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aikorns

AIKEN AUDUBON SOCIETY

FOWL FEET

Story & photos by Leslie Holzmann



When out in the field identifying birds, how often do we look at the feet—if we can see them at all? Wading and swimming birds keep their feet under water and out of sight, and mind. Perched birds' feet are often hidden in the foliage, or too small to see from a distance. Yet, bird feet can provide a clue, not just to a bird's identity, but also to its habitat, diet, and general lifestyle.

Most bird species have four toes. Typically, the “big toe” points backwards while the other three face forward. They walk on their toes, which means they are “digitigrades” (so are cats and dogs, and many other animals). The “Thick-Knees,” such as this Bush Stone-Curlew, are named for what look like knobby knees. However, if you look at the skeleton, what we consider knees are actually ankles, so the bird family should actually be called “Thick-Ankles”!

Loons and grebes are the exception—they walk on their metatarsals as well as their toes, like we do. This makes them “plantigrades” (they “plant” their entire foot on the ground).



Birds of prey have strong, grasping talons tipped with sharp claws. Osprey even have spines on their soles, handy when you consider how hard it is to hold onto a wet fish!

Ptarmigans have feathery “snowshoes.”

Typically, birds have legs and feet that are the same color, but one glimpse of its “golden slippers”

cinches the identity of a Snowy Egret. (On the other side of the world, Little Egrets have the same black legs plus yellow feet combo, making it difficult to ID the rare stray.)

Chickens, emus, and other ground-dwelling birds have tough feet with sharp claws used to scratch the dirt. Although they have the typical four toes, cranes, rails, and pheasants have their first toe higher up on their leg where it won't drag as they walk or run along the ground.



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A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Ever since the winter of 2016 – 2017, when it was drained to allow for repairs, local birders have been anxiously awaiting the day when Big Johnson Reservoir would once again hold water. One of the premier birding spots in El Paso County, the reservoir has an eBird list of 251 species and over 1700 submitted checklists. As one of the few local water bodies that was usually ice-free during much of the winter, it was an important winter habitat for both birds and birders.

As many of you likely know already, judging by the 53 checklists submitted since water first became visible in mid-January, the refilling process has officially begun! Because of the limited time when water can be drawn from Fountain Creek, it may take years before the reservoir reaches its pre-repair water levels. However, waterfowl have

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Coming programs

MARCH 18

Birds and Renewable Energy

Amy Sherman

APRIL 15

Live Birds of Prey

Diana Miller, Pueblo Raptor Center

MAY 20

Colorado Springs Rocks and the Origin of Bird

Sharon Milito

Newsletter articles

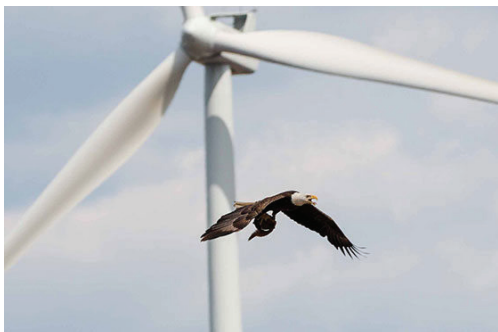
Articles, announcements, or other items of special interest to Aiken Audubon members are welcome for consideration. We'd love to hear from you!

The deadline for submissions to the May/Summer 2020 issue of the *Aikorns* is Wednesday, April 15. Contact the editor, Leslie Holzmann, at Editor@AikenAudubon.com or call/text (719) 964-3197.

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MARCH 18 / AMY SHERMAN BIRDS AND RENEWABLE ENERGY



With the increase in demand for renewable energy across the U.S., there is also increasing concern over potential impacts to birds and other wildlife. This presentation will provide an overview of the various federal regulations that govern development of renewable energy with respect to birds, as well as the best management practices and mitigation measures utilized by wind projects in order to manage avian impacts. Major regulations discussed will include the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, the Endangered

Species Act, and how the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service managed compliance with these regulations. We'll also discuss how local renewable energy projects are addressing avian concerns, and what you can do to support changes to regulations to strengthen protection of birds.

Amy Sherman is a Project Manager and Biologist with Tetra Tech, Inc. in Colorado Springs. She has over 12 years of experience specializing in environmental permitting support for energy, transportation and water projects across the Great Plains and Western United States. Ms. Sherman is a member of the Aiken Audubon Society and an avid local birder.

