



The Chat

Volume 53 Number 7

Columbia Audubon Society

March 2011

<http://columbia-audubon.missouri.org/>

Serving Audrain, Boone, Cooper, Howard, Monroe and Randolph Counties

MARCH 16 CAS MEETING: A Bird's Life

March 16 at 7:30 p.m.
Unitarian-Universalist Church, 2615 Shepard

Bob Bartlett will take us on an illustrated journey through the typical annual cycle of "A Bird's Life". The trip consists of about 100 close-up Power Point photos showing birds going about their business as the seasons go by.

Bob Bartlett is a retired engineer with a lifelong interest in birds. An Osher course by Bill Clark and Edge Wade about 4 years ago rekindled his interest. Not content to view small birds from afar, Bob decided to create close-up photographs of the birds he saw as a retirement project. Since then he has photographed more than 200 species, mostly in central Missouri, in all manner of habitats and activities. Using his photographs, he teaches courses about birds at Osher Life Long Learning and gives occasional shows in the community. Bob lives at Lenoir Woods with his wife Ada.

YOU, TOO, CAN WRITE FOR THE CHAT!

Howard Hinkel

Would you be interested in writing something for "The Chat"? If any CAS member wishes to submit something, Editor David Schenker and I encourage you to do so. As a newsletter "The Chat" will usually be mostly "news," but we welcome contributions on any

subject related to the interests and mission of Columbia Audubon. Just had a fantastic birding day? Are you hoping to begin or have you already planted native plants in your yard, hoping to attract more birds? Interesting and successful water features? Concerned about habitat in the area? We would enjoy receiving a piece from folks in any of the CAS counties. The field of possibilities is vast. Write it up and send it to David at schenkerd@missouri.edu or 107 Westwood Ave, Columbia, MO 65203.



SAVE THE TREES, AND AUDUBON'S MONEY

If you're receiving this newsletter by email, you're getting the news sooner, the pictures (when we have them) in color, and you're saving both trees and money. You know about the trees. What you might not know is that the annual cost of printing and mailing the *Chat* almost equals the sum total of dues Columbia Audubon collects. If you don't use email (and we all know at least one of us who doesn't), that's fine - we'll keep mailing you the *Chat*.

If you do use email, and you still receive a paper *Chat*, you can help us save bird habitat and funds for local birding programs by switching to email delivery. To receive *The Chat* by email, notify Jim Gast at jgast@centurytel.net.



FUNDING PROBLEMS IN MISSOURI'S STATE PARKS by David Bedan

The Missouri system of State Parks and Historic Sites is a model for the nation and has regularly been listed among the top four state park systems nationwide. But it is now in serious financial crisis. The Missouri system is supported almost entirely by half of a one-tenth-of-one-cent state dedicated sales tax -- support that has been re-affirmed by a two-to-one voter margin each time it comes up for renewal. But diversions from the Park Sales Tax Fund and inadequate funding for capital improvements have resulted in severe staff cuts and a \$200 million backlog in vitally needed rehabilitation of facilities and infrastructure. On May 19, 2010, the National Trust for Historic Preservation released its annual list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. Missouri was one of five states whose parks are at risk for destruction or irreparable damage.

At our September meeting Susan Flader, President of the Missouri Parks Association, discussed the \$200 million backlog of needed capital improvements and repairs in Missouri's state parks and historic sites. Susan now reports that Chris Kelly has introduced the resolution for the Capital Improvements Bond Issue in the same form that it cleared the Senate Appropriations Committee in Spring 2009, amended to include up to \$250 for other state agencies besides higher education; thus, it might include as much as \$80-100 million for state parks. It is HJR 9 this year, but it has not yet been assigned to committee.

Another issue involves the State Park Earnings Fund. HB 191, which would keep the interest on funds in the Park Earnings Fund with the fund to be used for state park purposes, rather than disappearing into state general revenue, was heard by the House Tourism and Natural Resources Committee and then attached to another DNR measure, HB 89, re extending water permit fees, and voted "Do Pass" out of committee last Thursday. HB 89 is a priority measure, so the bill could get to the floor any time.

For more information see the web site of the Missouri Parks Association or contact Susan Flader at (573)-289-3146 or (573) 442-1058 or fladers@missouri.edu.

TIPS FOR TYROS: Practicing on What's Present by Edge Wade

Now that you've been practicing with your binoculars, consulting your field guide regularly, and have assembled the quintessential birding outfit, it's time to focus on the birds, rather than the birder.

