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**aikorns**  
AIKEN AUDUBON SOCIETY

## COLORFUL BIRDS

by Leslie Holzmnn



Saffron Finch



Variegated Fairy Wren



Painted Bunting

What's the first thing you see when you look at these birds? For me, it's their incredible diversity of color! And it's not only tropical birds—even cold climates produce blue Steller's Jays, red House Finches, and yellow goldfinches. Or consider the ruby gorget on a Broad-tailed Hummingbird, flashing its iridescent hue when the sunlight hits it just right. How can feathers be all these colors?



Blue birds, jays, bluebirds, and the like, get their colors, not from a pigment, but rather because blue light is scattered by keratin crystals and tiny air pockets in their feathers. The first time I ever saw a Blue Jay (*left*), it appeared monochromatic—black, white, and gray. I hunted through my field guide, but couldn't find the bird. Then the sun came out from behind the clouds, and the bird was transformed from dull gray to brilliant blue. Aha!

The brilliant metallic color of a hummingbird's gorget works the same way. Those throat feathers actually lack any pigments; the colors come from microscopic crystals in the feathers. That's why the color of the gorget changes according to the light shining on it.

Birds with yellow, orange, pink, and red feathers get their colors from the food they eat—in this case, carotenoids. Carotenoids are what make plants orange—fall leaves, yellow sunflowers, and of course, carrots. There are over 600 kinds, and they are all produced by photosynthesis. When birds eat these plants, the pigments are incorporated into their feathers. Since carotenoids are actually yellow, orange and red birds have to convert the chemicals to the other colors, courtesy of a specific set of genes. If you've ever seen a yellow male House Finch or cardinal, for example, it's because that individual has a mutation in the



...continued on page 6

## A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

As the end of the year (and decade!) approaches, it seems like a good time to thank everyone who contributes to the success of Aiken Audubon Society. None of our programs or field trips would be possible without folks willing to volunteer their time, energy, and expertise. In the past year, volunteers have contributed more than 500 hours to Aiken. This time was spent leading field trips, writing our newsletter and maintaining our website, finding and communicating with meeting speakers, educating the public, researching and commenting on conservation issues, and planning our Christmas Bird Count.

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### Coming programs

#### JANUARY 15

##### Birding Is a Human Right

Eric Eaton

#### FEBRUARY 19

##### 3 Billion Birds Gone

Clark Jones

#### MARCH 18

##### Birds and Renewable Energy

Amy Sherman

#### APRIL 15

##### Live Birds of Prey

Diana Miller, Pueblo Raptor Center

### Newsletter articles

Articles, announcements, or other items of special interest to Aiken Audubon members are welcome for consideration. We'd love to hear from you!

The deadline for submissions to the March/April 2020 issue of the *Aikorns* is Wednesday, February 19. Contact the editor, Leslie Holzmnn, at [Editor@AikenAudubon.com](mailto:Editor@AikenAudubon.com) or call/text (719) 964-3197.

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## JANUARY 15/ ERIC EATON BIRDING IS A HUMAN RIGHT



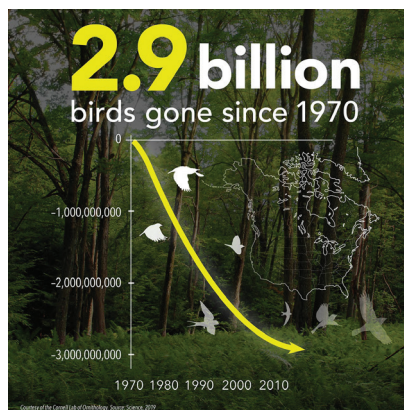
In the age of bird decline, are birders themselves becoming an endangered species? Instead of claiming to speak for our fine-feathered friends, it may be time to stand up for our rights as birders. Arguments for the rights of nature have fallen flat, so perhaps we need to assert our collective rights to nature. Join us for a unique perspective on a not-so-new angle to wildlife conservation in general, and birds in particular. Leave the legal dictionary and politics at home, but bring your heart and soul and honest voice to this presentation and the discussion to follow.

Eric R. Eaton is one of our most entertaining and educational speakers. You know him as “Bug Eric” on the internet and social media. He is lead author of the *Kaufman Field Guide to Insects of North America* and co-author of the second edition of *Insects Did It First*.