APRIL 15 / DIANA MILLER LIVE BIRDS OF PREY

Learn about hawks, owls, eagles, falcons, and vultures through an hour-long presentation featuring live birds of prey. Naturalist Diana Miller will discuss raptor adaptations, predator/prey relationships, natural history, personal stories of the birds presented, and the [Nature and Wildlife Discovery Center](#)'s work to rehabilitate sick, injured, and orphaned birds of prey.

Diana's fascination and passion for birds of prey started the day she met Buddy, the Great Horned Owl. That was in 1985, when she arrived at Pueblo's Greenway & Nature Center to do a series of internships in environmental education and the center's raptor rehabilitation facility. After completing her education, she returned to Pueblo, where she has been Director of the Raptor Center since 1989. She now also directs the newly formed Nature and Wildlife Discovery Center.

For more than 30 years she has dedicated her career to the pursuit of quality rehabilitation care for wildlife, especially birds of prey. Diana also puts equal energy into educating the public about our native raptors and wildlife in general. Her greatest rewards in her career are experiencing the joy of an animal returning to its home, seeing children's faces when they meet an educational raptor in their classroom, and the honor of meeting others who share her passion of all things wild.



PHOTO: LESLIE HOLZMANN

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.

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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.

SATURDAY, MARCH 14, 7:30 AM - 3 PM LAKE PUEBLO STATE PARK

Join us for this Aiken Audubon early spring outing to Lake Pueblo State Park. Waterbirds will certainly be a major focus—we'll scan for loons, ducks, grebes, gulls and more from the lake's best vantage points—but we'll also be alert for resident and early migrant raptors and land birds in the park's desert habitats, as well as wooded areas such as the Rock Creek Canyon area. Our actual itinerary will be flexible based on recent reports, weather conditions and time, but it should be a fun day of easy birding (no long hikes planned) and we'll have scopes to share for better views of those more distant waterbirds and raptors.

We'll plan to spend the full morning and a few hours of the afternoon in or near the park, so pack a lunch and water, and remember to bring along warm layers in the event of chilling early spring breezes.

Group size limited to 15. We'll meet at the Safeway parking lot at South Academy and Hwy 115 (6520 S Academy Blvd.) at 7:30 a.m. for carpooling. Please note an \$8/vehicle daily fee (or Colorado State Parks annual pass) is required for entry to Lake Pueblo State Park. Contact trip leader Kip Miller at KipGMiller@gmail.com to register.

SATURDAY, MARCH 14 ETC. BIRDING 101

Fountain Creek Nature Center is again offering Birding 101, and introduction to a hobby that gets you outside, moving, collecting, socializing, and always improving! Join us to jump-start your new passion and skill set. You'll learn beginning birding basics and develop your ability to identify birds by sight and sound. By the end, you'll be hooked and confident! See their [website](#) for details.

TUESDAY, MARCH 24, 6:45 AM - ALL DAY COLORADO CITY & RYE HOTSPOTS

Colorado City and Rye are very under-birded areas. We'll try to hit all the hotspots in this area to see what is there and just enjoy the day. We'll hope to see a Lewis's Woodpecker, but there are no guarantees. Habitats vary, including grassland, marsh, riparian, ponds, and pine forest.

Participants will need to pack food/drink for the day and be prepared for some walking in a variety of conditions and habitats.

Meet in the Sam's Club parking lot, 4385 Venetucci Blvd.,

More trips online!

For the latest information on field trips and events:

AikenAudubon.com

Colorado Springs. Trip capacity is 12 people/3 cars. Contact Diana Beatty at otowi33.33@gmail.com with questions and to sign-up.

TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 8 AM GARDEN OF THE GODS

This morning before the crowds of the day (and summer!) arrive, we'll enjoy an easy birding walk through Garden of the God's Central Garden area in search of typical foothills species. In addition to the spectacular scenery, we'll especially hope to enjoy the aerial acrobatics of the many White-throated Swifts and get one or more of the resident Prairie Falcons in our scope for all to enjoy. The steep rock faces can be good locations to see and hear Canyon Wren and the juniper areas are good for a variety of species including Western Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire and sometimes Juniper Titmouse.

Kip Miller will lead this outing. Group size limited to 15. We'll meet at the main (North Garden) parking area along the loop road. Please contact Kip at kipgmiller@gmail.com to register.

