

NINEMILE WILDLIFE WORKGROUP

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SPRING 2019

PROMOTING KNOWLEDGE AND STEWARDSHIP OF LOCAL WILDLIFE AND HABITATS WITHIN THE COMMUNITIES AND PUBLIC LANDS OF THE NINEMILE, HUSON, AND ALBERTON REGION.

We always seek new and returning participants in this local non-profit. If you're interested in meeting and talking about wildlife issues, organizing events in the area, or if you want to submit photos or wildlife-related articles to this newsletter (printed and mailed in spring and fall each year), please email us at ninemilewildlife@gmail.com, find us on Facebook, or check out our website (see in the white text above).

WHITE ON WHITE - PHOTOGRAPHING SNOWY OWLS

by *Charlie Janson*

A decade ago, snowy owls came down into the Flathead valley, and I was captivated. Every 3-4 years, lemming abundance reaches a low point in the Canadian arctic, forcing snowy owls south in search of food, and they may show up in Montana. The last such irruption happened in the winter of 2018, but the owls stayed mostly in eastern Montana (a few showed up in the Flathead valley). When I saw them 10 years ago, they mostly spent time around a then-new housing development on the south side of Polson, where they were seen by thousands of visitors. They were easy to find, but the backgrounds were awful for photographs (roofs, water tanks, abandoned fields filled with invasive knapweed). I managed to get a few photos to keep, but I have wanted to take some better pictures ever since.

Finally, I ran out of patience for them to return to Montana, so I signed up for a snowy owl photography workshop offered in Canada (Ontario) in late January this year. I was worried that my photography skills and equipment might be challenged. The main goal of the workshop was snowy owls in flight (bird flight pictures are HARD!) and the temperatures were expected to go down to -10F, below where I have ever used my equipment even in Yellowstone in winter.

The good news is that my equipment held up just fine, and the challenge of doing flight shots was markedly reduced because the workshop organizer fed the owls mice – a practice that I now know is common, although not considered 'correct' for real wildlife photography. Although I had not expected the owls to be fed, I came to see the benefits, at least for my introduction to bird flight photography. Having an owl come to a known spot (where the mice was tossed) made it much easier to anticipate its trajectory and so practice keeping the bird in the frame well enough that the camera's automatic focus could actually work!



This female snowy owl shows the darker edges to the feathers over most of her body. Females are larger and dominant to males, so will chase them away from the better hunting areas. Charlie Janson.

After 5 days in really cold conditions (we experienced a part of this year's infamous polar vortex there), I ended up with quite a few neat pictures of these impressive and beautiful birds. Although I could never submit these photos for a wildlife photography contest (they do not accept photos of animals lured to a feeding site), I am overall happy with the experience. Maybe next time I will go track the owls to their breeding grounds and perhaps manage to get pictures of them at their nests. I hope you enjoy the pictures!



Male snowy owls are nearly pure white and almost vanish into the snowy background of winter landscapes. Charlie Janson.

There are pros and cons to feeding birds. For many of us who do feed, one of the positive aspects is that we get to frequently observe birds at close range, while enjoying all the comforts of home no matter the weather. During the winter we keep a suet feeder, a Niger thistle feeder, and two sunflower feeders along with a heated water bath/drinking source. All of these are less than 20 feet from the nearest window and provide us with insight into bird behavior that we may not notice in “free range” birds.



A pair of blue jays (more regularly found in the Midwest than here) appeared this October and has visited our yard every day since. Like chickadees, blue jays take one sunflower seed and fly off to eat it. I suspect the chickadee does this for greater security. In the jay's case, they take a seed, fly to a nearby branch, hold the seed against the branch with their feet and peck it open, eat the seed, and repeat. Jays pretty much rule the feeder when they are here and smaller birds wait their turn on the side while the jays eat. I suspect that the jays' presence has driven off our normal winter resident northern shrike. Shrikes feed on smaller birds and they disappear while the shrike was nearby. The one day I saw the shrike show up, both jays chased it away and it hasn't appeared since. With the shrike gone, we can reasonably surmise that smaller birds can spend more time at the feeder.



