



the prairie falcon

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JUNE PROGRAM
June 19

“PEONIES”
Karen Gast

NORTHERN FLINT HILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY, P.O. Box 1932, MANHATTAN, KS 66505-1932

PEONIES

Dr. Karen Gast

Since the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society inherited the Stagg Hill Peony Farm, as part of the Michel-Ross preserve, we have sold these plants to benefit the Chapter. In the process, we have been asked many questions about peonies. So, K-State's resident expert on peonies has been invited to speak at our June program. Dr. Karen Gast, associate professor Department of Horticulture, Forestry and Recreation Resources, will discuss the history of peonies, how they have been used throughout the ages, and how they are used now as cut-flowers, medicinal plants, collectors items, and in landscaping.

Dr. Karen Gast has been on the faculty of the Department of Horticulture, Forestry and Recreation Resources for 13 years. She is the state's Extension Specialist for Post-harvest and Marketing. In that position her responsibilities cover a wide range of activities. She is the state's contact person for the USDA's farmers' market programs. She has provided leadership for developing food safety educational materials for fruits and vegetables for Kansas. Lastly, she serves the retail and wholesale florist industry in Kansas. Her research has focused on serving the needs of florists and farmers' markets cut-flower vendors by conducting post-harvest research on flowers. Her favorite species to work with is herbaceous peonies and is recognized internationally as the person to talk to about post-harvest care of peonies.

Dr. Gast has published several KSU-AES Reports of Progress on her research, presented numerous posters/papers on peonies, and published several articles. She has hosted researchers from New Zealand and Israel, and had the honor of hosting a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Scholar who studied cut-flower peonies with her. In 1998-99, she packed up herself, her 2-year-old, and 5-year-old to spend five months in New Zealand on sabbatical leave to study cut flower peonies with New Zealand researchers there.

Before each program, we invite our speakers to join us for an informal dinner and discussion. Feel free to join us this month at Coco Bolos at 5:45 PM. The program begins at 7:30 PM, 1014 Throckmorton, NE corner of Denison and Claflin. Refreshments are served after every meeting. All meetings are open to the public.

Field Trips

BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING WALK

Join us Saturday, June 8th and every second Saturday at 8 AM in the Ackert/Durland parking lot on the KSU campus. We will carpool to a local birding hotspot and should return by about 11 AM. Birders of every age and interest level are welcomed. Children are especially encouraged to attend. Call Dave Rintoul, 532-6663 or e-mail him at drintoul@ksu.edu for more information

INSIDE

- 2 BIRDING
- 3 TREE OF THE MONTH
- 4 SKYLIGHT
- 5 TAKE NOTE

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UPCOMING DATES:

Jun 8 Beginning Birdwatching

Jun 19 Wed. 5:45 PM DINNER
7:30 PM - PROGRAM
1014 Throckmorton, KSU
NE corner Denison/Claflin

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BIRDING DAVERINTOUL

“More than with most species of small birds, the attention and interest of the observer center about the nesting habits of the blue-gray gnatcatcher because of the great beauty of its nest. This nest should be even better known than its miniature counterpart, the nest of the ruby-throated hummingbird, for by virtue of its larger size and consequent better visibility it can be found much the more readily of the two—yet it seems to have been entirely overlooked by the general public and is known only to ornithologists.”

Arthur Cleveland Bent, **Life Histories of North American Birds**, 1949. Smithsonian Institution United States National Museum Bulletin 196: 344-364. United States Government Printing Office. (also available at <http://home.bluemarble.net/~pqm/>)

During this year's North American Migration Count, I was standing along a roadside, in a drizzle, waiting to hear a warbler song to break the silence, when I heard the familiar whiny “spee, spee, spee” of a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. I quickly spied the bird, who was peering down at me from a hackberry above the road, holding some hapless insect in its needle-like beak. (I never have understood how birds can make all of their standard sounds with their beaks tightly clamped down on an insect.) The bird glared at me for a bit, then hustled away to a nearby oak branch. I figured that this might be a bird headed toward the nest to feed its mate, who should be incubating eggs at this time of year. Sure enough, the bird flashed down the branch, delivered the insect to the waiting beak of its mate on the nest, and sped off. When I saw the nest, I was grateful to the parent bird for bringing it to my attention, since it otherwise looked like the proverbial bump-on-a-log, except for the bill and long tail of the brooding bird, which were both poking skyward from the cramped interior of the nest.

