit, stage-whispers one word: *SPEED*. The ones in contributing photographer **Rob Raker's** photo (taken in January 2021 at Chatfield State Park) look like avian sprinters, leaning together for the tape in a photo finish.

It's unmistakable when one or a few of them whisks by overhead. They make me smile every time. The largest of North America's three mergansers is called a "sea duck" by the Cornell Lab's Birds of the World, but we're fortunate to have them here in Colorado, far from the ocean, during the fall-winter non-breeding season. We get few in spring and summer breeding season, too.



**Robert Raker**, a DFO member since 2014, is a former environmental scientist, adventurer and filmmaker on many expeditions around the

world. Now retired, he enjoys birding and photography, rock-climbing and skiing.

One prolific female, somewhat famous locally, returned to Denver City Park every spring for at least five straight years to nest, including this year. The location of her tree cavity nest always escaped detection. She would turn up suddenly in late May on the park's Ferril Lake and adjacent Sediment Pond with a darling brood of 10-12 fuzzy ducklings. Park-goers thrilled as the young paddled single-file behind her, two or three riding on her back. The annual spectacle attested to the deep fidelity Common Merganser moms attach to nesting locations.

The ducklings were self-sufficient from the moment they reached water. But they were easy pickings for predators. The one or two that survived most years did so by growing too big to be swallowed by herons, fish and other dangers. Some years, no young made it. Twin pairs lived to fledge in 2023 and again this year.

Tragically, their mother became a victim herself last summer, somehow entangled in a sloppy angler's discarded fishing tackle. Despite well-meaning human attempts to rescue the ailing bird, she eluded their reach and nets. Within days, she lay dead in the lakeside grass, tied up in monofilament line with an orange fishing lure still attached. As if in tribute, her remaining two young tested their wings in late August and flew away to future adulthood.

Will one of them or another Common Merganser female return to City Park to carry on her tradition? It's doubtful but not impossible. She found City Park's urban island of habitat suitable for years, after all. Common Mergansers show up in winter from time to time. The dark-headed, red-billed merganser males and cinnamon-headed females are a striking contrast, diving for fish and crayfish amidst the park's winter flocks of Cackling Geese.

Fun fact: The species we sometimes call "merg" for short goes by a variety of nicknames across North America, from fish duck and sawbill to sheldrake and even "goosander." "Merganser" translates from Latin roughly as "plunging duck." I'll simply call the Common Merganser uncommonly beautiful.

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**Patrick O'Driscoll**, editor of *The Lark Bunting* since 2020, took up birding in his 50s. A retired newspaper journalist, he joined DFO in 2014 and became a field trip leader in 2016. In 2023, he received DFO's inaugural Peregrine Award for innovation



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*The Lark Bunting* newsletter of Denver Field Ornithologists is published online monthly at [dfobirds.org](https://dfobirds.org) except for joint issues in July–August and February–March.

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Submit original articles or story ideas to the editor at [patodrisk@gmail.com](mailto:patodrisk@gmail.com). 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.

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*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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- Ads do not carry over each month. To renew, resubmit by next deadline
- Available *only* to DFO members
- Deadline: last day of month except January and June (*The Lark Bunting* does not publish in February and July)

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

**Next deadline: Tuesday, Dec. 31, 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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directly, please contact them  
individually via the  
[DFO Leadership Page](#).





## FROM THE PRESIDENT

# Ready for DFO face-to-face time again? Come join us for a “Coffeehouse Chat”

### Sharon Tinianow

Those of you who attended our second Denver Field Ornithologists Volunteer Recognition Event on Oct. 19 (read the details on [page 13](#)) had that increasingly rare DFO experience — time to socialize with other birders, in person.

When DFO’s monthly meetings were in-person, such face-to-face interaction was commonplace. Each evening program gathering opened with half an hour of “social time.” Since we began meeting via Zoom because of COVID-19 — but continued to do so after the pandemic subsided — some members have expressed dismay at losing that monthly opportunity to meet old friends and make new ones.

At our Volunteer Recognition gathering, I got to chat with people I hadn’t seen in a while and met some new folks, too. A congenial buzz of conversation filled the room as we sipped coffee and snacked before the program. Everyone seemed to enjoy the social time as much as I did.



A few days earlier, several of us had a similar experience that might model another way for DFO members to meet and greet. The club’s Awards Committee met over coffee with **Peter Stoltz**, one of this year’s Meadowlark Award winners for his behind-the-scenes DFO volunteer work. A previous commitment prevented Peter from joining us at the Volunteer Recognition gathering, so we brought the award to him.

Over coffee and pastries at Denver’s Wash Perk coffeehouse, the informal award presentation became a lively chat about birding, DFO, and other shared interests. What a great opportunity it was to catch up with one another around a table instead of via Zoom! Peter even arrived half an hour early to do some sidewalk birding around the Washington Park neighborhood.

By the time we wrapped up this impromptu coffee klatsch, a consensus had brewed. “Let’s do this again!” we agreed. It was fun, and we realized how much we missed the social mix of in-person meetings.

DFO is searching for a solution to that dilemma: an affordable place to hold monthly program meetings together but still host them in real time via Zoom for those who can’t attend in person. That search continues.

In the meantime, I’m proposing a new, official but casual DFO function: **Coffeehouse Chats**. Let our mascot be the Yellow-breasted Chat, whose chatty array of seasonal [chirrs, rattles and squawks](#) catches birders’ ears along the Front Range.

On the **third Wednesday of each month**, we will meet at a different coffeeshop with a designated DFO host. All who attend are expected to patronize our meeting place, buying a drink or treat. We’ll choose locations close to Denver metro area parks and green spaces so attendees can go birding on their own before or after our meetup.

*Continued on page 6*

The point here is to meet and reconnect with DFO friends old and new. Bring something to talk about — a birding topic, a DFO question, something else timely and on your mind, bird-related or not — and spark a fun conversation.

We have set two dates for the end of 2024 and the start of 2025:

**Wednesday, Dec. 18, 8:30 a.m.**

**Wash Perk**

**853 E. Ohio Ave., Denver 80209**

RSVP to host **Sharon Tinianow** at [sharontinianow@gmail.com](mailto:sharontinianow@gmail.com)

**Wednesday, Jan. 15, 8:30 a.m.**

**St. Mark's Coffee House**

**2019 E 17th Ave., Denver 80206**

RSVP to host **Patrick O'Driscoll** at [patodrisk@gmail.com](mailto:patodrisk@gmail.com). (*Weather-permitting, join Pat in nearby Denver City Park an hour beforehand or afterwards for a gander at geese and waterfowl on the park's lakes*)

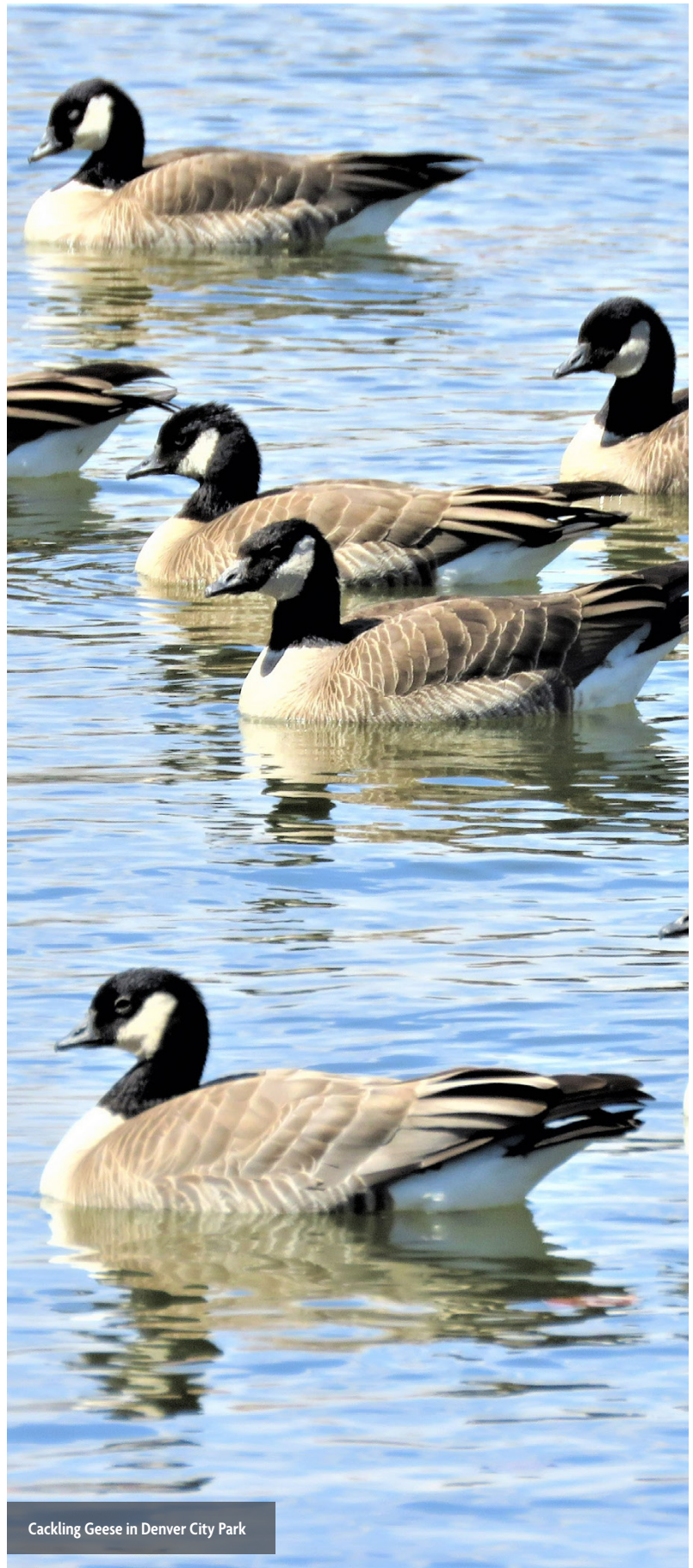
I invite you to attend one or both of these and consider hosting a future Coffeehouse Chat. There's certainly no shortage of friendly local coffeeshops in Denver and surrounding communities. So, who's up for hosting in February? Let's chat. Drop me a line by Jan. 1 and we'll set it up.

In the meantime, happy holiday birding, everyone!

— **Sharon**

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*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.*



Cackling Geese in Denver City Park





# As DFO turns 90, this newsletter will turn a new page to “journal”

**Patrick O'Driscoll**

Welcome to the final issue of *The Lark Bunting* as Denver Field Ornithologists' monthly newsletter. But we'll be right back in January as . . . *The Lark Bunting*, DFO's quarterly journal.