Another trait we noticed was competition at the feeder. It seems larger species almost always displace smaller birds. Most birds we observe fight and posture among themselves to gain a spot at the feeder. This often involves pecking at, chasing, or aggressive poses such as raising their wings to intimidate others of their kind (see picture at left). The common redpoll is an exception to this behavior as they peacefully share the feeder with all that can fit (see picture at right).

We have tried a variety of suet cake holders. The one we currently use requires the birds to feed from underneath, while hanging upside down. The design of this feeder was to discourage starlings from eating while allowing the more agile woodpeckers and smaller birds to feed. One surprise to us was that magpies found the suet and learned to access it by different methods. At first, they would hover below while pecking at the suet, eating some while some crumbs fell to the ground where they or other magpies could easily eat. After a while, at least one of them learned to somersault while flying at the feeder and perch, seemingly uncomfortably, upside down to peck away. Now we observe both feeding behaviors (see pictures below) as not all magpies seem to possess this specific acrobatic ability.



Redpolls

Most birds drink by dipping their bill in water, holding it in their mouth and tilting their head back so the water flows down their throat (see below). We watched Eurasian collared-doves at the birdbath. They immerse their bill and you can see their throat making sucking motions to drink, similar to a horse. This unusual behavior is shared by all of the pigeon family and no other American land birds.

Our backyard avian companions vary from year to year and from season to season. Attracting birds to feeders brings in other birds that don't necessarily use the feeders; we've seen American tree sparrows some winters near the feeder, but never on it. Finally, a feeder helps you keep track of the timing of arrivals. An example is red-winged blackbirds. The males show up sometime in mid-winter while the females wait until spring. If you keep a bird list you can note the timing and better predict arrival and departure times of our seasonal species.

Feeders can help you learn more about your local wildlife but remember that feeding birds may attract bears. Bears are generally active from April through November. To avoid bear trouble, avoid feeding birds during those months. If you do, make sure all bird feeders are out of reach from bears: 10 feet up and 4 feet out from the tree trunk or pole.

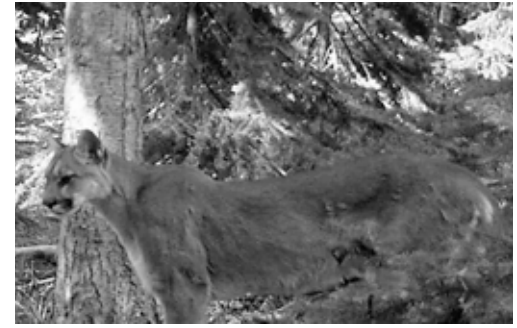




Elk



Black bear rubbing



Mountain lion

Grizzly bear habitat connectivity between the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is of keen interest for wildlife and land managers. With that mindset, Carly Lewis, wildlife biologist for the USFS Ninemile Ranger District, inquired in the spring of 2018 if the Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup (NWW) would be interested in assisting the district office in an effort to collect data on bear activity along the Reservation Divide system of trails.

Specifically, the objectives were three-fold: 1) monitor bear use of the Ninemile-Reservation Divide area, particularly any grizzly bear activity; 2) engage the NWW and residents of the Ninemile Valley and nearby communities in long-term monitoring; and 3) collect data and photos to be used for public education and to inform land managers regarding bear use of the area. The NWW heartily agreed to undertake this collaborative effort. The process of data collection entailed identification of active bear rub trees and then set up a hair sampling system and trail cameras to photograph bear activity. The data collection protocol, form templates, and trail cameras were provided by USFS Ninemile Ranger District and a field training day was held in June 2018 at an active bear rub tree on McCormick Peak trail.



Monitoring team

Three sections of trail along the Reservation Divide were selected for monitoring activities. Perhaps due to the high degree of human activity throughout the Ch-paa-qn Peak and Reservation Divide Trailhead areas, no bear rub trees were identified in that section. Two active rub trees were located on the McCormick Peak trail section and one active rub tree was located on the Siegel Pass section.