According to A.C. Bent, one gnatcatcher nest that he disassembled was constructed of oak catkins, plumed seeds from grasses, and fibers from the stem “wool” of the cinnamon fern. The outer coat of this artifice was covered with lichens, skillfully tacked on to the exterior with spider silk. It had an inner cup, composed mostly of the plumed seed fibers. The nest was deep, with a large foundation, and was



presumably attached to the branch with spider silk as well. Other nests, from different parts of the country, were constructed and lined with other materials (including feathers), but the basic construction principles seem to be the same across the broad range of this species. The nest that I observed was also deep, and firmly attached, since the 30 mph winds moved the branch quite a lot but did not perturb the brooding bird. When the wind blows, the cradle will rock, indeed!

Since that day, I have returned to the nest for some photographs and videos, and will return periodically to record and marvel at this natural wonder. Other birds are also nesting nearby; Great-crested Flycatchers, Summer Tanagers, and Louisiana Waterthrushes are calling along the nearby creek, and all of their nests, if found, would probably also instill a sense of wonder. You have to give birds at least a modicum of respect for annually constructing, using only their mouths, a home and nursery for their young. If humans were constrained to build homes with only their mouths, it might be good for us all. It certainly would cut down on the number of call-in radio shows, since everybody

would probably be too tired to call and whine about the latest outrage or insult to their sensibilities...

But at any rate, this is the nesting season, so watch for birds carrying food, look for bumps on logs, listen for begging calls, and it will be easy to find at least a few nests. However, if you find a baby bird that is seemingly “abandoned”, please resist the urge to take it home and “save” it. More than likely the parent birds, who have a lot more invested in that baby than you do, are watching, waiting for you to leave, so that they can get back to work feeding that youngster. Since all birds are full-grown at the time they normally leave the nest, they pack a lot of growth into a very short (10-12 days for the Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher) time span. That means that they eat a lot, they eat often, and if they don't get enough to eat, they will probably not grow and survive. Parent birds are used to this feeding schedule, and they can handle it a lot better than you can!

So take advantage of this brief window to get out into the woods and prairies, and learn more about our fellow-travelers on the planet. They lead fascinating lives, and the nesting season is a good time to learn more about those lives and the strategies that they use to make a new generation each year.

© 2002 David A. Rintoul



While walking on the campus of Kansas State University, I smelled the sweet, honeysuckle-like fragrance of the blossoms of the linden. The fragrance had drifted on the breeze, but I moved back and forth, following the scent like a hound, and found the grove of lindens.

The sun had set, but a few butterflies were taking sips of nectar before reluctantly finding their perch for the evening. Near the top of a diminutive tree, there was a moth with its long proboscis extended as it sipped the sweet nectar. More of the moths appeared and one hovered near me. Its wings were blurs of movement, but between the blurs, I saw the white lines on its thorax for which this white lined sphinx moth is named.

The following morning, honey bees were harvesting nectar. When they visit linden blossoms, they continue to visit them, harvesting the linden nectar to the exclusion of

all others. The honey produced from the linden is a delicacy, because of the distinctive flavor that remained pure.

The little leaf linden may have been a dominant tree in English forests, and has had a long association with western Europeans. In long ago days, an Englishman probably brewed a tea from the dried flowers of a little leaf linden, and added linden honey to the rim of the cup to sweeten the tea.

This tree has “little invasive potential” according to a fact sheet written by E. F. Gilman and D. G. Watson of the United States Forest Service in 1994. This tree (*Tilia cordata*) appears to have become naturalized in some areas of America, however, and it can hybridize with the American linden (*Tilia americana*). This appears less problematic than many other situations that involve competition between natives, non-

natives, and hybrids, because the little leaf linden does not have an obvious competitive advantage and has remained less abundant than the native lindens in natural landscapes. Anyway, I plan to enjoy the little leaf linden trees that have already been planted at Kansas State University.

