



Raptors of the Rockies

P.O. BOX 250, FLORENCE, MT 59833

Educational Programs since 1988

Raptor Round-Up

www.raptorsoftherockies.org
See a color version of the newsletter

NUMBER 38, AUGUST 2011

Big Bald Eagle Nest



photos by Kate Davis ©

You could call it an obsession, standing on a railroad grade for hour after hour, shooting a telephoto on a tripod. I've been observing/photographing this Bald Eagle nest since April, or actually since 2008, when it fledged three young. This year, I would spend several days a week there, snow squalls and wind, other times blistering heat, but nearly always rewarded with an amazing bit of behavior. I grew to greatly respect and admire these birds, a species that gets a bad rap for eating carrion and stealing from other hard-working raptors.

Both parents were superb providers, patient and thorough at feeding time, and nearly always lingering somewhere in the background with a keen eye on the enormous nest in the Ponderosa Pine. Their offspring almost seemed polite, allowing siblings to feed, waiting their turn, rarely scrapping as young birds. This in itself would make for interesting observations, but what sets this nest apart is that it fledged four young! Only a handful of nests have pulled this off, a remarkable feat for a raptor that is often the used as an example for fratricide; larger young kill their smaller nest mates. Four young in a Bald Eagle nest is very rare and it seems to be a fairly recent phenomenon, observed across the country with a few previous occurrences in Montana.



Osprey and Black-chinned Hummingbird photos by Kate Davis ©

The Photo Issue

The whole spring and summer has been a combination of *taking* photos and *talking* photos, between field work at the various nests and falcon cliffs, and selling the new book. Our friends at Mountain Press Publishing say that it takes about 6 months for a new book to take off, and looking pretty darn good so far. We have also provided over 50 programs, from Big Sky to Bannack, and one in Boston (Medford, actually) in September. This one is for the 2011 Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch Annual Meeting, and the previous keynote speakers were Ian Newton, author of the greatest book ever written, *Population Ecology of Raptors* and Steve Hoffman, founder of Hawk Watch International and Director of Montana Audubon. Fine company and friends both.



Our ten year old buildings had a major remodel in July, thanks to a group of volunteers from around the country. Plus I've had art shows at the Prudential building downtown, and sculptures at the Missoula Art Museum. But the most fun has been the photography, so I've included a bunch in this edition of Raptor Round-Up. We invite you to see them in **full color** on our web site, Newsletter Page.

A photo essay of the Bald Eagle Nest and four young is featured on pages 4 and 5.



MISSION STATEMENT

Raptors of the Rockies is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) raptor education project located in Western Montana. Active since 1988, our mission is:

- * To educate schools and the public through the use of live birds - the eagles, hawks, falcons and owls used in raptor education and wildlife art programs;
- * To provide a lifetime of quality care to permanently disabled birds of prey and falconry birds;
- * To instill a sense of respect and admiration for these skilled hunters and to promote wildlife conservation and habitat preservation for our wild bird populations.

Display at the University DBS



Kate Phillips in about 1985, with the collection of study skins I prepared that was donated to two museums in China, courtesy Dr. Bart O'Gara, Wildlife Cooperative Research Unit. Bart wouldn't let me go and deliver them personally, despite my nagging. I was the resident "bird skinner" for the Bird/Mammal Museum for about a dozen years, now called the Philip L. Wright Zoological Museum (my hero back in college days.)

Thirty-three years after moving from Cincinnati to attend the U of M, I have a display of photographs in the Health Sciences building, across from the DBS office. I received a degree in Zoology back in 1982, and now it is called the Department of Biological Sciences. The secretaries suggested that I be lent the space and Dave Dyer, museum curator agreed. Along with raptor photos, I included a little plug for a decade of partnership with the university in research using our program birds. We are currently working with Dr. Erick Greene on an alarm call study, partnering with Cornell University.

Montana Peregrine Institute - Report 2011



A One Horse Creek fledgling across from the Raptor Ranch.

The Peregrine Falcon is definitely faring well in Big Sky Country, and Jay Sumner reports over 90 known nests in the state. He has been monitoring the birds all his life, and with MPI starting in 1999. This was a big year, as they found 9 new territories, 3 that held falcons in the past (historical) but not in recent years. The cold, wet spring might have put a damper on productivity in some areas, but not in the Bitterroot, and Mac Donofrio found three fledglings at nearly every eyrie, 12 cliff nests total.