## FEBRUARY 19 / CLARK JONES 3 BILLION BIRDS GONE

A recent study estimates that we’ve lost nearly 3 billion birds in North America since 1970. Dr. Clark Jones will discuss the findings of the recent paper in the journal *Science* and how everyday volunteers made up a large part of the data set. We’ll discuss how you can become involved in bird conservation to help reverse this trend, as well as opportunities to contribute to bird monitoring in the future.

Clark is vice-president of Aiken Audubon and a wildlife biologist. He currently helps the Department of Defense with habitat management and wildlife monitoring on our nearby military bases.



Aiken Audubon programs are free and open to the public. They are held at Bear Creek Nature Center, located at 245 Bear Creek Road in Colorado Springs, 80906. Coffee and socializing begins at 6:30 pm and programs begin at 7 pm.

If inclement weather cancels an Aiken meeting, decision will be made by 1:00 PM on the meeting date. Notification will be placed on our [website](#), on our [Facebook page](#), and sent out through our email notification list. If there is any doubt, please contact any Aiken board member via telephone. Always, your safety is first, so use your own judgement when coming to a meeting.



Look for the  
Aiken Audubon Society  
Facebook page!  
[facebook.com/pages/Aiken-Audubon-Society](https://facebook.com/pages/Aiken-Audubon-Society)

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## Aiken Audubon Field Trips & Events

Everyone is welcome on Aiken field trips, regardless of experience level or membership in Audubon. Contact trip leader for details and to let them know you are coming. Remember to pack your binoculars, scope (if you have one), field guide, water, snack or lunch, hat, rain gear, sun screen, bug spray, camera(?), and some gas money for the drivers. No dogs are allowed.

Note: In cases of extreme weather, trips may be cancelled. If this might be a possibility, please contact the trip leader an hour before the scheduled meeting time. To receive e-mailed reminders of upcoming field trips and notices of last-minute cancellations, send your name and e-mail address to [AikenAudubon@gmail.com](mailto:AikenAudubon@gmail.com).

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### **JANUARY 1, 2020, 8 AM – NOON (LATEST) BIRDING & BICYCLES AT CLEAR SPRING RANCH**

Start out the New Year with a great outdoor activity. Clear Spring Ranch has several miles of relatively flat dirt road and trails that makes it a suitable location for birding by bike for a good range of ability levels and most types of bicycles. Using the bikes to help us cover more terrain, we aim to visit most of the park to see what birds are there.

We will ride slowly and make frequent stops to bird along the way, looking to find the wintering Western Screech Owl if he's available, riding up to the fish ladder three miles north and possibly a bit beyond, checking out a few side spurs on our way back, and then heading south a mile to the train bridge before coming back to the trailhead. If the trails are not mostly dry and clear of snow, this trip will be canceled and offered again at a later date. Total riding distance should be ten miles or less.



Trip is limited to 6 participants. Meet at the Clear Spring Ranch parking lot. Bring your bikes, binoculars, water, safety gear and anything else you need/want for the trip. Contact Diana Beatty at [otowi33.33@gmail.com](mailto:otowi33.33@gmail.com) to sign up.

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### **SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 7:30 ~ 11:30 AM RED ROCK CANYON OPEN SPACE**

Join us in February for a walk through Red Rock Canyon Open Space, where we will be on the lookout for our winter resident birds and maybe some unexpected visitors! Target birds will include White-winged Dark-eyed Junco, American Tree Sparrow, Northern Shrike, and maybe a Northern Goshawk, if we're lucky. Plan for about 4 hours of walking with a fair amount of moderately strenuous uphill travel. Feel free to come and go as you wish. Bring your binos, water, snacks, and don't forget your hiking shoes. Limited to 20 participants—we'll split into groups if needed. To sign up, e-mail Clark Jones at [Clark.AikenAudubon@gmail.com](mailto:Clark.AikenAudubon@gmail.com).

## More trips online!

For the latest information on field trips and events:

**AikenAudubon.com**

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### **SATURDAY, MARCH 7, 6 AM – 2 PM BEAVER CREEK STATE WILDLIFE AREA**

Beaver Creek State Wildlife Area is a 2,200+ acre parcel of land in northeastern Fremont County. It is characterized by pinyon-juniper scrub, riparian woodland, mixed conifer forest, and dramatic canyons. Although we will primarily be birding on trails, expect to hike over difficult terrain. This will be a strenuous trip, but the scenery is worth it. Expect to find birds typical for late winter in the Pikes Peak foothills and riparian habitats. Possible species include Scaled Quail, Wild Turkey, American Dipper, Bewick's and Canyon Wrens, Juniper Titmouse, Canyon Towhee, Golden Eagle, and numerous woodpecker, bluebird, and Corvid species.