As mentioned in a couple of previous letters from the editor like this, our club is about to split its regular online publication in two. Starting in January, we will deliver you month-to-month news, announcements and updates — the need-to-knows of DFO life — via a new e-newsletter. At the same time, *The Lark Bunting* will step back and re-focus on the nice-to-haves — timeless birding features and accounts, essays, member profiles, photo galleries of the birds we love, and more — but on a less labor-intensive publishing schedule. In 2025 and thereafter, issues of *The Lark Bunting* journal will publish on the DFO website in January, April, July and October.

*The Lark Bunting's* magazine look and feel won't change, nor will its most thought-provoking features. From accounts (and snapshots) of memorable field trips and the lives of memorable DFO friends to articles and commentary on science, history and conservation, we pledge more “good reads” beyond the day-to-day and “now this” details.

That's because DFO will continue to share anything urgent, time-sensitive or coming-right-up in a new email newsletter that we're calling *DFO On the Wing*. Not unlike the birds we love, it will be on-the-fly, of the moment, and coming in for a landing — in your inbox. Whatever's happening in or around the club, *DFO On the Wing* will deliver: from upcoming program previews and club events to seasonal appeals, new field trips, new faces, new places, and more.

Editing this new monthly will be **Mike Fernandez**, chair of DFO's Communications & Outreach Committee and creator of DFO Digest, the monthly email that for the past two years has served as a club tipsheet in between issues of *The Lark Bunting*. In fact, Mike's recent experimentation with his mid-month update looks a lot like what our new e-newsletter will be. *DFO On the Wing* won't just replace the digest. It will reimagine and enhance it as your quick monthly must-read on all things DFO.

It's no coincidence that all this is taking place as our club prepares to mark its most significant birthday since it was founded as the Colorado Bird Club in 1935 and renamed Denver Field Ornithologists sixty years ago in 1964. Ninety years a club! In 2025, we'll celebrate in the digital pages of both DFO publications. Look for an affectionate and informative new four-part history of the club in our birthday year's quarterly issues of *The Lark Bunting*. And look for *DFO On the Wing* to keep abreast of events to commemorate this milestone for Colorado's oldest bird-related organization, from programs to field trips and more.

Finally, please accept our personal invitation to share with us whatever matters to you about birding and DFO. Got a story idea, or a gripe or a thumbs up? Tell Mike and me about it. Want to write something for the monthly or the quarterly yourself? Let us know. Almost no birding-related topic is off the table. *Operators are standing by!* A field trip memory, your view on a hot birding topic, your best bird photos from backyard to field trip to out-of-state and beyond? SHARE them all with me at [patodrisk@gmail.com](mailto:patodrisk@gmail.com) and with Mike at [comm@dfobirds.org](mailto:comm@dfobirds.org).

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**Patrick O'Driscoll**, editor of *The Lark Bunting* since 2020, took up birding in his 50s. A retired newspaper journalist, he joined DFO in 2014, became a field trip leader in 2016, and leads occasional trips in Denver City Park and other local destinations.

# 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](mailto:patodrisk@gmail.com).

## NEXT ON BIRD BOMBS: CHRISTMAS COUNT ID PREP!

The December installment of DFO's "BIRD BOMBS" species identification Zoom mini-webinars will review common Colorado bird ID challenges in preparation for the month's many Christmas Bird Counts across the state. "BIRD BOMBS: CBC Explosion!" is scheduled for **Thursday, Dec. 12, 7 p.m. MST**.

If you missed the most recent "BIRD BOMBS: Colorado ID Masters," the Zoom video will be available with all the other past programs on the [Denver Field Ornithologists YouTube channel](#). The series videos also are available in the [BIRD BOMBS video library](#) on the DFO website.

REGISTER FOR BIRD BOMBS

## EBIRD TAXONOMY UPDATE INCLUDES HERRING GULL X 4

As if gulls weren't already devilishly difficult to tell apart, the latest tweaks in the ranks of global bird taxonomy include splitting Herring Gull into four different flavors. That change leads eBird's [October announcement](#) that it has finished updating many millions of checklist records to reflect species splits, lumps and other revisions to bird species worldwide in 2024. For the record: eBird reports 3 newly described species, an increase of 11 species because of splits (and the loss of 16 through lumps), for a net rise in 128 species and a grand total of 11,145 bird species on the planet, in case you're thinking about a Global Big Year.

Our continent's default "local" will now be American Herring Gull (*Larus smithsonianus*). European (*Larus argentus*) and Mongolian (*Larus mongolicus*) will pertain to those

regions, and Vega (*Larus vegae*) breeds in Siberia. But gulls' general inclination to wander far and wide will make new identification a challenge, to say the least. (The Cornell Lab of Ornithology says the Herring Gull split alone resulted in revision of 7 million birding records, eBird's largest change ever.)

Other highlights: Barn Owl split into three species (*American Barn Owl* is the new name for ours), House Wren into seven (Northern House Wren is ours), and the three redpolls lump into one, now simply Redpoll. Finally, one esoteric but notable change caught our eye: The lookalike Cooper's Hawk and Sharp-shinned Hawk are splitting apart taxonomically. Cooper's, American Goshawk and seven other global species are leaving the genus *Accipiter* for *Astur*, a dormant designation resurrected to accommodate the "long-anticipated breakup" of the overbroad *Accipiter* group. ("Astur" is Latin for "hawk.") Sharpie, BTW, will remain a true *Accipiter*.

For the complete list of changes, visit eBird's [2024 update](#) webpage.



## HOW EBIRD REVIEW WORKS

Speaking of eBird, have you ever wondered how and why eBird reviewers accept some of your rare bird sightings but flag others with requests for more information? **Doug Hitchcock**, a veteran volunteer eBird reviewer in Maine, explains it all in his YouTube video, "[How eBird Review Works](#)." This info-packed, easy-viewing presentation flies by much faster than its 19 minutes and is worth watching, repeatedly. He explains the simple nuts-and-bolts mechanics of the review process, including filters that "know" to raise a flag if you report unusually large numbers or questionable locations of certain birds found in places and at times of the year that are dubious.

*Continued on page 9*

When reviewers like Hitchcock follow up via email, “I know how people can get really defensive when we’re just asking for a few more details . . . I can’t vouch for all of the reviewers out there, but we’re really just here to help you.” He admits one pet peeve: birders who dismiss a rare-bird flag by eBird for more details with an overused and annoying one-word response: “CONTINUING.” He notes: “You’d be amazed how many people report a sighting as ‘Continuing’ and later upload pictures of the wrong bird.”

Being an eBird reviewer “is a time-consuming and tedious process . . . and is largely thankless, and sometimes you deal with some really nasty people,” he adds. “Remember, we’re volunteers.”

To view more of Hitchcock’s eBird-related videos, visit his [YouTube channel](#). And a thank-you shoutout to **Diane Roberts** of the Denver Field Ornithologists Facebook Group page for first posting a link to this helpful video there in late October.



**HAPPY THANKSGIVING  
– GO WILD!**

Sandra Hoyle





## WINTER PROGRAM PREVIEW

# No Boundaries for Wildlife: Saving Tropical Birds in Colorado

Nic Korte  
Monday, Jan. 27, 2025  
7 p.m. MDT via Zoom

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER](#)

There's no missing the call to well-informed activism — especially where Mother Earth is concerned — in that familiar turn of phrase, “Think globally, act locally.” Longtime western Colorado wildlife conservationist **Nic Korte** suggests that North American birders try putting a Western Hemispheric twist to it: Think tropically, act locally.

Korte says he'll detail that in “*No Boundaries for Wildlife: Saving Tropical Birds in Colorado*,” his DFO evening program on Monday, Jan. 27, at 7 p.m. MST via Zoom webinar. Korte's presentation was originally scheduled for last August, but had to be postponed and now marks the first DFO program of the new year.

“Local actions here affect birds in the tropics,” Korte says, explaining his tropical focus. “Some of those birds spend part of their lives in Colorado. Avoiding palm oil in products you buy helps not just the birds whose year-round tropical habitat might be saved, but also birds that live part of the year here in North America.”

This is the time when birds familiar to us as spring migrants and summer nesters have departed for their neotropical fall and winter haunts in southern Mexico, Central and South America. Tanagers. Orioles. Grosbeaks. Buntings. Flycatchers. Warblers . . . not to mention every Swainson's Hawk on the planet.

Korte, a 40-year resident of Grand Junction, has been the conservation chair of Grand Valley Audubon Society for more than two decades and a board member for nearly three. He also leads the society's Western Screech-Owl observation project, with several hundred Grand Valley residents engaged in a community science effort with national status.

But Korte has also made more than 30 trips to the tropics. “I find the diversity of everything fascinating. There's so much to see, so many types of plants, butterflies, etc.” He even wrote a book, *Ten*

*Jungle Days* (Outskirts Press), that combines human and natural history, personal memoir and nature discovery travel in the Costa Rican rainforest. His encounters there include exotic amphibians, anteaters, climbing rats, spider monkeys and “the delightful siren call of extraordinary birds.”

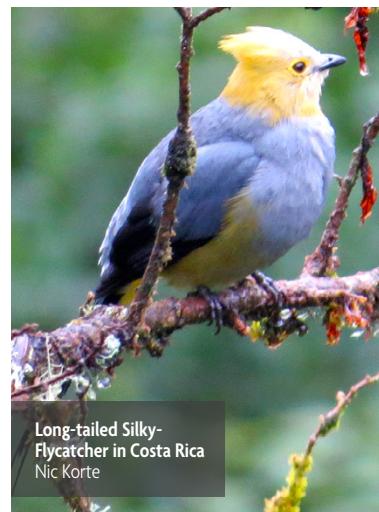
Korte says the aim of his DFO talk “is not to have people ‘know’ about the issues, but to inspire them to do something.” He thinks the fact that many of “our” birds spend more of their lives in the neotropics gives us a greater stake in their welfare there.

Growing up in the farmlands of rural southern Illinois, “I was always interested in birds,” Korte says, “but if you weren't harvesting something, whatever you were doing was considered wasteful. The only way to express outdoor interest then was hunting and fishing.”

Indoors, the family's 1956 edition of the *World Book Encyclopedia* revealed Nic's true interest. “The ‘B’ volume,” he says, “had several very worn pages — the pages on birds. I wore them out looking at them.”