In contrast to the American linden tree, which is a large tree, the somewhat diminutive, little leaf linden tree is well proportioned for butterfly watching. At times, it may become so covered with butterflies that it seems to be a butterfly tree. Many species of butterflies visit its blossoms, including black swallowtails, tiger swallowtails, and zebra swallowtails.

If you wish, join me in trying to identify butterflies on the diminutive trees at the southeast corner of the parking behind Ackert Hall on Sunday, June 2nd, at 1 PM.

© 2002 T.D. Morgan

Thanks

I have another Thank You for help with the Northeast Community Park. The Riley Co. Conservation District did not charge our organization for the use of the grass drill when the reseeding was done this spring. The District makes the drill available to rent for \$6 to \$8 / acre for seeding native grasses. This would have been a charge of \$168 and we are very appreciative of their letting us use it without cost. Also, we thank member Irene Johnson for making these arrangements with the District.

Leann Harrell



Once upon a time, dear one, Earth and Sky were close companions. Whenever cloud curtains were pulled aside, and the dust from Krakatoan eruptions and Sonoran sandstorms had settled, and the smoke from wildfires had dissipated, they could be seen still, shoulder-to-shoulder, from valley treetops to snow peaks, with the stars on Sky's epaulets glittering in brisk colorful vivacity. Then another couple – Chemical Haze and Graceless Glow – began wedging between them. Where they go, occasionally some stars now react with small psychedelic displays, but more generally their rising and settling performances are smudged out of existence. And unlike clouds, etc., these two intruders seem intent on taking permanent possession of the horizon.

To be sure there have been past efforts, and continuing ones, to get Chem to give up smoking, and to put Graceless on a diet. Any solution to cell phone interference with radio telescopes, that I reported last month, seems technical in nature. But the costs and other

affects of visible light pollution are more local, more a reflection of community will. More next time.

First I'll inform any who may not have heard, of other news that may affect our Flint Hills sky: windfarms. I understand that negotiations are going forward with landowners in Greenwood, Chase, Morris, and Wabaunsee counties. The one array in the latter two counties would have about 50 mills, each about 270-foot tall with 76-foot blades. Where there is zoning there will be hearings if and when conditional use permits are applied for. Because I'm on Wabaunsee County Planning Commission, I can't say more till those hearings, which could come as early as the third Thursday in June, the 20th. Anyone interested can contact: Claude Blevins, Wabaunsee County Zoning Administrator, Court House, Alma, Kansas 66401, 785-765-3432.

On that June 20th, *Astronomy* reports, bright Venus will pass through the dim beehive cluster in Cancer. all sources seem to agree that the solstice will occur

at 8a24 CDT on the 21st, when the Earth will be 3.3% further from the Sun than in January (per *StarDate*), and the Sun will thus appear 7% dimmer (per *The Old Farmers' Almanac*) despite the advent of summer. *Sky and Telescope* mentions that Saturn and the waning crescent Moon will be kissing cousins about 40 minutes before sunrise on July 8th. On July 10th, Venus (actually about 66% lit) will be meeting with Regulus at the elbow of Leo's front leg, and on the 12-13th a waxing crescent Moon will join the evening conversation.

Throughout this period, the prominently bright star at the zenith about midnight will be Vega. For more hidden pleasures, *S&T* suggests looking leftward and upward from the two level Cat's Eyes in the tail of Scorpio for two clusters, M6 (more steeply upward) and M7 (at a shallow angle upward). These are designated naked eye, however M6 will glisten more if you bring a telescope, while M7 is willing to enhance its performance for a mere pair of binoculars. Full Moon, June 24th, new July 10th.

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Memorial

When Audubon member and friend Gene (aka Geno) Donovan passed away last year, his family established a memorial with NFHAS. Because Gene loved photography, and photographing birds especially, it was decided to use the memorial funds to purchase books for the Manhattan Public Library — books that celebrated photographers and nature.

These two books are now available for your enjoyment: [Rare and Elusive Birds of North America](#) by William Burt, and [In Response to Place: Photographs from the Nature Conservancy's Last Great Places](#).

We want to thank Marcy Allen of MPL (and wife of board member Earl Allen) for her thoughtful assistance in selecting these books and helping us honor Gene Donovan.



