



the prairie falcon

Vol. 31, No. 04
DEC 2002

DECEMBER Kansas Area Christmas Bird Census

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

Manhattan Christmas Bird Census DECEMBER 21st

NOT the 14th as printed in the Directory!!!!
Contact Dave Rintoul for more information

After counting birds all day, come join your fellow bird-counters at the Christmas Bird Count supper at the Senior's Service Center, located at Fourth & Leavenworth in Manhattan. The doors will open at 5:30 PM and the meal will begin at 6:00 PM (or whenever you arrive) through 9:00 PM (or whenever the food runs out). During the course of the evening we will eat, drink, swap stories, compile the bird numbers and find out what group will take home the trophies.

Supper will consist of chili, salads, pizza, desserts, and drinks. Free will donations for the meal are accepted. If you would like to contribute to the meal with your special chili recipe or some other dish, contact Carla Bishop, the supper coordinator, at 539-5129 (h), 532-1859 (w), or cbishop@ksu.edu.

See page 5 for dates of other area CBC and contacts.

ATTENTION all artists - a new Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society "logo" contest. All entries must have both color and black and white versions, no larger than 8"x8 and no smaller than 6"x6" submitted on separate 8.5"x11." Must include our name "Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society - either incorporated in the design or as a separate element. Send entries to NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan, KS 66502-1932. Deadline is January 31, 2003. Don't forget to include your name, address, and phone number with each design submitted. For additional information contact Cindy Jeffrey, 785-532-3157 (wk) or email cinraney@ksu.edu.

Oh yes -- there is a prize for the winning design -- \$100!

Field Trips

BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING WALK

Join us Saturday, Dec. 7th 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.

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CONTRIBUTORS:

DRU CLARKE
PETE COHEN
THOMAS MORGAN
CHUCK OTTE

UPCOMING DATES:

- Dec 7 2nd Bird Feed PICKUP
9:00 AM - 1:00 PM
UFM, 1221 Thurston
- Dec 7 Beginning Birdwatching
8:00 AM
Ackert Hall Parking Lot
- Dec 21 Manhattan Christmas Bird
Census (537-0781) &
Compilation Dinner
(539-5129)
- Jan 4 Eagle Day - Meet at 9:00AM
Tuttle Creek Corps of
Engineers Office

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MANHATTAN, KS



An Important Subject (with Aesthetic Failings)

Dru Clarke

On most days I make a trek to our mailbox which is across a dusty road from the lane to our house. Because this road is a feeder to and from a major highway and a densely populated trailer court, folks who'd prefer not to foul their vehicles casually toss their accumulated trash on the road and in the ditches. Most of the time, it is camouflaged by tall weeds, fitfully mowed by the county, and I don't notice it. Recently, however, I spied a flattened beer carton, stooped to pick it up, then thought better of it. Neatly arranged in the center of the brew's brand mark was a coyote scat. Now, this coyote had plenty of room to relieve itself, but, for some reason, chose this smooth, highly visible surface. (When I've encountered coyote scat at other times, it has usually been in the middle of the road.) My initial annoyance at the trasher was dissolved by understanding the clear intention of the coyote. In fact, I laughed out loud at its sheer audacity.

I've run on, and into, many animal scats that have been similarly placed: "Location, location, location" appears to be important in the non-human world as well. Our stud politely defecates in one corner of his stall, making manure removal relatively simple. His purpose is most likely to enhance the fragrance. Some large birds do this as well, creating enormous mounds of excrement. Some rhino fecal middens have measured five meters (about sixteen feet) in diameter. Llamas sometimes

wait patiently to take their turns at designated latrine areas. On the trunks of large trees which have fallen across stream channels, a characteristic pile of muskrat dung, dead high center, will accumulate. Certain prominent stream stones seem to attract other territorial creatures. Although I've read that raccoons prefer to relieve themselves in water, the attic of an old abandoned house we were renovating was filled to the depth of a foot with their waste. True squatters. At another location, the same animal preferred to use the upside down lid of a discarded grill.