He grew up to become a geochemist. But after graduate school, he worked at the University of Arizona in Tucson, “where I actually encountered birders” for the first time — and found a life's hobby.

In 2015, Korte received Bird Conservancy of the Rockies' Richard G. Levad Award for “distinguished service to the ornithological community.” In 2019, National Audubon awarded him its William Dutcher Award for “leadership in the birding community of Western Colorado.” Follow his blog at [Birds and More – Birding and Conservation in Western Colorado](#).





WINTER PROGRAM PREVIEW

# Colorado: We Need to Talk About Ravens

Nathan Pieplow  
Monday, Feb. 24, 2025  
7 p.m. MST via Zoom

CLICK HERE TO REGISTER

Colorado bird authority **Nathan Pieplow**, a frequent DFO speaker in past years, returns in 2025 to challenge and enlighten us on an unexpected topic for a man best known for his command of birdsong and bird sounds:

How do we tell Colorado's two raven species, Chihuahuan and Common, apart from each other? And why might we be doing a lousy job of it with some of the photographs we post to eBird?

Pieplow's presentation, "*Colorado: We Need to Talk About Ravens*" (**Monday, Feb. 24, 2025, 7 p.m. MST** via Zoom webinar), springs from reading a [recent article](#) by **David Sibley**, the renowned national birding artist and expert, in *North American Birds*, the journal of the American Birding Association. Pieplow says Sibley proposed that at least half, and maybe up to 90%, of photos submitted to eBird from Colorado as Chihuahuan Ravens might actually be Common Ravens. "If this is true," Pieplow adds, "then the conventional wisdom on raven status, distribution, and identification needs some serious revision."

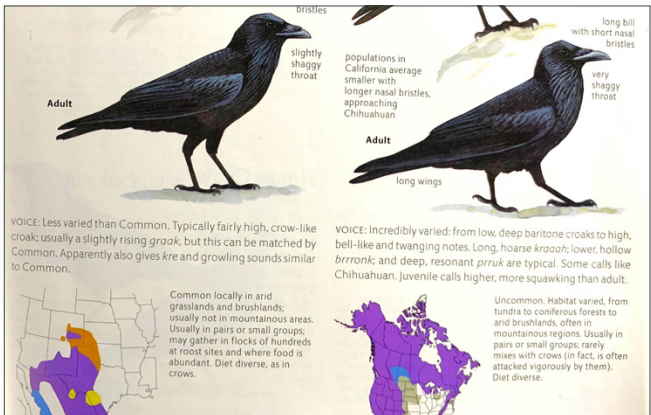
Pieplow will review what we know about ravens and how we know it, including Sibley's recent innovations in identification criteria and an in-depth listen to raven voices. Along the way, he'll talk about raven intelligence and what that means for their vocal communication. And he'll pose this question: "If we've been getting the ravens so wrong, what other accepted species records might need revisiting?"

He will also discuss how birding authorities validate unusual sightings in Colorado, including reports of Chihuahuan Ravens beyond the southeastern quarter of our state that is the northernmost part of the species' range.

A decade ago, Pieplow wrote about the role of voice in telling Chihuahuan and Common ravens apart in Colorado on [Earbirding](#), a bird-sounds blog he co-authored through the 2010s. Pieplow's most recent DFO appearance was in August 2022, when he entertained us with "The Best Bird Songs You've Never Heard" — his take on the unexpected and accomplished singing and sounds of unlikely species, from cormorants and vultures to House Sparrows.

Pieplow has been a determined student of bird sounds for more than two decades. He wrote the *Peterson Field Guide to Bird Sounds* (with separate volumes for western and eastern North America), and he is former editor of Colorado Field Ornithologists' quarterly journal, *Colorado Birds*. He is also an author of the [Colorado Birding Trail](#) website.

A native of South Dakota, Pieplow grew up fascinated by birds. Now based in Boulder, he is an assistant professor of writing and rhetoric at the University of Colorado Boulder.

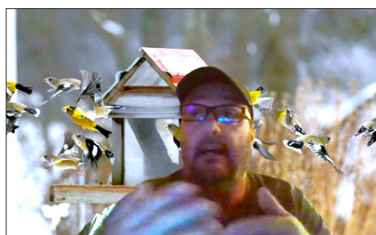


Chihuahuan Raven, left, and Common Raven, side by side in *The Sibley Guide to Birds*

## MONTHLY PROGRAMS

# If you missed it: DFO's October program

DFO keeps a video archive of our monthly fall, winter and spring programs. If you could not attend our most recent program live via Zoom, click the “WATCH ONLINE” link below to view the recording on [DFO's YouTube channel](#).



Screen grab from Matthew Young's presentation

OCTOBER 28

## Crossbills, the Finch Research Network, and the new Stokes Guide to Finches Matthew A. Young [Finch Research Network](#)

In this recording of DFO's Oct. 28 evening program, **Matthew A. Young** leads viewers through his 30-year love affair with finches. Not to be missed — and just four minutes into his presentation — is a mesmerizing two-minute video Young created for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. It shows White-winged Crossbills deftly prying seeds (up to 3,000 a day) from spruce cones, sometimes even breaking off the cylindrical cones to nibble at another perch, turning them as if eating corn-on-the-cob.

Besides crossbills (including Cassia Crossbills, thought isolated only to southern Idaho until Colorado birders found them here three years ago), Young details the work of his [Finch Research Network](#), updates the status of the continent's finch species (Hawaii's, too) and explores the alarming drop in Evening Grosbeak numbers, down 92% since 1970.

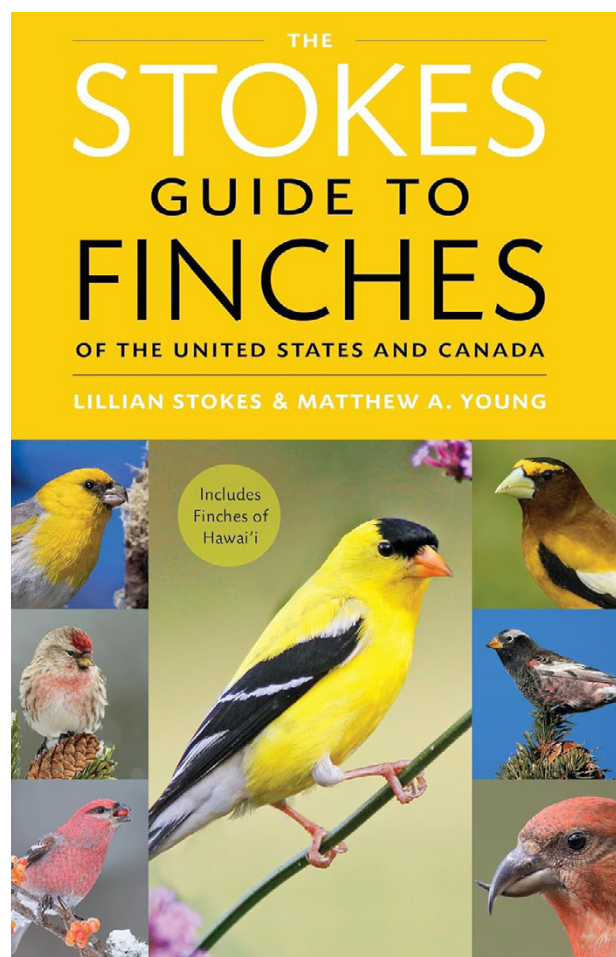
Later in his 78-minute presentation, he guides viewers through the comprehensive new *Stokes Guide to Finches of the United States and Canada* (Little, Brown, 352 pages, paperback, \$21.99), which he co-authored.

**WATCH ONLINE**



**zoom**

Thanks to DFO historian **Kris Haglund** for editing and posting videos of other past programs, which can be viewed on the DFO website's [Past Programs page](#).





# DFO veteran Ira Sanders heads list of volunteer honorees



Ira Sanders receiving Ptarmigan Award from DFO President Sharon Tinianow  
Patrick O'Driscoll



Tammy and Ira Sanders  
Patrick O'Driscoll

## Patrick O'Driscoll

A longtime DFO member known for his sharp birding eye and dry wit is the 30<sup>th</sup> recipient of Denver Field Ornithologists' highest honor, the Ptarmigan Award. **Ira Sanders** of Golden was recognized at DFO's Volunteer Recognition Event on Oct. 19 at Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge.

For the second year, DFO also presented its new honors for innovation and leadership (Peregrine Award) and behind-the-scenes volunteer contributions (Meadowlark Award). In addition, three organizers of DFO's Dinosaur Ridge Hawk Watch spring raptor count received special recognition, and every DFO volunteer in attendance received a DFO logo pin as a token of appreciation. The gathering opened with social time over midmorning beverages and snacks, and ended with a presentation of live birds and other wildlife by Colorado's own Nature's Educators conservation program.

Across more than three decades, Sanders has generously shared with DFO his board service, field trip leadership, legal expertise, and welcoming access to his birdy yard in the foothills of Golden. A trip leader for more than 20 years, Ira joined DFO in 1991 and will mark his 34<sup>th</sup> year in the club in 2025. Over the years he also has contributed to DFO's newsletter, *The Lark Bunting*. In 2009, he wrote a popular month-by-month series, "What Birds to Look for and Where to Look for Them," which he updated and repeated in the newsletter a decade later.

DFO President **Sharon Tinianow** presented Sanders a framed painting of a White-tailed Ptarmigan by DFO member **Joe Chen**. The

*Continued on page 14*



award inscription reads: *"For exceptional field trip leadership, steadfast board service, generosity with your legal expertise, and a delightful sense of humor that helped sustain DFO through the years."* The Ptarmigan Award recognizes extraordinary devotion of time and energy to the club, often over a lifetime.

Sanders expressed his thanks and acknowledged that his wife, **Tammy** (in the audience recording video of the moment), was there with him for nearly every DFO field trip over the years.

The Peregrine Award was presented posthumously to **John C. Breitsch**, a gifted birder, DFO field trip leader, and promoter of under-birded hotspots across metro Denver. Four days before his Aug. 12 death of cancer, DFO friends informed John of the honor and read to him the wording later etched on the awards plaque: *"For smart innovation, meticulous planning and selfless leadership of exceptional DFO field trips near and far, to the delight of all who birded with you."*

Two volunteers received the Meadowlark Award for years of unsung heroics:

**Jim Esten**, DFO web and Zoom administrator and photo editor of *The Lark Bunting* newsletter, was honored "for sharing your photography, running club webinars on Zoom, and ensuring the integrity of our website, enabling DFO to communicate effectively with Colorado's birding community."