The smashed egg on the step should have alerted me. The shell had been a pale grey-blue, with speckles, and a thimbleful of marigold yolk congealed with albumen lay there in a splat. I stepped over it, thinking “nature’s balance.”

As the steaks marinated, I went to the deck to fire up the grill. With a flourish, I yanked the black tarp up, and pulled it off: to my surprise, the utensil wing became animated. A slow, sinuous animation. Damn! I don’t know why snakes elicit such a visceral response in me, but they do. And this one wasn’t particularly ominous or menacing. Dark, like the tarp, it was two (...three?) feet long and as big around as a cigar, sort of between a swisher sweet and a good Havana. No stogie this one. Its black ash dullness suggested an imminent shed, but its identity as a young adult black (pilot or Eastern, as you wish) rat snake with its mottled yellow and white belly was unmistakable. Unremarkable as far as snakes go, it lazily undulated its tongue to “taste” me, the intruder. Slowly - it was a chilly dusk - it seeped to the exterior back of the grill, neatly fitting itself on the narrow ledge between the hinges, leaving the utensils unmoved. I thought, “Snake, you’ll be really warm in just a minute.” Rigidly, I bent, extended my arm, keeping my face averted and body well away from the grill, and turned on the gas. Gingerly, I lifted the grill lid,

struck a match (the auto igniter is shot), and flung it between the rungs of the grate. Backing up, I stood back and watched. The snake didn’t move. ‘I can’t watch this anymore,’ I muttered to myself, feeling remorse as I scurried into the house.

About fifteen minutes later, I sneaked (snaked?) out to assess the damage. The snake had simply vanished! I checked for a crisp black shank of rope under the grill - nothing. I looked up at the tree branches that shade the deck (some snakes love to climb, you know, especially black rat snakes), expecting it to fling itself into the air and do pirouettes and stick its tongue out at me, like Verdi.

But it wasn’t there. I crept around the deck, looking on top of and under the table and empty flowerpots: no snake. The black tarp lay over a chair near the railing. I eyed it, thinking to lift it ever so slowly, but then thought better of it. I backed up, all the way to the kitchen door.

After returning to the kitchen to fix a salad, I thought of an article in “Birds and Blooms” I had read advising homeowners how to keep hawks and falcons from eating songbirds (“yardbirds”) at their feeders. It made me roll my eyes. Natural predators are important in population balance, and besides, they are awesome. How is a finch “better” than a sharp-shinned? Seeing one

effectively snag its main meal of the day is a rare gift to the birdwatcher; and, having created an artificial feeding station for a preferred avian population has its risks and, as I see it, its benefits. The true birder watches, and understands, and accepts what is natural.

Eugenie Clark, the famous marine biologist, better known as the “shark lady,” once described an encounter she and her son had with a hammerhead shark. They were in no real danger, and she was glad, not fearful, to have had the opportunity and considered it a gift.

So, too, with the young snake. It apparently wasn’t too effective a forager yet (witness the uneaten smashed egg), and it risked coming across that invisible territorial boundary that humans delineate - to feed itself, to shed, to live. A certain cheer eclipsed my initial repulsion, glad that it had the gumption to violate my territory and jolt my sensibility. It made me feel more alive, more connected, more ‘biological.’

The steaks that evening were especially savory, although we hadn’t foraged for or stalked them. And I haven’t moved the tarp on the chair.

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Subscription Information:

Introductory memberships- \$20 per year; then basic membership is - \$35 annually. When you join the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, you automatically become a member of the National Audubon Society and receive the bimonthly Audubon magazine, in addition to the **PRAIRIE FALCON**. New membership applications may be sent to NFHAS at the address below; make checks payable to the National Audubon Society. Renewals of membership are handled by the National Audubon Society and should not be sent to NFHAS. Questions about membership call toll-free, 1-800-274-4201, or email the National Audubon Society join@audubon.org.

Nonmembers may subscribe to the **PRAIRIE FALCON** newsletter for \$15 per year. Make checks payable to the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, and mail to: Treasurer, NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan KS 66505-1932.

RARE BIRD HOTLINE

For information on Kansas Birds, subscribe to the Kansas Bird Listserv. Send this message- **subscribe KSBIRD-L**, to this address- listserv@ksu.edu and join in the discussions!

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