Black bear at rub tree

Initial reconnaissance trips were made in late June/early July to identify active rub trees and set up hair sampling wires and trail cameras. A second site visit was made in August to check for collected hair samples and to exchange the trail camera memory card. Finally, a close-out visit was made in October to check for collected hair samples and to retrieve the camera. Collected hair samples, associated photographs, and a site visit report were completed for each visit and submitted to Carly. Although no grizzly bear activity was documented at any of the three monitored trail sections, that observation in and of itself is valuable information to wildlife and land managers. While there may not have been any grizzly bear activity, the deployed cameras did document an abundance of wildlife species including black bear, wolf, mountain lion, bobcat, elk, mule deer, whitetail deer, and what is suspected to be a pika.

The NWW thanks Carly and the Ninemile District for the opportunity to participate in this program and to contribute to the effort of better understanding grizzly bear habitat connectivity and habitat utilization.



Wolf



Elk



Coyote

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Annual Lecture Series - Held at the Albertson Senior Center beginning at 7 PM on Tuesdays

UPCOMING EVENTS

Wolves of Yellowstone: History and Current Research. April 16. Brenna Cassidy completed a degree in Wildlife Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and has worked on multiple projects in Yellowstone National Park for many years studying birds, cougars, and wolves. Her MS research will focus on estimating survival of gray wolves in Yellowstone National Park. Yellowstone wolves are often in the news. This is your chance to learn from one of the scientists who has been directly involved in studying them.

Osprey as Canaries: Bellwethers of Environmental Contamination. May 14. Dr. Erick Greene is a professor in the Division of Biological Sciences and Wildlife Biology Program at UM. He'll share his long history of studying osprey which began with studying osprey colonies in Nova Scotia as a part of his undergraduate honor's thesis. He currently works on the Montana Osprey Project, a long-term study of ospreys along the upper Clark Fork River and its tributaries. You may know about the Osprey Project as it is often highlighted in news articles or have seen the study nests on web cams in the Hellgate Canyon and on the Dunrovin Ranch along the Bitterroot River. The ospreys will have recently arrived from their wintering grounds. Hear from an expert about these fascinating and easily observed fishing specialists.

Bird Watching Trip - June 1 at 8 AM led by board members Jeannie Siegler and Pat Sweeney. Meet at the Ninemile Ranger Station for a half day of bird watching in the Ninemile and Sixmile Valleys. We find close to 50 species of birds on this trip as we have access to some excellent habitat. Want to learn more about our area and what birds you may find here? Plan on joining us for this safari of mostly driving to good spots and listening and observing. All abilities can enjoy this outing. No previous birding experience needed and everyone is welcome. Dress appropriately for the weather and bring snacks and water. If you have them, bring binoculars and a bird book, but we'll have some spare binoculars if you need.

Adopt-A-Highway - June 15 at 9 AM. Dale and Kandy Chik have spearheaded this trip for many years and we will again meet at their home at 29221 Old Highway 10 (Frontage road about 1 mile west of Ninemile Creek). This 2-mile section of Highway 10 is thankfully pretty clean and while we do pick up a few bags of trash, most years it is a chance to visit with neighbors and get in your daily steps. Bring gloves and join us for a little exercise and community service. We'll be done before lunch. Every year brings surprises, join us to see what this year brings.

Apple Cider Pressing and Chili Cookoff - October 12, 11 AM to 3 PM. This is the 2nd year for this extremely popular event hosted by the Ninemile Community Center Board at the Ninemile Community Center. One of the purposes of this event is to turn apples into cider and re-move food attractants from bears. Last year a host of happy helpers pressed apples, pears, and grapes into delicious ciders taken home by the participants. This family-friendly event includes information tables and a variety of chilis to enjoy. This year an apple pie contest is planned! Remember to save your apples and bring them to this event to make great juice and keep bears out of trouble. Look to our website or facebook page for more information about this event!