**Peter Stoltz**, past DFO secretary, was recognized for vital technology contributions, including "introducing DFO to Zoom technology." His award certificate noted how "you mastered webinar programming, holding our club together remotely during COVID-19 and beyond."

In addition, three drivers of DFO's success running Colorado's only Hawk Watch raptor count were applauded for their efforts. Hawk Watch Committee chair **Natalie Uschner-Arroyo** presented custom-crafted American Kestrel lapel pins to:



*Continued on page 15*



Former DFO president **Dave Hill**, an accomplished bird-of-prey watcher who saved the raptor count from being abandoned. After previous Hawk Watch operators could no longer continue, he stepped in for DFO in 2020. Hill formed and chaired DFO's first Hawk Watch Committee, recruited volunteer watchers, and continues to teach the raptor ID webinar and site orientation each spring

**Janet Peters** and **Carol Cwiklinski**, who expanded Dinosaur Ridge Hawk Watch to involve paid experts to lead the daily counts in the field. Peters also served as committee chair and volunteer coordinator, and Cwiklinski supervised Hawk Watch's paid counting staff.

Tinianow thanked the event's planning committee, led by DFO volunteer coordinator **Phil Waltz** and including DFO Board members **Cyndy Johnson**, **Mary Geder**, **Susan Blansett** and **Patrick O'Driscoll**. She ended the presentations by recognizing field trip leaders also in the room. "It would not be DFO," Tinianow noted, "without field trips."



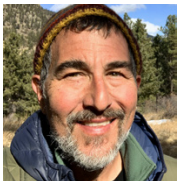
Top: Hawk Watch volunteers singled out for special thanks at Volunteer Recognition Event (Patrick O'Driscoll). Bottom left: Stylized American Kestrel pin awarded to Hawk Watch leaders. Bottom right: DFO logo lapel pin given to club's volunteers

## Ptarmigan Award laureates list

DFO's highest honor was created in 1988 to recognize Ruth Wheeler, then the last living charter member of the Colorado Bird Club, founded in 1935 and renamed Denver Field Ornithologists in 1964. Winners of the award include:

2024	Ira Sanders
2023	Ann Johnson
2018	Karen von Saltza Kayleen Niyo
2017	Mary Cay Burger
2016	Edmund J. Holub, Jr.
2015	Chuck Hundertmark
2014	Jackie King
2013	Joe Roller
2012	Joey Kellner
2009	Ann Bonnell
2007	Tina Jones
2005	Dick Schottler
2004	Norm Erthal
2002	Karleen Schofield
2001	Warren Finch Glenn Hageman
1997	Lynn Willcockson
1996	Duane Nelson Catherine A. "Birdie" Hurlbutt
1995	Patty Echelmeyer Bob Spencer
1994	Robert Andrews Bob Righter
1990	Hugh and Urling Kingery
1989	Jack Reddall Harold Holt
1988	Ruth Wheeler Thompson Marsh

Further details about each recipient are on the DFO website's [Ptarmigan Awards page](#).



FROM THE FIELD WITH DAVID SUDDJIAN

# A new wrinkle for new field trippers: meet DFO's first Rookie of the Year

## David Suddjian

Hundreds of Colorado birders sign up for Denver Field Ornithologists trips every year. All of them, from newbies to old hands, enhance our field outings with fresh birding perspectives, gifts and needs. Fortunately for DFO, many of them return again for more.

Whether they come back a few times or a lot (I like to call that second group our “frequent fliers”), repeat participants make DFO’s field trip program better. It’s not just their numbers — it’s their enthusiasm. I especially enjoy welcoming newcomers eager to immerse themselves in our shared passion for birds.

To honor that spirit, this year we’re naming the field trip program’s first “Rookie of the Year” — an individual new to DFO field trips (whether new to birding or not) whose participation on multiple outings has enriched everyone’s experience.

Introducing the 2024 DFO Rookie of the Year: **Ryan Corda** of Denver!

Ryan began birding just last winter and signed up for his first DFO field trip in March. By late November, he’d become DFO’s most frequent flier of 2024, joining FORTY-THREE field trips! Ryan’s kind and friendly manner was evident from the start. So was his budding skill as a birder, frequently spotting new birds for the group. His thoughtful questions of experienced birders on the trail help everyone learn. And on many of our day-long outings, Ryan volunteers to drive for the carpool, a generosity that helps make out-of-town trips possible for any and all.

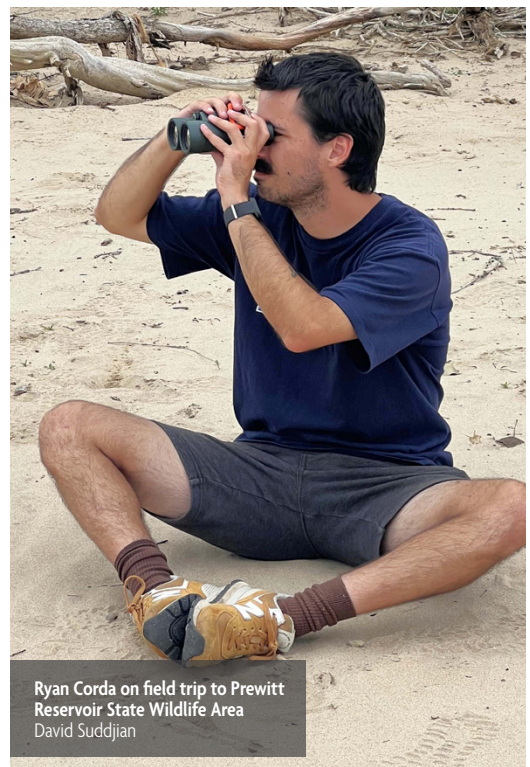
I invited Ryan to share with you his rookie-year experience in DFO:

*Last December, I began to pay a little attention to birds and submitted a couple of incidental eBird checklists from my backyard. My interest turned to real appreciation in January, when I started birding properly. In February, I went on a couple of walks with other birding organizations. But I didn’t really find my place until, just by happenstance, I came across DFO’s website. All those field trips!*

*My first was a March 9 outing led by **Charlie Chase** along the South Platte River near Denver’s water treatment plant. That super-interesting waterfowl study was also a neat introduction to the unorthodox places where you can find birds. Shortly thereafter, I joined a couple of trips led by **David Suddjian** to a few parks in Littleton (my first encounters with Merlin and Virginia Rail) and to the town of Louviers in Douglas County (a crazy number of Blue Jays).*



Ryan Corda on field trip  
at Beaver Ranch Park  
David Suddjian



Ryan Corda on field trip to Prewitt  
Reservoir State Wildlife Area  
David Suddjian

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DFO Rookie of the Year field tripper Ryan Corda, third from left, on trip to Ken Caryl Ranch  
David Suddjian

*Just three trips and I was totally hooked! Since then, I've tried to catch every field trip I can, from Larimer County to Las Animas, from the Front Range to the eastern Plains. Some of these outings went so far afield that I saw parts of Colorado I'd never have visited otherwise. And watching David's "BIRD BOMBS" bird ID presentations was totally invaluable preparation for many of my field trips.*

*Here are a few more highlights of my first field-tripping year with DFO:*

- *A Long-billed Curlew in Lincoln County, seen unexpectedly as we looked for Mountain Plovers*
- *Flushing a female Northern Bobwhite by accident as we tracked her with telemetry at Tamarack Ranch SWA*
- *The calls of Common Poorwills and the fun and frustration of trying to ID Empidonax flycatchers*
- *Learning the history of Colorado's Ludlow and Sand Creek massacres on Birds Plus+ field trips (I can't wait for more)*
- *A pair of Juniper Titmice that complicated our eBird checklists by hopping over the Las Animas-Huerfano county line*
- *Being surrounded by Red-headed Woodpeckers near Prewitt Reservoir*
- *Hearing the song of a Hermit Thrush for the first time*

*My favorite part of all was the people: super-welcoming and helpful participants, and passionate and informative trip leaders who were also great teachers. I can't say thank you enough.*

— Ryan Corda

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**David Suddjian**, DFO Field Trip chair since 2021, has led more than 540 club outings. He came to Colorado in 2013 from his native California. He organized the club's 2018 "Big Year" and created the "BIRD BOMBS" mini-webinar series on bird ID. David received DFO's inaugural Peregrine Award for innovation in 2023.

# ♪ *Christmas is coming,* ♪ *the geese are getting fat . . .* Help count them to celebrate that!

## Joey Kellner

The 70<sup>th</sup> Denver Christmas Bird Count, part of the continent-wide annual tally sponsored by National Audubon, is set for **Saturday, Dec. 14**. All are encouraged to participate, from beginning birders to experts and everyone in between. And it's free!

"Fees? None! So, no excuses," says count leader and compiler **Joey Kellner**, a longtime DFO member and field trip leader. "Come have a great time and help us count birds!"

The Denver CBC, which is conducted inside a 15-mile diameter circle over most of southwest metro Denver, is one of several along the Front Range. It is centered roughly between Ken Caryl and Columbine and bounded by Green Mountain on the north, Littleton east, Douglas County above Louviers on the south and Jefferson County foothills communities west (*see map*). It also includes Chatfield State Park and several major reservoirs. Each of the 24 count zones has an area leader (*see numbered list*). Teams assigned to each will canvass for species and numbers.

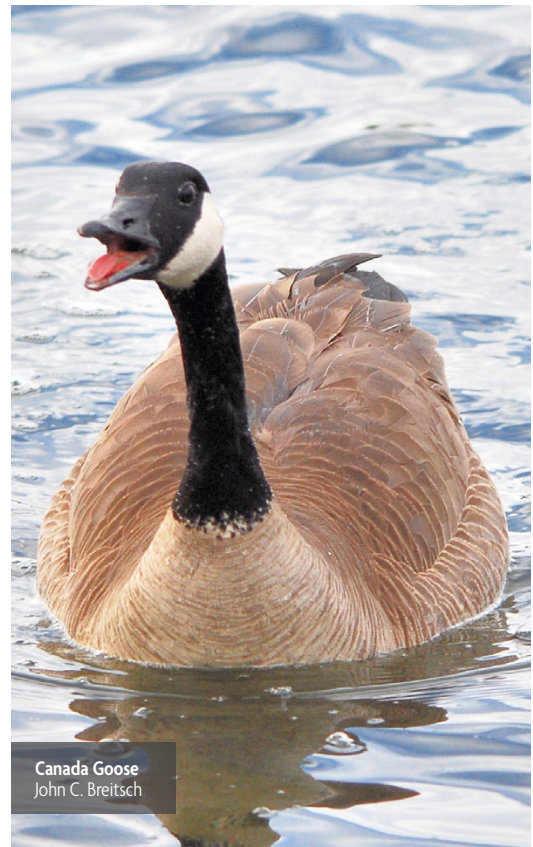
Another Denver count — *Urban Denver*, centered east of downtown and containing a bit of Aurora — takes place on New Year's Day 2025. That count is near the end of the roughly three-week window in which thousands of Audubon CBCs occur across the continent.