SATURDAY, APRIL 18, 8:30 AM KETTLE LAKES

Mid-April should be a good time for a visit to the Kettle Lakes area north of Colorado Springs. Migrant ducks and other waterbirds could be present on the lakes and the adjacent brushy areas and pines should host a variety of resident and migrant landbirds. With luck we may find a few raptors as well, possibly including Osprey and Great Horned Owl. We'll walk 2 to 3 miles on easy terrain and have one or more spotting scopes available to share.

Kip Miller will lead this outing. Group size limited to 15. Meet in the parking area at the north end of Airfield Drive. (Airfield Drive is a right turn off of South Gate Blvd, just before the South Gate entrance to the US Air Force Academy.) Please contact Kip at kipgmiller@gmail.com to register.

**FRIDAY - SUNDAY,
MAY 15 - 17**



REGISTRATION ENDS MAY 11!

PikesPeakBirdingAndNatureFestival.com

WATER IN BIG JOHNSON RESERVOIR

Hooray and hallelujah! After what feels like eons, Fountain Mutual Irrigation Co (FMIC) has begun to re-fill Big Johnson. Though it will take years to get back to capacity, the reservoir has lured back numerous water birds in the area nearest the dam. And due to the incoming water displacing rodents, eagles, hawks and falcons galore are on the hunt. If you venture out, be sure to bring your scope, as the birds are still far off. According to FMIC manager, Gary Steen, water will continue flowing into the reservoir through March 15th.

RED CANYON QUARRY PROPOSAL DROPPED!

At the end of a three-hour meeting, the State Land Board (SLB) found themselves without an advocate for the proposed Red Canyon Quarry “land swap” in Fremont County. Due to confusion as to what entity had originated the idea, the board found that more deliberation was needed.

In a complicated move, the SLB had presented an exchange in which Martin Marietta (MMM) would essentially expand Red Canyon Quarry into an adjacent area, while giving up some land in the current lease parcel. The quarry currently operates in Fremont County, off Barrett Road. If you’ve birded that road, south of Turkey Creek, you’re familiar with MMM’s countless trucks roaring by.

Aiken found that the proposed parcel is conducive to Mexican Spotted Owls, as well as being adjacent to the Beaver Creek Wilderness Study Area, a wintering area for elk and bighorn sheep, and major wildlife corridor. Aiken recently received word that Martin Marietta has withdrawn their permit application, and the matter is officially closed.

COLORADO WILDERNESS BILL PASSES HOUSE

Congresswoman Diana DeGette’s (D-CO) Wilderness bill has finally passed the US House of Representatives, as a result of twenty years of effort. The bill would permanently protect 660,000 acres of wild lands in Colorado, in 36 different areas. Parcels not far from Colorado Springs— such as Beaver Creek, Grape Creek and Brown’s Canyon—would no longer risk development. As part of the Protecting America’s Wilderness Act, the bill would protect a total of 1.4 million acres across the U.S.

While this is great news, another wilderness bill, Senator Michael Bennet’s CORE Bill (Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act) has also recently passed the House. CORE would protect over 400,000 acres of land in Colorado, but would omit Beaver Creek and Grape Creek. Unfortunately, neither bill is expected to pass the Senate.

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) 425-1903 or Conservation@AikenAudubon.com.

AUDUBON: NEW SAGE-GROUSE REVIEW PLAN IS “NOTHING MORE THAN WINDOW-DRESSING”

DENVER (FEBRUARY 19, 2020)—“The environmental review process announced today by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is nothing more than window dressing for a process that they should be taking seriously,” said Nada Culver, vice president for public lands and senior policy counsel with the National Audubon Society. “This attempt by the administration to get around their loss in court last year is yet another egregious example of their concerted effort to undermine needed protections for sage-grouse, not a genuine commitment to remedy the significant flaws in their last attempt, despite a court giving them clear direction. They have repeatedly ignored science, and disregarded public input and common sense in their mission to upend a historic and popular multi-state, bi-partisan plan that was achieved more than four years ago.”

In October, a federal judge in the District Court of Idaho ruled that the BLM must halt its plans to expand leasing, drilling, and other industrial activities across millions of acres of habitat for the Greater Sage-Grouse. This range includes Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Nevada, California, and Oregon. The ruling put the landmark 2015 BLM plans enacted for the Greater Sage-Grouse back in effect until the court makes a final decision on the lawsuit challenging planned rollbacks.