George Orwell, in *Animal Farm*, penned one of my favorite lines: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." It can be applied in many contexts. Let's apply it to birds and birders' desire to see them.

Sparrows. Oh, no, not sparrows! Beginning birders tend to shy away from this look-alike bunch of birds. Warblers and orioles are so much more exciting--and identifiable (if they'd just hold still).

It's March, and spring will be here soon (really, it will...probably). This means we have but a short time before the birds are on the wing, so let's look at the very limited variety of wintering Missouri sparrows. We're applying the principle of "one bird at a time" and with limited options, narrowing our observation down to a correct identification -- even with sparrows -- becomes easier.

Let's go through the most likely candidates. These are not complete descriptions, but highlights to help distinguish among them. You might want to look at your field guide as you go through these.

1. HOUSE SPARROW, a.k.a. English Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) HOSP. O.K., technically this introduced species isn't even a sparrow, it's really a weaver finch, but we'll ignore that, because it is the "sparrow" most likely to be seen near feeders. The adult male is unlikely to give anyone an i.d. challenge. The gray crown and large black bib are easy field marks. Note, though, that this bib is reduced in size in winter. Hormone surges in spring cause this attractive-to-the-female HOSP feature to get

bigger. The white cheek and prominent white wing bar are clinchers.

It's the female that may cause i.d. problems. Legendary ornithology professor George M. Sutton often placed a female HOSP among the birds for identification quizzes. He said it was the most-often misidentified species. That is because she is so plain--plain brown crown, no white cheek, no white wing bar. Her identifying marks are a streaked back and buffy eye stripe. And don't forget to look who she hangs out with. Bird behavior and association should always be a big part of the identification process.

1.a EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) EUTS [not #2 because of limited range]. Also introduced (to the St. Louis area, but after a century, now expanding range), this close relative of the House Sparrow is similar in habits.

It can be distinguished easily from the HOSP because it does not have a gray crown (it's crown is a rich brown), and male and female have a large brown spot in the middle of the white cheek. It is slightly smaller, has only a small white wing bar, and the bib is more solid, but covers a smaller area (more like a chickadee bib).

2. WHITE-THROATED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) WTSP. The clear, outlined white throat, often presence of yellow at the front of the wide white or buff eyebrow, dark crown stripes and mostly dark bill, and clear, unstreaked underparts help distinguish the adults from any other species. The juvenile has a grayish-white throat, often not sharply separated from the rest of the face, and the breast and flanks are heavily streaked.

Note that the closest look-alike that may be present is the White-crowned Sparrow. The WTSP has a more hunched, neck-tucked posture; the WCSP is more upright.

One more thing to remember: WTSP comes in two color patterns (called morphs or phases). The head can be streaked black and white, or brown and buff. This has nothing to do with age in the White-throated Sparrow [but

see White-crowned, below].

3. WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) WCSP. The pattern and position of the cap/crown may remind you of a bicycle helmet. The crown is black and white striped in adults (brown/gray in immatures). In WCSP, this is not a color morph, but an age indicator.

The bill can be pink, orange or yellowish. The throat is whitish, but not white and outlined as in the WTSP. Underparts are unstreaked in adults, streaked in immatures.

4. HARRIS' SPARROW (*Zonotrichia querula*) HASP. Far more likely to be seen in the western quarter of our state, it is a large sparrow with a black crown and bib, in winter the cheeks are buffy and there may be white areas in the bib. The pink bill really stands out against the dark colors. Underparts are clear. May be with WCSPs.

5. AMERICAN TREE SPARROW (*Spizella arborea*) ATSP. In winter, this is the one with the rufous crown (Chipping Sparrows are gone in winter) and the "stick pin" large spot in the middle of the breast. It has a whisker stripe and two white wing bars.

6. SONG SPARROW (*Melospiza melodia*) SOSP. Its gray central crown stripe, heavy mustache stripe, big central breast spot, strongly streaked breast and flanks, long tail (pumped as it flies) make this a fairly easy call, even when it is not calling.

7. SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) SAVS. Smaller than the SOSP, it usually has yellow in the face, has more delicate streaks, a shorter, spiky tail, and is more likely to be found in open areas. Uncommon in most of the state in winter.

This is not an exhaustive list of possible wintering Missouri sparrows. It is a place to start learning about them. Consult that ever-present field guide for more details and additional species to distinguish. All sparrows are not equally difficult to identify.