Depending on area, the suburban Denver count may last half a day or until day's end. But participants are free to come for however long they like. Afterwards, all participants are invited to attend the annual compilation meeting to warm up, chat with other birders, and see how the count went.

This year's post-count meetup is set for approximately 5 p.m. MST in the multipurpose room of Chatfield State Park headquarters, on the south-central side of Chatfield Reservoir near the park's Heronry Overlook. Access is via the park entrance off South Wadsworth Boulevard. A reminder that at state parks, a **vehicle entry pass is required**, and carpooling is encouraged.

To sign up for a count that interests you, see the map of numbered count areas. Then go to the list of count leaders and area names, find the one that corresponds to the numbered area you want to join, and call or email the leader. If you want Kellner to assign you to a less in-demand area that needs additional observers, contact him at [swdenverbirding@gmail.com](mailto:swdenverbirding@gmail.com) or 303-978-1748. Any other questions? Contact Kellner for answers, too.

The count also includes stationary participants who compile species and numbers visiting their bird feeders at home within the count circle. To join this feeder count, contact feeder coordinator **Bob Shade** at [wrshade3@gmail.com](mailto:wrshade3@gmail.com). Feeder watchers will be asked to send Bob their lists of species and numbers of each species as soon as possible after "count day."

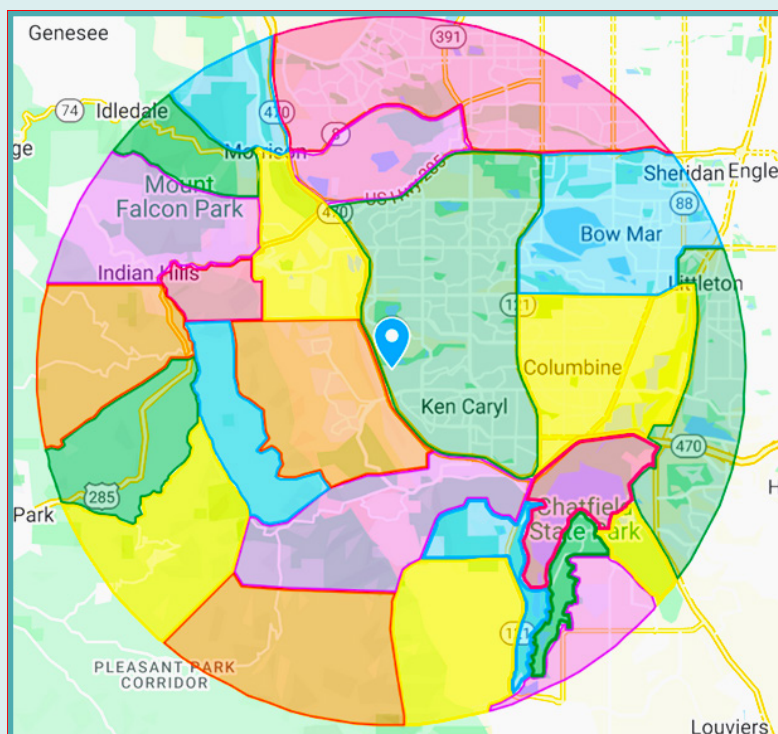


*Continued on page 19*



AREA	NUMBER AND LOCATION	AREA LEADER	CONTACT INFO
1.	Red Rocks Park	Gregg Goodrich	303-655-9135
2.	Lower Bear Creek	Scott Somershoe	615-829-3573
2A.	Bear Creek Lake Park	Cyndy Johnson	303-378-1335
3.	Bow Mar/Marston	Mary Geder	303-981-8823 or <a href="mailto:mfg5000@live.com">mfg5000@live.com</a>
4A.	Lower South Platte – East	Cole Sage	<a href="mailto:colesage03@gmail.com">colesage03@gmail.com</a>
4B.	Lower South Platte – West	Steve Larson	<a href="mailto:woodcreeper29@comcast.net">woodcreeper29@comcast.net</a>
5.	Highline Ditch	Nancy Crews	303-842-2833
6.	Plum Creek	Norm Erthal	303-917-2596
7A.	Middle South Platte – West	Sue Summers	253-678-3721 or <a href="mailto:summerssue@hotmail.com">summerssue@hotmail.com</a>
<b>7B.</b>	<b>Middle South Platte - East</b>	<b>Leader Needed</b>	
8.	Chatfield Reservoir	Joey Kellner	303-978-1748
9.	Upper South Platte **	Jill Holden	720-288-4018
10.	Lower Deer Creek (Chatfield Farms)	Barbra Sobhani	<a href="mailto:barbramaher@comcast.net">barbramaher@comcast.net</a>
11.	Upper Deer Creek	Wes Donnell	720-648-7305 or <a href="mailto:wdonnell7584@gmail.com">wdonnell7584@gmail.com</a>
12.	Yegge Peak	Cynthia Madsen	303-770-6534
13.	Doublehead Mountain	Amy Davis	<a href="mailto:amyjaned21@hotmail.com">amyjaned21@hotmail.com</a>
14.	North Turkey Creek	Ed Furlong	303-956-8321
15.	Indian Hills	Ryan Dibala	<a href="mailto:ryan@gobirdingman.com">ryan@gobirdingman.com</a>
16.	Upper Bear Creek	Laura Steadman	<a href="mailto:lauramsteadman@gmail.com">lauramsteadman@gmail.com</a>
17.	Ken Caryl Ranch	David Suddjian	<a href="mailto:dsuddjian@gmail.com">dsuddjian@gmail.com</a>
<b>18.</b>	<b>Garrison Gate</b>	<b>Leader needed</b>	
19.	Morrison / Willowbrook	Chris Gilbert	804-214-1508
20.	Willow Creek	Dale Pate	575-706-4584
21.	Mount Lindo/Willow Springs	Chris Sherry	303-807-3645

\*\* To participate in area 9 / Upper South Platte, you must contact the area leader no later than **Monday, Nov. 25**





## SUPPORTING DFO

# Last call: Annual membership renewal is also a great time to donate to DFO

How's that end-of-year checklist looking? No, not your eBird checklist — rather, that to-do list of yours before 2024 becomes last year's news. If it still includes renewing your DFO membership, push it to the top and get to it. Current memberships expire on **Dec. 31, 2024**. Renewing now is as easy as a couple of clicks on the membership [renewal page](#) of the DFO website.

While you're at it, how about making a donation or two to DFO, Colorado's oldest birding organization. Did you know our club turns 90 in 2025? How about an early birthday gift to our citizen science project, the DFO Dinosaur Ridge Hawk Watch raptor count? Or a contribution to DFO's Research, Conservation & Education Grant Fund for worthy outside projects to benefit knowledge, science and conservation of Colorado birds and their habitat?

Last month's issue included a more detailed appeal for the grants fund. This month, we're also featuring Hawk Watch and Colorado Gives Day, the statewide charitable giving day (**Tuesday, Dec. 10**) that includes DFO for the second year.

Read on for more details on each — and give 'til it helps!

## SUPPORTING DFO

# Colorado Gives: DFO's on list again for Dec. 10 donate-aganza

### Mike Fernandez

In 2023, Denver Field Ornithologists joined [Colorado Gives Day](#), the nonprofit fundraising effort that provides grassroots donors an online directory of more than 1,600 charitable, nonprofit organizations across the state. With this year's day of donations set for **Tuesday, Dec. 10**, consider using it to make an extra donation to DFO. While you're at it, share DFO's direct Colorado Gives link (below) with friends and family to increase the response, won't you?

Since 2010, Colorado Gives has helped raise more than \$415 million for community organizations of every kind. Its one-stop-shopping convenience online allows donors to contribute easily and securely to all their favorite Colorado causes.

This 24-hour focused appeal between Thanksgiving and the Christmas-Hannukah-Kwanzaa holidays is coming up fast, but early giving is already underway at [DFO's page](#) on the Colorado Gives website.

Although DFO's finances are in good shape, we joined Colorado Gives last year to boost income so we can enhance our club offerings, including the Hawk Watch raptor-counting project each spring on Dinosaur Ridge. And DFO's first-year results on Colorado Gives Day 2023 exceeded our expectations: \$2,950 in donations.

Contributing via Colorado Cares is easy and convenient. Visit the [Giving Methods](#) page on the [Colorado Gives](#) website to donate using any of nine different ways to make one-time or recurring payments. While you're on DFO's Colorado Gives page, consider also clicking the link to "[Share This Organization](#)" by email or on social media (Facebook, X/Twitter) with family and friends. It brings up a draft email or Facebook or X/Twitter posts with content about use. You can also simply share the [DFO page link](#) in your email to friends.

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*A DFO member since 2014, **Mike Fernandez** edits the mid-month DFO Digest and is Communications & Outreach Committee chair. He is a retired Interior Department communications manager.*



Hawk Watchers scanning for raptors from Dinosaur Ridge  
Janet Peters



Bald Eagle  
John C. Breitsch



Ferruginous Hawk  
John C. Breitsch

## SUPPORTING DFO

# Donate NOW to Hawk Watch, and your gift doubles with secret donor's match

### Natalie Uschner-Arroyo

If you're renewing your membership with Denver Field Ornithologists, thank you! While you're at it, please consider making an additional year-end, tax-deductible donation to the DFO Hawk Watch Fund on the matching-grant page of the Colorado Gives website.

This year, DFO's Dinosaur Ridge Hawk Watch program has a chance to *double* all donations through **Dec. 31**. An anonymous family foundation will match every donation to Hawk Watch, dollar-for-dollar, between now and year's end at the link above.

Since DFO took over management of the Dinosaur Ridge raptor count in 2020, the program has grown into a vibrant volunteer community science project. Your donation goes directly to compensate field biologists who serve as chief hawk counters and observers. They in turn share the skills they hone on raptor ID with DFO's corps of volunteers who help with daily counts on the ridge each spring. Some of the funds also go to Hawk Watch educational programming to increase awareness about raptor migration and conservation.