Meet in the SW corner of the Safeway parking lot at 6520 S. Academy. We will carpool from there, leaving promptly at 6 am and returning no later than 2 pm. Maximum: 10 participants. Contact trip leader Tyler Stuart at [tylerhstuart@gmail.com](mailto:tylerhstuart@gmail.com) for more information and to sign up.

**Would you like to lead a field trip? No experience necessary, just enthusiasm and a friendly attitude. Contact Diana Beatty, [FieldTrips@AikenAudubon.com](mailto:FieldTrips@AikenAudubon.com), for more information on volunteering to lead a trip for Aiken Audubon.**

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## **A MYSTERY SOLVED!**

Have you ever wondered why flamingos (and some other birds) prefer to stand on one leg? A pair of neuromechanists—Lena Ting at Emory University and Young-Hui Chang at the Georgia Institute of Technology—recently came up with the surprising answer. It's easier for the bird! Who would have guessed? Unlike with us humans, flamingos' skeletons are arranged to perfectly center their weight over one side or the other. As when they're holding onto a perch, no effort is required. Ting and Chang discovered that for a flamingo, standing on one leg is such a stable position, even dead birds can do it!



## MEXICAN SPOTTED OWL HABITAT ENDANGERED

At its February 2020 meeting, the Colorado State Land Board (SLB) will consider whether to allow Martin Marietta Materials (MMM) to mine in Mexican Spotted Owl (MSO) habitat. MMM currently mines aggregate at Red Canyon Quarry in eastern Fremont County, near birding hotspot Barrett Road. The northern section of their lease area is high quality MSO habitat, and at least one Spotted Owl was seen in this location in 2019. MMM is not currently mining that area.

To avoid quarrying in this known nesting habitat, which would require an incidental take permit, MMM is asking to be allowed to mine adjacent SLB property in its stead. The problem is that this, also, is MSO habitat. And while natural resource consultants consider it lesser quality habitat, it nevertheless provides potential MSO habitat. Furthermore, a biologist has observed an MSO there in recent years.

Your Aiken board is currently writing comments on this proposal, and will likely oppose mining in both locations. It is not a clear-cut issue. Mining in either area will affect the local MSO population, not to mention wildlife habitat and corridors, as well as water quality.

## MARCH 2020 COLORADO BLM OIL AND GAS LEASE SALE

Aiken Audubon recently signed on to a National Audubon Society comment letter addressing proposed oil and gas lease sales in northwest Colorado, and in particular the North Park area (Walden, Arapaho NWR).

Sage-grouse protection was the utmost priority. National Audubon's comments included:

- BLM has not assessed the March 2020 lease sale's conformance with the 2015 Colorado Sage-grouse Plan
- BLM has not prioritized leasing outside of sage-grouse priority habitat
- BLM did not consider the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of this sale
- BLM failed to analyze a reasonable range of alternatives.
- The underlying Risk Management Plans are inadequate to support leasing without supplemental NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act)

The letter concluded by claiming that the lease sale "violated federal law including the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act. BLM should withdraw the offered leases and reinstate its environmental analysis, in order to comply with these laws."

### JOIN THE CONSERVATION ACTION TEAM

Are you interested in learning about regional conservation issues? In sending an email to a legislator, to protect a property or species that you care about? Aiken Audubon has a list of folks who could be contacted for issues of import. No commitment required. To join, please contact Linda Hodges at (719) 635.5551 or [Conservation@AikenAudubon.com](mailto:Conservation@AikenAudubon.com)

## CONSERVATION GROUPS FILE FEDERAL LAWSUIT OVER ICEBREAKER WIND PROJECT

**PRECEDENT-SETTING PROJECT IN LAKE ERIE MUST DEMONSTRATE THAT BENEFITS OUTWEIGH RISKS**

On December 11, American Bird Conservancy (ABC) and Black Swamp Bird Observatory filed suit against the U.S. Department of Energy and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The suit focuses on the agencies' failure to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act and Clean Water Act, respectively, during their evaluation of environmental impacts and alternatives associated with the Icebreaker Wind project. Icebreaker would place a precedent-setting wind energy facility in Lake Erie, offshore of Cleveland, Ohio.