Not only is care shown with placement of leavings, but each animal's is quite distinctive. A skunk's waste has a cute DQ curl at the end, and rabbit pellets are neatly capsulated. We know we have bobcats on our farm because we've found their scat (and heard them screaming during the mating season in February).

The study of fecal matter has a name: Coprology. This scatological subject is not without value: Close examination of specific shapes can not only identify the animal of origin, but shed light on its diet, health and whereabouts. Fossilized bat droppings found in submerged caves in the Bahamas show that the caves used to be above ground. Our interest in coprolites – fossilized feces – can provide evidence of the creature's cloaca (organ for holding waste): Some are spiral, like some of today's shark species. Present-day droppings of kangaroo, sheep, and goats are

being monitored by satellite and global positioning systems to map their distribution.

"Fewmets," an ancient word for dung, may have derived from the nose-holding sound "Phew!" we make when our olfactory lobe is assaulted by a particularly pungent dropping. "Poppycock" is a generally accepted word for nonsense, and derives from the Dutch "pappekak," soft dung. When was etymology this much fun?

Birds are adept at keeping their nests clean. Baby songbirds' feces are encapsulated in lozenges, easily packed out by parent birds. Some older juveniles drop their excretions over the edge of the nest. Hornbills and kingfishers shoot their pellets out of the nest hole, aiming at the light. Some birds, when flushed from the nest, defecate on their eggs – an accident, concealment, or repulsion? The act of defecating before flight definitely lightens their airborne load.

While I mutter about finding and retrieving the human-generated trash that accumulates along the roadbed, I look forward to finding our natural companions' waste. Theirs is a subject infinitely more interesting and worth encountering. And I don't feel compelled to pick it up.

References:

- Lewin, Ralph A (1999). *Merde*. NY: Random House
Murie, Olaus (1982). *Field Guide to Animal Tracks* (has a guide to scats)

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Thanks

Judy Roe, program chair, thanks the following for helping make the Wind Power Forum such a huge success: the panelists, of course, who did a great job on their presentations; Dusty Becker for seamless moderation; John Tatarko for smooth audiovisual operation; Joann Hablutzel, Cindy Jeffrey, and Dolly Gudder for promotion; the KSU Union for the great set-up; the students in SEA for cool posters and ads; the Little Apple Brewing Co. Staff; and the Sierra Club.



Ironwood is often used as a name for a tree in eastern Kansas which is also known as hop hornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*). Ironwood survives in heavy shade, in part, because it holds its leaves level to catch the most sunlight. It grows slowly, but budgets some of its meager resources for toughening its wood. Tough wood is valuable for a tree which is occasionally struck by debris from larger trees. Such a tree may count each summer's growth as a victory, and may count the resources needed to insure the durability of its victory as resources well spent. Several other small trees are known for tough wood, including at least one (persimmon) that has extremely thick sapwood. Ironwood has thick sapwood and delays for forty years or more before converting its first layer of living sapwood into heartwood. Perhaps the metabolic demands of its thick sapwood might slow its growth. The wood of some trees, such as black walnut, is also more resistant to shocks, if it has been grown slowly. Anyway, for one reason or another, the wood of ironwood is strong, hard, heavy, durable and tight-grained.

Some Native Americans carved bows from this tree, which suggests that their tools had superb edges. The flaked edges of their flint tools were sharp but brittle. Native Americans must have possessed loving patience for their craft. Most of them respected an industrious woodcutter, the beaver, that preferentially utilized ironwood in some areas. It could cut down an ironwood quickly, although it must have applied more force as it bit out a chip. It did much of its woodcutting at night and must have known the texture of this tree's bark as well as it knew the contours of its own paw.