Some off-season personnel notes:

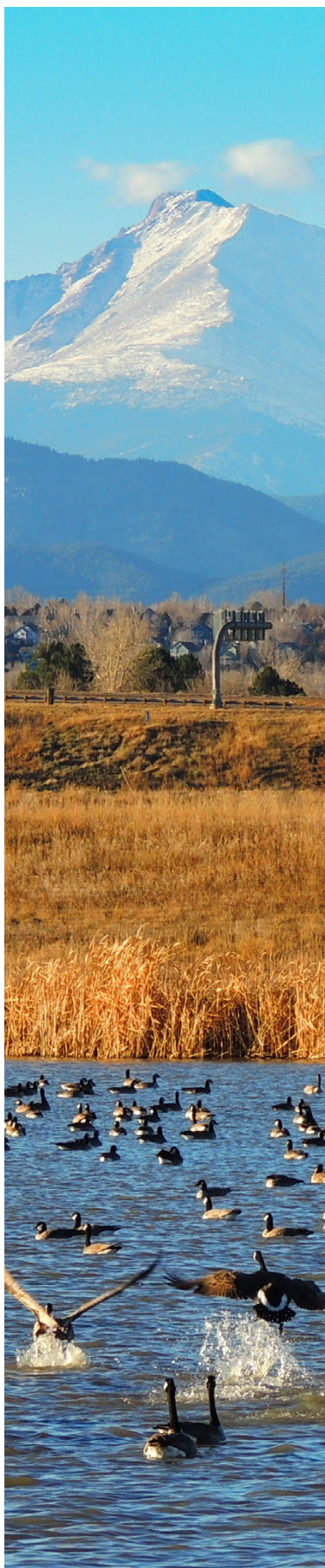
- Lead counter and project lead **Emma Riley** will return for the 2025 season. She spent time in 2024 as an avian technician conducting bird mortality surveys on a wind farm
- **Dustin Kohler**, lead counter in 2024, went on to become an avian field tech in Wyoming for Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
- 2024 weekend observer **Audrey Anderson** is now assistant hawk counter and Monarch Butterfly biologist at Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory in Kiptopeke

An upcoming calendar note: Registration for the Dinosaur Ridge Hawk Watch training opens **Friday, Dec 20** at the Hawk Watch link on the [DFO website](#).

**DONATE TO HAWK WATCH HERE!**

*Natalie Uschner-Arroyo is interim chair of DFO's Hawk Watch Committee*





## SUPPORTING DFO

# 'Tis the season . . . for tax-free giving

### Roger Koester

When we give holiday presents to loved ones, they enjoy the gifts and we get positive feelings, too. It's the same with gifts to favorite causes, charities and even a certain nonprofit birding organization we're all familiar with. At this giving time of the year, there's also the extra benefit of a year-end tax break for such charitable giving.

For those of us age 73 or older who are required by law to take a minimum distribution each year from our retirement savings, there's an even better reason to give. When we make those mandatory withdrawals from our Individual Retirement Accounts (IRA), we pay income tax on that money.

But if we donate some or all the money in those "required minimum distributions" (RMD) from our IRAs directly to a qualified nonprofit, we pay no income tax on them. And yes, Denver Field Ornithologists is a qualified nonprofit. (By the way: People in this instance can make these direct donations any time during the year, whenever they take an RMD.)

Pardon the alphabet salad, but here's one more abbreviation: QCD, or "qualified charitable distribution." That's what this kind of donation is. So if you are now required because of age to take an RMD this year (tax year 2024), make some or all of it a QCD to a nonprofit charity, it's tax-free. You get to exempt that donated amount from your taxable income.

If this sounds complicated (it is not), get this: You don't even have to itemize your taxes to do this! Make a QCD with some or all of that RMD from your IRA, and that dollar-for-dollar direct reduction of your taxable income is A-OK . . . for your taxes and for DFO (or any other qualified nonprofit).

One important caveat to remember: Whatever amount you choose to contribute to charity as a QCD *must* be donated from your IRA *directly* to a qualified nonprofit. Do NOT withdraw the money first and then donate it to DFO, because that does NOT qualify for the tax exemption. Donations must be direct from your IRA to the nonprofit recipient.

A final note: Additional restrictions may apply for some individuals. To learn more about whether and how it might apply to you or not, contact your tax adviser or retirement provider first, *before* you donate.

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**Roger Koester**, a DFO member since 2018, is Finance Committee chair and a member of the DFO Board. Before retiring, he worked in student financial aid for several universities and was active in national, state, and regional professional associations.

# Welcome to new DFO members

Isabelle Busch of Fort Collins; Peter, James, Kelly, Will and Lucy Dinneen, Denver; Troy and Edward Donnan, Denver; Michael Eagen and Elaine Cooksey, Denver; Tom Kajiwaru, Brighton; Spencer and Brandy Margeson, Aurora; Jenine and Sandy Mathia, Denver; Steve Matthews, Golden; Sharon Tanaka, Littleton

# Thank you for your contribution

## Research, Education and Conservation Grants Fund

Renee and Dan Brachear; Nicole Callaway; Kevin Corwin; Doris Cruze; Roy Hohn; Andrew Michelle Husko; Roger Koester; Kathanne Lynch; Jenine and Sandy Mathias; Joyce Michael; Linda Purcell and Billy A. Harris Jr.; Niña Routh; Betsy Rumely; Jason Sell, Evan Sell and Patricia Kuzma Sell; Nancy and Bob Stocker; Mary Zick

## Friends of DFO

Nicole Callaway; Kevin Corwin; Doris Cruze; Roy Hohn; Laura Hollenbaugh; Roger Koester; Barry and Donna Levene; Winston Liu; Jenine and Sandy Mathias; Joyce Michael; Victoria Miles; Linda Purcell and Billy A Harris Jr.; Mary Beth Searles; Lynn Slaga; Kenneth Arroyo and Natalie Uschner-Arroyo

## DFO's Dinosaur Ridge Hawk Watch

Mary Ann Bonnell; Kevin Corwin; Doris Cruze; Roy Hohn; Darcy Juday; Kathanne Lynch; Jenine and Sandy Mathias; Jean McClenathen; Joyce Michael; Lori Morton



Downy Woodpecker  
John C. Breitsch



Northern Shrike  
John C. Breitsch





FIELD TRIPS IN FOCUS

# October DFO trips *In Focus*

Fall migration DFO field trips in October 2024 included 19 outings on which birders reported 145 species. Participants on 15 of those trips took pictures of “birders birding” as photographic history for our 89-year-old club. If you’re on DFO outings in November and December, please take a few shots of your fellow birders and send us the best for the next issues of *The Lark Bunting*. Send .JPG or .PNG photo files of birders in the field, with date/location of trip and any individual IDs (if needed), to editor **Patrick O’Driscoll** at [patodrisk@gmail.com](mailto:patodrisk@gmail.com). Deadline for our January 2025 issue is **Tuesday, Dec. 31**. Thanks!

OCTOBER 1

## Deer Creek White-throated Swift Watch (Jefferson)

### Leader

David Suddjian

### Participants

Michelle Trotter, Mary Ramsey, Shai Ronen,  
Michelle Verostko, Bonnie Prado, Paula Rosson

Swifties of a different sort — birders watching as many as 250 White-throated Swifts return to their fall migration night roost in the sandstone wall of the Lyons hogback above Deer Creek — zero in during Oct. 1 evening outing  
(David Suddjian)



OCTOBER 2-3

## Birds + History, Southeastern Colorado (Lincoln, Crowley, Otero, Kiowa, Bent, Prowers, Cheyenne counties)

### Leaders

David Suddjian and Linda Purcell

### Participants

Ryan Corda, Jennifer and Robert Tonge, Kenneth Stuckey,  
Betsy Goodwin, Virginia Gulakowski, Dawn Baudek-Smith,  
Kris Saucke, Ian de la Rosa

Morning start at Box Springs Pond in Crowley County during Oct. 2-3 Birds + History excursion across 7 counties in SE Colorado. It included a history visit and birding at Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site in Kiowa County  
(Ryan Corda)

*Continued on page 25*



OCTOBER 4

## Ponderosa Preserve (Arapahoe)

### Leaders

Cynthia Pederson Cestkowski and Gary Witt

### Participants

Elizabeth Fischer, Susan Blansett, Linda Cunico,  
Ethan Cleveland, Sandy Mathias

Out in the grasslands Oct. 4 at Ponderosa Preserve in Aurora on  
Cynthia Pedersen Cestkowski's first time leading a DFO field trip  
(Gary Witt)



OCTOBER 4

## Deer Creek White-throated Swift Watch (Jefferson)

### Leader

David Suddjian

### Participants

Nadiyah Watts, Scott Levine, Chip Dawes,  
Andrea Duran, Lisa Forte

Field trippers lean back for better view on encore Oct. 4 outing  
to view about 100 White-throated Swifts arriving at their night  
roost in a crack in the sandstone wall above Deer Creek  
(David Suddjian)



OCTOBER 5

## South Republican Wildlife Management Area and Pipit Hill (Kit Carson, Yuma, and Cheyenne, KS)

### Leader

Gary Witt

### Participants

Winston Liu, Anne Craig, Dave Prentice, Susan  
Blansett, Betsy Goodwin, Archer Silverman, Peter  
Burke, Helen Butts, Linda Purcell, Ian de la Rosa

Birders move through fields near Yuma County's Pipit Hill  
on Oct. 5 field trip in search of the area's namesake species  
(Linda Purcell)



*Continued on page 26*





OCTOBER 6  
**Beaver Ranch Park**  
(Jefferson)

**Leaders**  
Gigi Zarzuela and David Suddjian

**Participants**  
Lorraine Dixon-Jones, Martha Strickland,  
Sarah Feigelson, Michelle Trotter, Nathan Crow,  
Morgan Kahle, John Batt, Nadiyah Watts,  
Becky Russell, Linda Klumpers

A trailside pause to scan for birds during Oct. 6  
field trip to Beaver Ranch Park in Conifer  
(David Suddjian)

OCTOBER 11  
**Barr Lake State Park Bird**  
**Banding Station**  
(Adams)

**Leader**  
Charlie Chase

**Participants**  
Lisa Bardwell, Martha Strickland, Michelle Trotter, Cindy  
Bouldin, Michelle Verostko, Joseph Margoshes, Sharon  
Kelly, Adam Silver, Brittany and Chad Van Soest

DFO field trippers surround bird bander Meredith McBurney on  
Oct. 11 trip to Barr Lake State Park banding station as she retrieves  
a White-crowned Sparrow from a mist net  
(Sharon Kelly)