Constructing turbines in the proposed project site would pose substantial collision risks to the enormous numbers of birds that use the area throughout the year, including large concentrations of migrating songbirds, as well as Common Loons, globally significant populations of Red-breasted Mergansers, and other waterfowl. Further, construction and increased vessel traffic associated with the project could pollute the waters used by these species. Despite this, the agencies have failed to adequately evaluate environmental impacts and reasonable alternatives that would reduce the project's impacts.

If approved, Icebreaker would be the first offshore wind facility in the Great Lakes and only the second in the United States. The site selected by the developer, the Central Basin of Lake Erie, is within a National Audubon Society-designated Global Important Bird Area that draws millions of birds annually. Radar studies have recorded large numbers of migratory birds and bats near Great Lakes shorelines, including Lake Erie's south shore. Many were flying at altitudes that would be within the rotor-swept area of wind turbines, making these birds susceptible to collision-related deaths, injuries, and disturbances. ☞

PHOTO: JEANNIE MITCHELL





## 2019 CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT RESULTS

Dear Colorado Springs Christmas Bird Counters,

Thank you to all of you for participating in this year's Colorado Springs CBC. I appreciate the time and effort that each of you dedicated to make this count a success. A total of 156 people participated as field observers and/or feeder watchers in 30 areas within our



count circle. We covered 152 miles on foot, 460 miles by car, and a total of 212 party hours for this year's count. Through such effort, we found 93 species on count day and one additional count week species. The 70-year average species count is 80.4 species, though the average since 1990 is 91 species. We tallied 16,953 individual birds, considerably higher than the 70-year average of 11,331 individuals (average since 1990 = 16,402 individuals).

I have attached the annual count records, which include historical data for the Colorado Springs CBC back to 1950. The results for the 2019 Colorado Springs CBC are also attached, and are presented by individual count areas.

We set several record high counts of species this year, which can largely be attributed to the effort that area leaders and participants made to cover our count circle thoroughly and carefully. The following species set or tied record highs for number of individuals counted, and the parenthetical year indicates the year the previous record was set: Cackling Goose (2,165 individuals, 2017), Belted Kingfisher (13, tied 2000 and 2018), Bald Eagle (8, 1956!), Downy Woodpecker (90, 2015), and White-breasted Nuthatch (177, 2014). Several field counters noted good conifer cone crops, and large numbers of Pine Siskins, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and other irruptive species that respond to the quality of the cone crops were documented.



A Pacific Wren, a first for the count and only the second record for El Paso County, was found in Bear Creek Canyon. Also, a gull in the genus *Leucophaeus* (either a Franklin's Gull or Laughing Gull) was observed in flight over Fort Carson. Oddly, not only do these species not spend the winter in Colorado, but the observed bird also had a fully black head, which implies the bird was in breeding plumage. A Barrow's Goldeneye was observed at Prospect Lake during count week. This species has been documented on this CBC only three times, most recently in 2005.

This event is truly a group effort. Each year, Colorado Springs has one of the highest participant turnouts of any CBC in Colorado. CBCs are a great way to contribute to the effort to sustain our bird populations. Cornell Lab recently began a campaign to highlight Seven Simple Actions to Help Birds, among which is contributing to citizen science. Follow the link to see how else you can easily help birds.

## A WINTERTIME ROMANCE: GREAT HORNED OWL NESTING SEASON

by Matthew Luzzincourt

As colder weather sets in and Valentine's Day approaches, love is in the air: especially for great horned owls. Most great horned owls search for a mate in January and early February. Once a mating pair is formed, the two owls will be a monogamous breeding pair for life. Nothing wrong with a fast-moving relationship!

While the dead of winter might seem like a peculiar time for nesting, the early start has its benefits. Eggs must be incubated for around a month before hatching, and owlets require another month before being able to leave the nest. Hatchlings are unable to even open their eyes for their first seven days! The early nesting season allows time for the owlets to grow and develop before springtime rolls around.