The bark has been used by people to treat medical conditions, including indigestion. On some trunks, vertical strips of bark are curled up at both ends, giving the trunk a shaggy appearance. On many trunks, particularly those that are less shaggy, the finely-furrowed, grayish-brown

bark is spirally twisted. The fine furrows are off-vertical slightly, so that in effect, these furrows spiral around as they wrap around the trunk. All and all, this bark has an appearance that makes you want to touch its texture.

It has never been domesticated, although it has been cultivated as an ornamental which needs little supplemental water. It grows in ravines which are often untouched by the fires that burn the adjacent prairie. However, it can resprout, if some of its trunk survives the fire. Its seed is enclosed in an inflated bag that can float down the ravine during a rainstorm, so this tree is often found growing along streams. It can not survive in poorly drained dirt, however, and is killed by prolonged floods. Its fruit is a cluster of papery bags, resembling the fruit of a hop vine, which is used for brewing beer. The base of each bag encloses a seed. The base has stinging hairs that might limit harvesting by critters with tender hands, but when I examined it in November, the hairs were not functional. Perhaps the hairs are functional when the seed is unripe, and guard the unripe seed. Squirrels occasionally eat a seed, and several birds including the downy woodpecker eat the seeds.

A district forester, Thad Rhodes, and I examined some trees at the Michel-Ross Audubon Preserve in Manhattan on October 25th. An unusually large "ironwood" proved to be an American elm. Thad chipped off a piece of bark and observed alternating dark and light layers in the bark which are characteristic of American elm. Then he glanced at twigs which were beyond his reach. He tossed a rope upward and managed to knock down a twig. The twigs lacked the hair that was present on authentic ironwood twigs close to the buds.

The ironwood leaf closely resembled the elm's, but had sharper, finer teeth, and when rubbed between the fingers, the ironwood leaf seemed somewhat thinner and much softer. The base of the blades of an

ironwood leaf were symmetrical, although this could not be used to easily distinguish it from all leaves of elms. The majority of the ironwood leaves were a delicately subdued yellow, although many leaves of the elms had not lost their green color. The twigs of ironwood had male catkins. The male catkins remain on the twigs until the female catkins finally appear in the springtime. And these catkins and buds are eaten by birds, and are eaten by ruffed grouse in larger quantity than any other food in winter.

Thad and I measured an ironwood that is somewhat smaller than the state champion which has a 9" diameter, 48' height, and 38' crown spread. Well, perhaps an ironwood in our preserve will attain that size some day. It is not a long-lived tree, however, and if it survives to 140 years of age, it has seen its better days.

During early November, I returned to Michel-Ross Audubon Preserve and admired the orangish-yellow of the elms during this particularly beautiful fall. Ironwoods, with their yellow leaves, were common on the edges of the ravines, and the two of the largest specimens were on north-facing slopes. The circumference of the largest specimen was the same as the state champion. I suspected that its height and crown spread was less than the champion's, but I admired it no less for that. I enjoyed looking at a middle-aged ironwood that seemed to be growing out of the middle of a slab of limestone. Another middle-aged specimen had a large branch that was curled back into its trunk and had grown together with its trunk, not once but twice, forming two "circles." My fascination with these tough, little trees began with a sense of wonder and has circled around, providing me with a renewed sense of wonder that I hope I will never lose.

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Thus might Edward FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* begun if written for this publication. The date to mark is January 4th, the high peak of a rare gem show this period. Saturn will be the busiest performer with two very special and exciting tricks. First, as it sails—with rings round its middle and many satellites in tow—it will be at the opposite side of the sky from the sun (thus, “in opposition”) and so at its most brilliant to us, at the same time that those rings are tilted to give us a full spread-eagle view, at the same time that our Earth is tilted so we can see it best, appearing high in the sky with the least atmospheric interference. With Saturn on a slow oval orbit and we on a faster inner one this joyful confluence will occur again at the end of 2003 and then not again for nearly 30 years.