OCTOBER 12  
**South Republican WMA**  
**and Pipit Hill**  
(Yuma, and Cheyenne, KS)

**Leader**  
Gary Witt

**Participants**  
Jennifer and Robert Tonge, Debbie and Tom Behnfeld,  
Timothy Condon, Cynthia Breidenbach, Julia Gwinn, Matthew  
Fast, Luke Jaramillo, Judy McKeon, Laura Hollenbaugh

Oct. 12 field trippers to Pipit Hill in Yuma County  
pose for group selfie by trip leader  
(Gary Witt)



*Continued on page 27*





OCTOBER 18

## Rampart Range Road (Jefferson)

### Leader

David Suddjian

### Participants

Ryan Corda, Kenneth Stuckey, Coreen Spellman,  
Dave Prentice, Christopher Curwen, Kris Saucke, Thomas Forre

Field trippers surveying along Highway 67 in  
Jefferson County's Rampart Range on Oct. 18 DFO outing  
(Dave Prentice)

## OCTOBER 19 Bluff Lake Nature Center (Denver)

### Leader

George Ho

### Participants

Scott Levine, Nadiyah Watts, John Collins,  
Kris Tita, Nicole Callaway, Lynn Sauer

First-time field trip leader George Ho, during his  
group outing to Bluff Lake Nature Center in Denver  
(Nadiyah Watts)



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OCTOBER 20  
**Fairmount Cemetery /  
High Line Canal**  
(Denver)

**Leader**  
Jason Bidgood

**Participants**  
Scott Hammel, Lisa Seiler, Kathy Kunc,  
Jeanne Marie Dillon, Virginia Gulakowski,  
Michelle Trotter, John Batt, Phil Waltz

Birders pursue Dark-eyed Juncos in Denver's Fairmount Cemetery Oct. 20 on field trip that included High Line Canal  
(Jason B. Bidgood)

OCTOBER 20  
**Chatfield State Park  
in the afternoon**  
(Arapahoe)

**Leader**  
David Suddjian

**Participants**  
Ryan Corda, Alice Tariot, John Batt, Victoria Miles,  
Cassandra Stroud, Tedford Luck, Timothy Condon,  
Jenny Germano, Jill Engel-Cox

DFO field trippers scan Chatfield Reservoir during  
afternoon outing Oct. 20 at Chatfield State Park  
(Ted Luck)



OCTOBER 24  
**Park County reservoirs**  
(Park)

**Leaders**  
Joe Tuttle and David Suddjian

**Participants**  
Ryan Corda, Bonnie Prado,  
Luke Jaramillo, Coreen Spellman, Debra  
Strike

On his first DFO outing as a trip leader,  
Joe Tuttle leads Oct. 24 field trippers on return trek  
across dry lakebed after scanning numerous waterbirds  
on Spinney Mountain Reservoir in Park County  
(Ryan Corda)



*Continued on page 29*



OCTOBER 27  
**Robert A. Easton Regional  
Park, Littleton**  
(Jefferson)

**Leader**  
Amanda Baker

**Participants**  
David Suddjian, Jeanne Marie Dillon, Lisa  
Seiler, John Batt, Shay Lyons, Jennifer  
Schripsema, Linda Klumpers

Amanda Baker, center, starts her first trip as a DFO  
leader Oct. 27 at Hine Lake in Robert A. Easton  
Regional Park  
(David Suddjian)



OCTOBER 27  
**Prospect Park / Wheat Ridge  
Greenbelt**  
(Jefferson, Douglas)

**Leader**  
Gigi Zarzuela

**Participants**  
Morgan Kahle, Marie Mager, Martha Strickland,  
Cyndy Johnson, Kris Tita, Nicole Callaway,  
Patricia Kuzma Sell, Lynn Slaga, Julia Auckland

Oct. 27 field trippers scan Bass Lake flock of 30 Gadwall from  
viewing blind during Gigi Zarzuela's monthly DFO outing to  
Wheat Ridge Greenbelt  
(Gigi Zarzuela)



## CONSERVATION

# Denver Parks & Rec moves to revive City Park cormorants' nesting colony

**Patrick O'Driscoll**

On Sept. 23, the first workday of autumn 2024, chainsaws roared in wooded parts of Denver City Park as crews trimmed hazard trees and cleared branches snapped by windstorms. Just another day in the maintenance of the city's largest park.

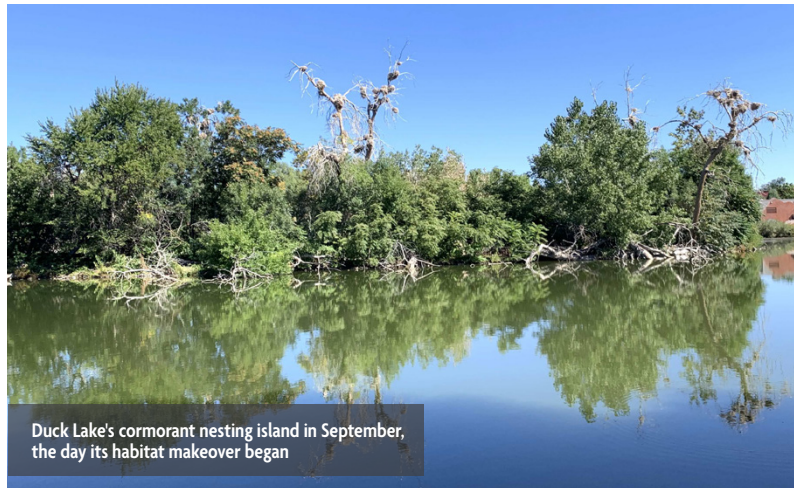
But away from that ruckus, hard-hatted workers in a small boat shoved off from the south shore of the park's Duck Lake on a different task. They paddled 50 yards to the large, brushy island that dominates the small lake. Once ashore, they unloaded their own chainsaws and went to work.

An ambitious effort is underway to revive Duck Lake, the site of an enduring urban wildlife attraction for birders and non-birders alike: hundreds of Double-crested Cormorants courting, breeding, nesting, hatching and fledging annual generations of young. But the lake's seasonal population of the big black birds has been declining since 2022. Most of the large cottonwoods that hold the nests are dead or dying: at least two fell in recent years, and just before Thanksgiving week, another suddenly crashed down. There's real concern now that the cormorants could abandon the island rookery unless habitat and nesting conditions improve.

This fall and into 2025, Denver Parks & Recreation is shoring up the island's remaining trees, planting new ones, and adding man-made nesting platforms attached to rough-hewn tree trunks the size of telephone poles. The hope is that these artificial "habitat poles" will augment natural nesting trees still standing and substitute for those that have fallen. The trees have suffered years of decline from soil-burning, root-killing bird poop, as well as previous cormorants' stripping of branches and leaves for nest material.

That day in September, the workmen cleared overgrown thickets of Tree of Heaven, a widespread, invasive and weedy species of sumac native to China. But they left standing the mostly branchless hulks of seven or eight cottonwoods that still support the nests of bleached sticks that the cormorants build and rebuild each season. Some of the standing island trees lean precariously.

In mid-November, workers returned to screw metal anchors into the ground around the remaining trees. Then they rigged bracing cables tightly between anchors and trees to arrest further leaning and stabilize them against wind and weather.



Duck Lake's cormorant nesting island in September, the day its habitat makeover began



Duck Lake island with most of invasive vegetation removed

*Continued on page 31*





It took 12 workers to hoist the finished nest platform post into place



Cottonwood and honey locust saplings await planting on Duck Lake island

## CORMORANTS *cont from page 30*

The following week, workers dug and augered post holes deep enough to prop two of the artificial platform trunks upright. Then they filled the holes around them with quick-setting concrete. Attached to each trunk are three skeletal nesting platforms, protruding like short tree branches.

As the nesting towers were being planted, other workers planted real trees: three saplings each of Plains cottonwood and Honey Locust “to hopefully establish and grow quickly to provide nesting habitat to the cormorants in future years,” said **Ian Schillinger-Brokaw**, a Parks & Rec urban ecology planner who oversees the Duck Lake project. Also planted were smaller Rocky Mountain maples as native understory growth “to compete with the Tree of Heaven and provide some habitat to smaller nesting birds,” he added.

Artificial nesting posts have been used in colonies of large birds elsewhere for decades. Denver based its platforms on a 1940s design from Wisconsin. Lakewood took a similar tack last year to replace storm-damaged nesting trees on the island in Belmar Park’s Kountze Lake with artificial nesting platforms on recycled lodgepole pines.

Technically, the rehabilitation of Duck Lake began years ago when the city installed 10 aerators to improve circulation of lake water, susceptible in summer to toxic, smelly and unsightly algae blooms. Three years ago, the city also replanted native shoreline grasses and other vegetation to improve habitat on the south edge of Duck Lake, where the passing public stands to view the cormorants, waterfowl and other wildlife.

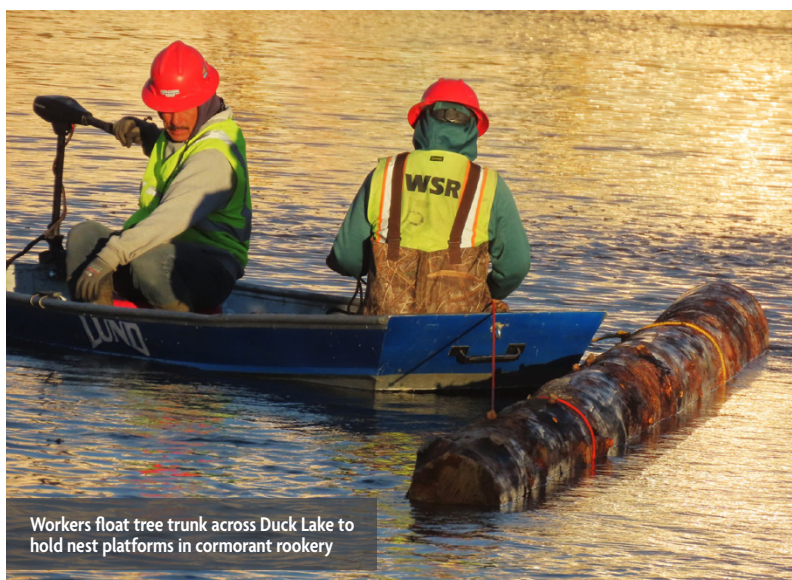
Then last July, just before Independence Day, half a dozen floating platforms of marsh grasses, each roughly 4-5 feet square, suddenly appeared on the west side of the lake. Parks & Rec calls them “floating wetlands,” and they are an experiment to see if vegetation that filters water and provides beneficial habitat can help improve the lake.