The court found that the BLM likely violated the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in a number of ways by failing to consider the effects of making changes contrary to accepted science, failing to consider the cumulative impacts of the change across the affected states, failing to look at other alternatives, and failing to conduct additional analysis despite making major changes to the use of compensatory mitigation to address harm to habitat. ☞

A BAFFLE OF CROWS

Story & Photos by Leslie Holzmann

Is that a Northwestern Crow or an American Crow?

Crows are one of the most common birds in the Pacific Northwest. There are crows in every tall fir, flying overhead, perching on lamp posts. You can't miss them. And then, if you happen down to the beach—particularly in Puget Sound—there are hundreds more, picking through the seaweed on intertidal rocks, foraging through the debris left by the receding waters, feasting on dead sea



life that has washed up on the sand. But, are those American Crows or Northwestern Crows?

The species have been considerate separate since 1958. Supposedly, Northwestern Crows are slightly smaller, and their voice is “huskier” (whatever that means). While American crows can be found across most of the US and Canada, Northwestern Crows restricted to a narrow strip of beaches and mudflats along the coasts of Washington, British Columbia, and southeastern Alaska.

If you've ever tried to distinguish between these two AOU species, you know how incredibly difficult it is. They're both big, black birds. They both caw, at least to my ears. I've been totally baffled for years. The only reason I have both species checked off on my life list is because I've seen so many crows on the beaches in Washington that I have to assume some must be Northwestern.

Now, it appears that all that hemming and hawing and trying to decide if a caw was husky or not was a waste of effort. A recent study* of both species' DNA reveals that they may actually be a single species.



Apparently, back in the ice ages, there were glaciers dividing two populations of American Crow. Those crows on the ocean side of the barrier diverged genetically from those on the inland side, and the one species began to become two.

Then the ice melted. With the barrier gone, the two groups of crows were once again able to interbreed. There were indeed two distinct populations—perhaps two distinct species—but the process of speciation has now reversed. In fact, there has been so much interbreeding that the paper's authors doubt that any purebred crows remain. They're all hybrids!

The paper, by scientists from the University of Washington, the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, and the U.S. Geological Survey, was published in *Molecular Ecology* this week, so no action has yet been taken on the findings. Still, I wouldn't be at all surprised to find that, when all is said and done, the two crow species end up lumped together. I'll be sad to lose a lifer, but that loss will be more than offset by the relief that I no longer have to guess which crow I'm staring at! ☘

— The actual paper is behind a paywall, so only the abstract is available. There's an easy-to-understand summary at [Gizmodo.com](https://gizmodo.com).

ABA'S 2020 BIRD OF THE YEAR—

CEDAR WAXWINGS

The ABA Bird of 2020 is the Cedar Waxwing. They couldn't have made a better choice. With so many issues dividing us, the Cedar Waxwing is the perfect antidote. As Nate Swick wrote in the ABA's introduction to this handsome species:

Famously gregarious, Cedar Waxwings are all about community. They share berries, they congregate at fruiting trees, they even occasionally overimbibe. Birders, too, are frequently a social bunch. Gathering for monthly bird club meetings, at rare bird stakeouts, in online forums, and at birding festivals. Taking joy in our numbers. Making connections. Sharing information and experiences like so many

berries on a fruiting holly tree.

While regularly seen in the Pikes Peak region, especially during the winter, waxwings aren't so common that we become jaded by their presence. Rather, every sighting is a thrill.

One of the few birds that can live solely on fruit for months at a time, they can be enticed into our yards by including plenty of berry-producing trees and shrubs, such as honeysuckles, dogwood, serviceberry, juniper, hawthorn, and winterberry. All that sugar makes for thirsty birds, so make sure you also include a water source. ☘

This waxwing was enjoying the Russian olives at Chico Basin Ranch.



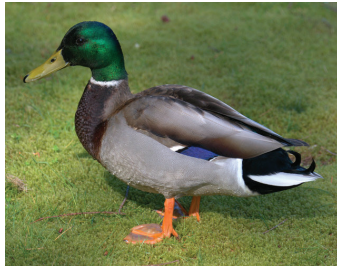
PHOTO: LESLIE HOLZMANN

Feet... continued from front page

Cassowaries have three toes. The middle one is tipped with a treacherous claw that can be five inches long. It's used for defense against potential predators.