Conveniently up there through the coming evenings, and shifting gradually eastward through Taurus, Saturn will be at its very brightest the night of December 17th (and on New Year's Eve next year), a mere eight astronomical units from the Sun (i.e.: eight times the mean distance from Earth to Sun). For now night by night it'll be approaching the tip of the Bull's southern horn, and there *Voilà!* on January 4th, the second trick will occur, but for one night only.

First, though, lets look back a moment to July 4, 1054, when a spot appeared in the sky so brightly that for some time it cast shadows at night and was seen by day. That was the supernova explosion that's resulted in what telescopes later discovered to be a crab-shaped nebula, and which recent science sees as a star shrunken to the diameter of Los Angeles, a

spoonful of which would now weigh a thousand tons—a pulsar emitting flashes of energy while spinning at 33 times/second. For these details I'm indebted to astronomer Bob Berman's book, *The Secrets of the Night Sky* and his article in the *2002 Old Farmer's Almanac*, plus *Astronomy's 9th Explore the Universe* edition, in all of which there's much more information.

Now again looking ahead to January 4th. That night, Saturn will transit the Crab Nebula; that is, move across our view of it, from about 8PM to 4AM. Some of its moons and maybe some of its rare tiny white storms could be visible against that background. This, of course, will not be a sight for naked eyes. Sans telescope there are other attractions.

There's Venus, also at its brightest for the year, especially for early risers—say, about three hours before sun-up, and in fact even a little bit brighter than Saturn while being only 45% lit up. (By August Venus will be fully reflecting, but from much further away.) Look to the southeast. And there's Jupiter, all this while no pale violet, very noticeably also rising ever earlier in the evenings amid the very modest stars of Cancer, and just below the waning gibbous moon on December 22nd.

Speaking of stars, even if the fuses blow on our glowing planets there'll be gems on display. Orion will be striding up from the east to once more take charge of the winter sky with orange Betelgeuse (the hugest star of all) aflame on his trailing shoulder, and diagonally downward across his famous three-star belt will be silver-blue Rigel at his leading foot. Look back eastward past the star of

his trailing foot, Saiph, and you'll soon be eye-to-eye with the star that shines the brightest: Sirius, the Dog Star, though actually it's the eye of the Big Dog, or Canis Major. It's a Dog Star of many tales for throughout history, as the Earth's wobbling on its axis has kept changing the celestial timetable, Sirius was deprecated for bringing bad times (the dog days of summer) and revered for bringing good times (the annual rising of the Nile), the price one can pay for prominence.

Now carom your line of view northeastward: straight back eastward from Orion, and before your eyes reach the twin stars of Gemini, you'll come to another Dog Star, the almost solo marker for the Little Dog constellation, Canis Minor. Though obviously not Sirius' equal, this star is next behind Rigel and brighter than the Twins, and sometimes even brighter than Betelgeuse, who tends to vary a lot. It's name is Procyon, which means “before the Dog,” because being at Orion's shoulder height, rather than at his heels, it comes into the sky before the Big Dog and clearly announces the approach of the good/bad news. Yet perhaps because it's not part of a very large group, Procyon hasn't drawn the blame/reverence that's focused on Sirius. Procyon achieves the quaint position of overlooked prominence. Life clearly can be like that.

All of which is not to deny that all the other stars aloft are not gems, too. They will all be there, if not one night, the next. Only on January 4th is it particularly desirable that all clouds spend the night in bed.

The Moon will be full December 19th, new January 2nd.