Each platform was planted with about 3 dozen plugs of marshland grasses, rushes and sedges. The aim is for their water-loving roots to grow down through the porous floating structure to soak up lake water nutrients and create habitat for fish, invertebrates and other water organisms. So far, the jury’s out. Waterfowl, mainly geese, have nibbled at the edges of the floating wetlands, preventing the grasses from growing to full height. Some waterfowl have also found the floating patches safe spots to nap in daytime and roost at night.

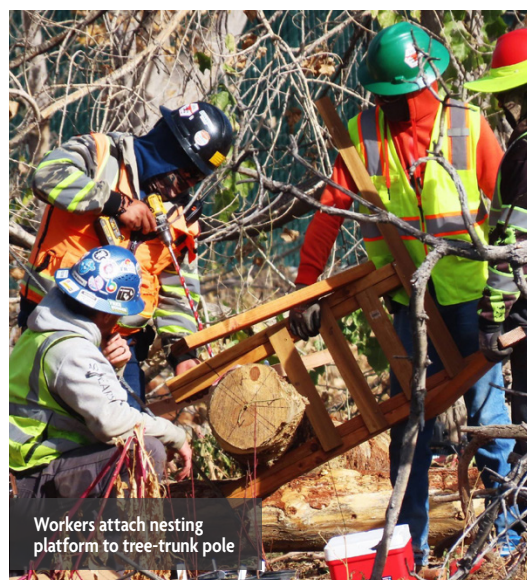
The history of the cormorants’ presence at Duck Lake is fuzzy. One early 20<sup>th</sup>-century account recorded that half a dozen fledgling cormorants were brought to Duck Lake from a rookery at Barr Lake. But there’s no evidence that the colony began then. City staff say the birds have nested on the Duck Lake island for at least 25 years, “but that is about as far back as we know for sure,” Schillinger-Brokaw said.

*Continued on page 32*





Workers float tree trunk across Duck Lake to hold nest platforms in cormorant rookery



Workers attach nesting platform to tree-trunk pole



Two completed tree-trunk poles with nesting platforms attached are now in place on Duck Lake Island

#### CORMORANTS *cont from page 31*

The eBird database is too new (launched in 2002 but not immediately in widespread use) for more precise confirmation. But Denver City Park's earliest eBird record for Double-crested Cormorant was checklisted retroactively for two birds seen on Oct. 19, 1991. The first eBird historical record for Duck Lake specifically was on July 3, 1994. But that lister wrote only "X" for quantity, leaving no indication if he saw one cormorant or a colony. Still another eBirder checklisted later that he saw 75 cormorants on April 8, 2001, which suggests a nesting colony by then. By 2010, one eBird checklist noted 220 cormorants in the park. Over the next decade, numbers climbed as high as 700 adults, fledglings and nestlings in peak season. But since 2022, adult numbers have not exceeded the low 200s.

As cormorant guano continues to accumulate on the Duck Lake island, the newly planted trees face challenges to successful growth. "Soil conditions on the island are problematic and quite acidic," Schillinger-Brokaw said, but amending the soil isn't possible without an irrigation system. Therefore, "some mortality of the planted trees may occur . . . (but) we opted for tree species that are a little more tolerant — that hopefully will get used to the growing conditions on site and survive without constant additional inputs."

The project improvements get their first test In about three months. The cormorants typically start returning from southern winter retreats by mid- to late February.

*Photos by Patrick O'Driscoll*



LAST WORD, LAST LOOK

## Pilgrimage to Pipit Hill

Birders' pursuit of secretive prairie native is an almost spiritual trek across Colorado Plains



Like crime scene searchers, Oct. 12 DFO field trippers fan out across Pipit Hill grasslands  
Laura Hollenbaugh



## Patrick O'Driscoll

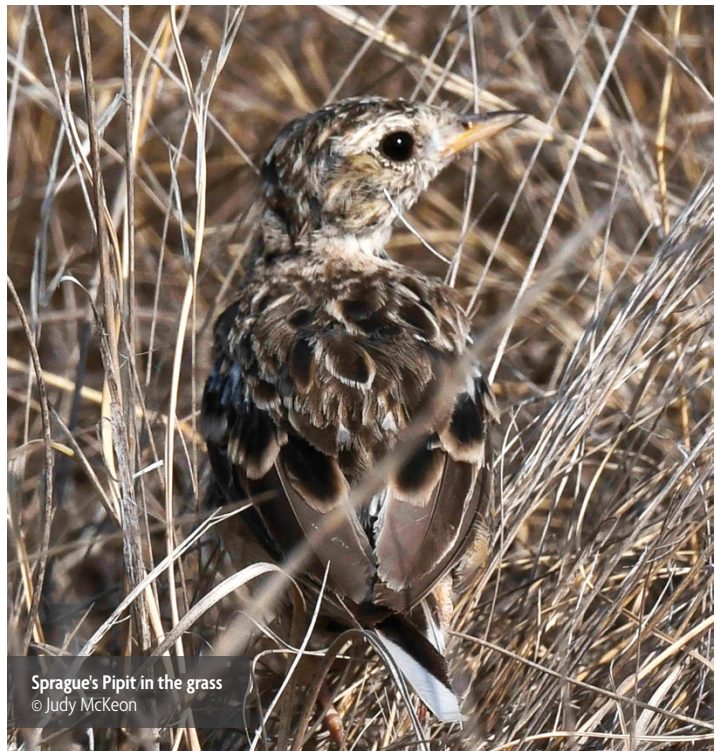
If there's a Holy Grail spot for birding on eastern Colorado's sweep of the Great Plains, it is *not* Pipit Hill.

By eBird's yardstick, birders have checklisted this remote, brown rise in Yuma County fewer than 300 times, all but one of them since 2010. Its unremarkable expanse of grazed pastureland — a patch of low grass, scattered cactus, boundary fences and a lone windmill in an isolated corner of [South Republican State Wildlife Area](#) north of Burlington — has yielded only 85 bird species total.

Yet every fall, small bands of faithful birders make the long drive out (three hours from Denver), hoping to commune with one bird — the shy, nondescript grassland species for which this desolate spot is named: [Sprague's Pipit](#). Although native to the Great Plains, it is a Colorado rarity. The bird is only seen along a narrow belt of Colorado-Kansas borderland that marks the west edge of its territory. It tends to stop through in late September and early October en route to wintering grounds in Texas and northern Mexico. Even the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's *Birds of the World* notes that Sprague's Pipit "often goes undetected during its migration through the Great Plains."

(The species does have a certain historical pedigree, though. **John James Audubon** himself described and named it after his friend **Isaac Sprague**, who was first to encounter one of its nests in North Dakota more than 180 years ago.)

*Continued on page 35*







Field tripper Anne Craig at Pipit Hill Oct. 5  
Dave Prentice

#### PIPIT HILL *cont from page 34*

Although the birds are secretive and unassuming, their behavior is distinctive. Their nasal *squeet* call sounds like someone stepped on a dog's squeaky toy. Sprague's escape flight when flushed is a series of midair stairsteps — up and out, up and out — that may end with a sudden drop like a rock to hide again in the grass.

Thus forewarned, Sprague's seekers arrive at Pipit Hill rather like pilgrims reaching a distant shrine. Cautious if not quite reverent, they walk patiently through the grass, hoping to flush pipits for a few good looks and pictures.

"As the first bird takes off, I'm going, '*Look for the white on the tail! Look for the flight behavior! Listen for the squeaky toy!*'" says field trip leader **Gary Witt**, who led two successful DFO excursions to Pipit Hill in early October. (He had only planned one trip but the waiting list begged for another.) "Once you get a bird in the air, everybody tries to get eyes on it. If it comes down in our field, we can perhaps sneak up and see it."

A retired water resource consultant from Denver, Witt first got religion about Sprague's Pipit three years ago, drawn by a quest familiar to any serious Colorado birding "lister": to record at least 400 species in the state (out of the 520 ever observed thus far).

*Continued on page 36*



Gary Witt and field trippers coming through the grass Oct. 5 at Pipit Hill  
Dave Prentice



**PIPIT HILL** *cont from page 35*

"I wanted to break 400 right after I retired, when I was in the 390s," Witt says. (He's now at 419.) After first hearing of Sprague's and its uncommon occurrence in Colorado, "I kept asking people about it and they'd say well, it's kind of random to find it out on the eastern Plains, except for Pipit Hill." When he learned that DFO hadn't led many outings there, Witt asked Field Trips chair **David Suddjian**, "How come nobody does any trips to Pipit Hill?" Suddjian replied, "I don't know. Maybe you should do one."

In 2022, he and Suddjian and another birder went out for a look. "We crossed the field. We scared up a couple of birds," Witt recalls. "I thought, well, this is an interesting thing." He soon began leading trips there, because birding Pipit Hill solo is a real challenge: "You could walk around a pipit by yourself and never flush it, never see it."

*Continued on page 37*



Sprague's Pipit calling from grassy lair  
Tom Behnfield



Peter Burke presents Witt with Pipit Hill  
souvenir of successful trip - a dried cow chip  
Dave Prentice





Sprague's Pipit nearly invisible in the grass  
Peter Burke

#### PIPIT HILL *cont from page 36*

Witt's trips employ what he calls "the FBI murder line." Like a crime-scene investigator searching for evidence, he spaces participants side by side, yards apart, for a careful, coordinated walk through the grass. They sweep east to west, then pivot north along the fence that marks Pipit Hill's west boundary.

"You try to cover as much ground as you can. Usually within a quarter-mile, we flush something," Witt says. Then it's a matter of a careful approach for better looks and pictures. With luck, birders will glimpse "the big dark eye," he adds, and the hint of an eye ring.

Once a Sprague's is recorded, it's time to celebrate with a "life bird" dance. "They're thrilled. They're all slapping five. 'We got it! We got it!'" he says of the field trippers' scene. "It makes for a great DFO trip. I'm excited when 80 to 90 percent of the group has not seen the bird before."

Witt aims to make the Sprague's Pipit pilgrimage "something that I can do repeatedly — the 'trip Gary does every fall.'" Mark your calendars now, pipit pilgrims!



Witt leads first-time spotters of Sprague's Pipit in celebratory Life Bird Dance  
Robert Tonge



*Until the next Lark Bunting . . .  
**HAPPY HOLIDAYS BIRDING!***



Sprague's Pipit in mid-flight at Pipit Hill  
in Yuma County on Oct. 5 DFO field trip  
Dave Prentice