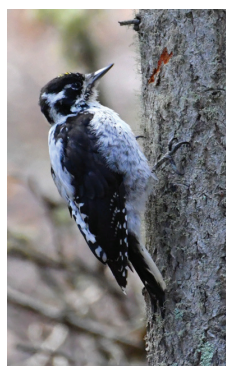
Ostriches are unique in having their digits fused into two toes. Their feet mimic a horse's hooves—perfect for long-distance running.

Ducks, loons, and gulls have palmate feet, with webbing between the three forward toes. On the other hand, the toes of some other water-going species all face forward, with webbing between all four digits. Examples of this arrangement include pelicans, cormorants, frigatebirds, and gannets.



Shorebirds, especially those who typically walk on soft mud or sand, have some webbing, but not as much as ducks. Instead, their long toes spread their weight over a large surface. The jacanas take this to an extreme, as they can scamper over floating waterlily leaves!

Grebes and coots have lobate feet. Instead of webbing, their toes are thick and fleshy. They get less propulsion than birds with webbing (there's a reason swim fins are webbed, not lobate!), but it doesn't seem to cause them any problems, and they can walk more easily on land this way. (Have you ever tried walking in fins?)



In birds with zygodactyl feet, two toes (the first and fourth) point forward while the middle two point backward. This offers increased dexterity to species such as parrots, that use their feet to manipulate objects, and stabilizes birds that climb trees, such as woodpeckers. (But don't forget yet another exception—the American Three-toed Woodpecker—with feet that are missing the first digit.) Then there are the trogons; where toes one and two are the backward ones, while three and four aim forward.

Some birds have built-in flexibility. Swifts can either turn all their toes forward—or not. This is a big help when you spend significant time hanging on a vertical wall. Owls, too, can choose which way their fourth digit points—helpful for birds that both perch in trees and grasp squirming prey. Notice how, in the photo on the left, this Barn Owl has three toes in front of the perch, while in the photo on the right it has only two.

And speaking of perching... songbirds have thin feet and toes, ideally suited to hanging on to branches.

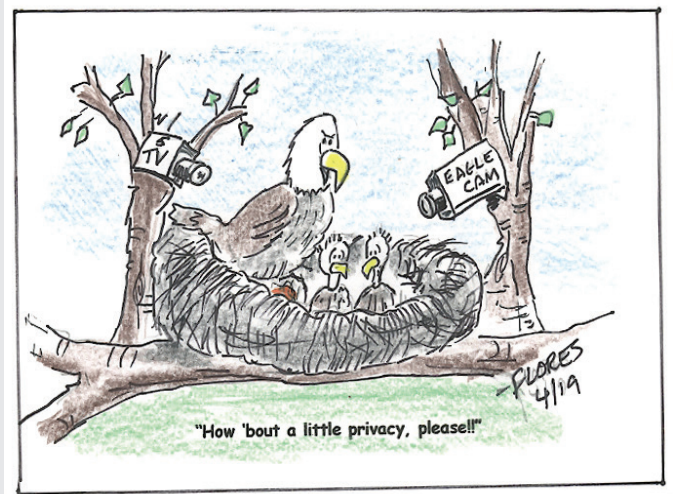
I've long wondered how they keep their grasp even when asleep. It turns out that this feat is accomplished by a simple locking mechanism.



The Achilles' tendon runs down the back of the leg, enabling both birds and people to move their feet up and down. According to Ornithology.com,

When a bird lands on a branch, the ankle bends and the Achilles' tendon is stretched. When the tendon stretches, it pulls on the toes and curls them around the branch. There is no muscular effort involved in holding onto the branch—it's automatic. When the bird takes off, the legs straighten, the tendon relaxes, and the toes release their hold on the branch. It's amazing what you can learn from a close look at bird feet! ☘

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

already returned by the hundreds, and spring migration should bring an inundation of shorebirds. Interestingly, large numbers of birds of prey are also being seen, likely drawn by a flush of small mammals being driven out of their reclaimed habitat as it begins to fill with water.

The adjacent Bluestem Prairie Open Space recently added four more miles of trail which offer additional vantage points of the reservoir, and more room to stretch your legs. So if you haven't made the trip yet, grab your binoculars, a scope, and a friend, and head out to witness the rebirth of a favorite local hotspot.

Anna Joy Lehnicke
President, Aiken Audubon Society



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