AREA CHRISTMAS BIRD CENSUS

for more information check <http://www.ksbirds.org/kos/CBC2002.html>



Saturday, December 14

Dodge City - Joleen Fromm, 620-227-6342
Hays - Greg Farley, gfarley@fhsu.edu, 785-628-5965
Lakin - Leonard Rich, 620-275-5192
Topeka - Gary Haden, 785-273-5598
Wichita - Pete Janzen, prarybrd@southwind.net, 316-832-0182
Wilson Lake - Mike Rader, mike_rader@hotmail.com, 785-658-2595

Sunday, December 15

Canyonlands (SE Logan County) - Tom Shane, 620-275-4616, shane@pld.com
Waconda Lake - Mike Rader, mike_rader@hotmail.com, 785-658-2595
Winfield - Max Thompson, maxt@cox.net, 620-221-1856

Wednesday, December 18

Quivira NWR - Mike Rader, mike_rader@hotmail.com, 785-658-2595

Friday, December 20

Cheyenne Bottoms - Helen Hands, 620-793-3066, helenh@wp.state.ks.us, meet at office at 8 AM.
Jetmore - Joyce Davis, 620-225-1217, meet at Wendy's, 2409 Central in Dodge City at 7 AM.

Saturday, December 21

Ark City - Gene Young, youngg6264@yahoo.com, 620-441-5331
Leavenworth/Atchison - John Schukman, 913-717-5141, schuksaya@aol.com
Manhattan - Dave Rintoul, drintoul@ksu.edu, 785-532-6663
Salina - Harold Lear, 785-823-2366, h.v.lear@att.net 6 PM.
Scott Lake - Sara Shane, 620-275-4616, shane@pld.com

Sunday, December 22

Wakefield (upper Milford Lake) - Chuck Otte, 785-238-8800, cotte@oznet.ksu.edu

Monday, December 23

Olsburg - Gary Jeffrey, 785-468-3587, gjeffrey@Kansas.net

Saturday, December 28

Baldwin - Roger Boyd, roger.boyd@bakeru.edu
Blue Rapids - Tom Parker, 785-363-7228, tlparker@flinthills.com,
Cimarron National Grasslands, Elkhart - Sebastian Patti, 773-248-0570, sebastianpatti@hotmail.com
El Dorado - Bill Langley, blangley@butlercc.edu

Sunday, December 29

Junction City - Chuck Otte, 785-238-8800, cotte@oznet.ksu.edu
Kenton (Black Mesa), Oklahoma - Sebastian Patti, 773-248-0570, sebastianpatti@hotmail.com
Linn County - Roger Boyd, roger.boyd@bakeru.edu

Monday, December 30

Liberal - Sebastian Patti, 773-248-0570, sebastianpatti@hotmail.com

Wednesday, January 1, 2003

SE Kansas Minedland, Cherokee County - Steve Ford, 620-235-4732, sford@pittstate.edu
Ulysses - Jeff Trotman, jtkb@PLD.COM

Thursday, January 2

Ingalls/Cimarron - Debra Bolton

Friday, January 3

Old Garfield County - Barbara Campbell, bcamp@ODSGC.NET, 620-275-5430

Saturday, January 4

Doniphan - Mike Stewart, 913-651-2565, mstewart@lvnworth.com
Garden City - Marie Osterbuhr, 620-276-8145, m.osterbuhr@ALLTEL.NET
Red Hills - Pete Janzen, prarybrd@southwind.net

Sunday, January 5

St. Francis - Dan LaShelle, 785-354-1270

Monday, January 6

Atwood - Dan LaShelle, 785-354-1270

Saturday, January 11

Blackwolf - Mike Rader, mike_rader@hotmail.com, 785-658-2595
Syracuse - Art Nonhof, 620-277-2087

Sunday, January 12

Kanopolis Lake - Mike Rader, mike_rader@hotmail.com, 785-658-2595
Sandhills/Finney County - Mike Ramsey, ramsey.hmbcr@SBCGLOBAL.NET

Pending (contact compiler for details)

Webster Reservoir - Mike Rader, mike_rader@hotmail.com, 785-658-2595

(this one will either be 12/22 or 1/5/03)



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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. Membership Renewals 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.

If you do not want to receive the national magazine, but still want to be involved in our local activities, you 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 Listserve. Send this message <**subscribe KSBIRD-L**> to this address <**listserv@ksu.edu**> and join in the discussions!

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