You can hear the low-pitched, conspicuous calls (hoo, hoo-hoo, hooo, hooo) of great horned owls throughout the year's early months as hooting rituals ensue. They can prosper around people, and while they are often found in forested areas, you may just as well find one in your local suburb. Keep an eye out for these love-birds and their young nestlings during your winter travels! ❧



PHOTO: LESLIE HOLZMANN

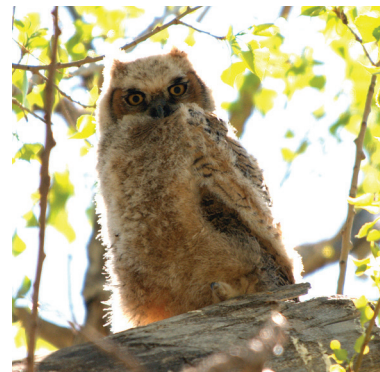


PHOTO: LESLIE HOLZMANN

If you have any suggestions for changes or improvements for the Colorado Springs CBC, please share them with me. I look forward to seeing everyone again for next year's CBC.

Birdifully,

Tyler Stuart

Colorado Springs CBC Compiler

Aiken Audubon Society

**Download PDFs or Excel spreadsheets:**

- [2019 CS CBC Final Tally PDF](#)
- [CS CBC Year Summaries 1950-2019 PDF](#)
- Excel versions are available on the [Aiken website](#)



Black-naped Oriole



Northern Cardinal



Black-vented Oriole

genes that do the conversion. They're limited to the yellows of the original pigment.

You may have seen pale gray or white flamingos in zoos. That's because these and other boiled-lobster-pink birds, such as Scarlet Ibises and Roseate Spoonbills (right), get their pigments, in this case the carotenoid canthaxanthin, either directly from an aquatic blue-green algae, or from the crustaceans that eat the algae. The more intense the feather color, the more direct the source. Often, the food provided for captive birds lacks canthaxanthin, and the birds show their underlying drabness instead.



Lady Ross's Turaco



Australian King Parrot

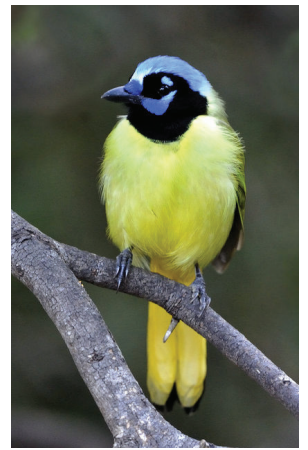
There are a few exceptions. Turacos get their red color from a different type of pigment. Porphyrins contain about 7% copper, which is why they're so bright. Another pigment, turacoverdin, is green. And parrots get their tropical colors from yet another group of pigments, the psittacofulvins. (Parrots are in the order Psittaciformes.)



What about black and brown birds, such as this Brown Thrasher (left), or this Australian Raven? Their dark hues are due to the same molecule that colors human hair and skin—melatonin. Why are there so many black birds? Melatonin makes feathers stronger and longer lasting. That's especially important for flight feathers, which take the

most punishment. In addition, flight feathers high in melatonin are more aerodynamic, perhaps because they hold their shape better.

So how does this all fit together? Consider the Green Jay. The feathers on its head are blue due to their structural make-up. Its body is covered by feathers with that same structure, that also contain yellow carotenoids that the bird has eaten. The green is more pronounced on the back, with yellow on the belly and underside of the tail. Finally, the black head and tail feathers contain melatonin. The result is one gorgeous bird! ☘



## Flores' Funnies



Artist Rick Flores, an El Paso County Nature Center volunteer, enjoys sharing his views of happenings at Bear Creek & Fountain Creek Nature Centers.

## President's Message, continued from front page

Thank you also to those who have supported Aiken financially throughout the year. As one of only two Colorado Audubon chapters that does not charge a membership fee, we rely on donations to fund our organization. This year we took in over five times more in donations than we did in 2018, much of which came from our first-ever annual appeal letter. This money will be used to enhance our education materials, bring in great speakers, fund our small grants program, and support the Pikes Peak Birding and Nature Festival.

Finally, we want to thank all of you who continue to support us by attending our meetings and field trips. Without such enthusiastic and engaged members, our chapter would not be the vibrant community that it is today. To all of you, happy holidays, happy new decade, and happy birding.

**Anna Joy Lehmiche**  
President, Aiken Audubon Society