A COUNTRY YEAR: LIVING THE QUESTIONS reviewed by Howard Hinkel

If you enjoy reading appreciative responses to Missouri flora and fauna, you might enjoy Sue Hubbell's *A Country Year: Living the Questions*. By means of Hubbell's eyes, ears, and clear prose the reader explores her one hundred and five acres in the Ozark Mountains. The narrative is framed within one spring through the next spring and describes her land and the properties surrounding it. What emerges is a delightful description of the area's natural history, a natural history which, as a blurb on the back cover says, "turns ownership into belonging." In "The Land Ethic" Aldo Leopold says that "a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it." By living the questions that arise during her experiences living in the Ozarks (as a beekeeper) Hubbell, though rarely using the word "ethic," attests to Leopold's wisdom. I can only scratch the surface of this wonderful work, so I have selected one of the "questions" she lives in order to show how her love of the land leads to a fulfilling life at a difficult time.

The question of ownership is raised by indigo buntings who have their own ideas about "who's in charge here." Hubbell notes that the "river to the north of my place is claimed by the U. S. Park Service, and the creek to the south is under the protection of the Missouri State Conservation, so I am surrounded by government land." The deed to her property says she owns one hundred and five acres, having bought the land in the late 60's or early 70's after leaving her position as librarian at an Eastern university and driving with her then husband, an engineering professor at another Eastern university, in a Volkswagen bus to the Ozarks. "The place is so beautiful that it nearly brought tears to my eyes the first time I saw it twelve years ago; I feel the same way today, so I have never cared much about the number of acres, or where the boundary lines run or who, exactly, owns what. But the things that make it so beautiful and desirable to me have also convinced others that this is prime land, too, and belongs to them as well. At the moment, for instance, I am feeling a bit of an outsider, having discovered that I live in the middle of an indigo bunting ghetto." One ghetto dweller is a young indigo bunting "preoccupied with song practice." Not yet an accomplished singer, "he was clinging to a bare twig and softly running through his couplets, getting them all wrong and then going back over them so quietly that had I not been within a few feet of him I would not have heard."

Hubbell throughout provides myriad unusual looks at her natural world and her part in it. While reading in bed she "felt rather than heard a soft plop on the bed next to me"—a "grey tree frog" which she cupped in her hands and transferred to a hickory tree. Having survived without much trouble a brown recluse bite, she regularly spares the spiders and takes them outside. She "realized that one of the major points in the favor of brown recluse spiders is that they help keep down the tourists." Many of these encounters described in about two hundred pages occasion a more scientific examination; Hubbell made herself into an excellent amateur biologist, though she would humbly deny excellence.

Hubbell's interactions with her human community provide comparable moments of her ability to belong rather than own. Especially in her early days in the Ozarks she worked hard to fit in. One example: She negotiates, sometimes for a couple of hours, over prices at a junkyard where she seeks parts for her old pickup, doing so because she realized that the owner expected that of his customers, simply as good conversation, and that her new neighbors thought about time differently than did folks back East.

I'll conclude by agreeing with this back-cover blurb from the *Houston Chronicle*: "Once in a while there comes along a book so calm, so honest, so beautiful that even the most jaded or cynical readers have to say thank you. . . . This is such a book."



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WHO'S COUNTING?

Laura Hillman reminds everyone to start thinking about the Migratory Bird Count, Saturday May 14. We need all our regulars and new counters. Anyone who plans to count or has questions should contact Laura at 573-442-3703 or hillmanl@missouri.edu.

Laura also tells us to be on the lookout for a full report on the Christmas Bird Count in next month's *Chat*.



Hawk

The hawk soars, lowers its eye,
Darts a glance at its prey,
Takes in its terror
And swoops from its lofty height
Like a dive bomber.
The squirrel scampers in circles
Its features flit from melancholy to hopeful
It lights on a hollow in an oak tree

Looks right and left
And lunges desperately for the hollow.
But there is no escape
From the pitiless and magnificent hawk
With a clean sweep and a quick snap
The hawk demolishes its prey.
By Tycho Wagner, 10 years old
(in Lisa Schenker's 4th grade class)

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1331, Columbia, MO 65205. Check a category: Student (\$10.00) Individual (\$15.00) Family (\$25.00) Donor (\$50.00) Friend/Business sponsor (\$300.00)

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