Jay knows of 140 Peregrine nests now, including historical ones, a daunting task to monitor. Plus he has observed 200 Golden Eagle nests, birds that commandeer a cliff, as in, "Jay, ever look at that cliff?" And his reply: "Eagles!" Maybe some day, falcons.



Peregrine Falcons were gone from the state, victims of the adverse effects of the pesticide DDT. Over 600 captive bred birds were hacked out, or released at suitable sites, the first pair breeding at Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in 1984. Over 90 nests grace our cliffs (and one gravel pit) today.

Fifty Years Later

Jay Sumner climbed down this cliff in Livingston in 1961 and collected his first Peregrine Falcon fifty years ago, and we re-lived the experience over breakfast. Formally called the "Tasty Freeze Eyrie," Jay and John Craighead and daughter Karen hitched a rope over a tree at the top, and Jay got his first falcon for the sport that would dominate his life. Falconry is hunting wild game with a captive bird, and in this case a bird that was flown for many years. In August we met with fellow falconers at our annual state picnic, then Jay showed me a bunch of cliffs that he had been checking since a teenager. We brought our binoculars into this restaurant, currently called The Pop Stand, and were treated to the pair of Peregrines flying across the cliff, chasing swifts while we were eating breakfast. The waitress was un-astounded, but that's fine because we both were!



TUESDAY, APRIL 19, 2011

Amazing New Peregrine Territory

Jay Sumner, Director of the Montana Peregrine Institute has said for years, "Some day Peregrines will nest here..." and we would take a brief look at this gravel pit in Clinton. Last week he again stopped to take a peek and to his amazement, two Peregrines were cruising the cliff face, landing on the rocks and snags, and even mating before our very eyes. That's what we would call occupied. I lived right across the highway from this eyesore for 13 years, never thinking I would grow to love it as the site of a Peregrine eyrie! Carmen Bassin and I watched the pair yesterday in between snow squalls, and we are hooked. We can only guess where the birds will set up shop. They may be the offspring from one of the Blackfoot nests or the one near Drummond, and are a very welcome addition to the list of new Peregrine nests in Montana.



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27, 2011

Clark Fork School Kids are Cool

After a bunch of assemblies for schools lately, we enjoyed a small gathering yesterday for the kids at Clark Fork School in Missoula. Friend Charlotte Beatty invited us to talk to the kindergarten through 2nd grade, and Sibley the Peregrine began the discussion with how she came to be an educator. I showed the little film of her time from baby in the play pen in the living room to an adult flying in a TV program chasing ducks. iPod the Pygmy-Owl was in attendance, the fairly recent addition to the teaching team and a favorite already (of course.) These children are very bird savvy, two of them arguing the merits of the Peterson versus Sibley Field Guides, no kidding. I think at that age I was discussing "Speed Racer" versus "Lost In Space."



SATURDAY, MAY 14, 2011

Snipe Really Do Exist

I pointed out a flying Wilson's Snipe to some visitors this week, and they were surprised to learn that there really is such a thing. Apparently one of our friends was tricked into "snipe hunts" as a kid, pointless ventures into the night with a sack, a practical joke played on all kids. This was a male snipe performing an elaborate flight display marking his territory, flying high and plunging toward the ground. Special muscles fan out his tail feathers which vibrate and make a beautiful winnowing sound. Instead of the typical 12 tail feathers of other birds including sandpipers, snipe have 14 or 16 depending on subspecies. They must have a nest in the grass near the house, and this guy displays well past dark.



WEDNESDAY, JUNE 8, 2011

First Line of Defense

Up and down, river levels have changed drastically, but last night's torrential downpour inspired some defensive work in the way of some strategically placed sandbags. Tom and I made two walls in the lowest spots next to the slough to at least try to keep water out of the fields and hawk buildings. If the Bitterroot River decides to march up to the house, we'll have to come up with a Plan B. The dogs and ducks sure enjoy all of the water. Our sympathies to those of you out there in worse shape, and a helpless feeling to be certain.



p.s.: we dodged the bullet and no flood. Just sump pumps running non-stop.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 29, 2011

MCAT RULES

Missoula Community Access Television Young Filmmakers Workshop was at the Raptor Ranch today with the champions of videography! Ron Scholl (filming here) and I figured that this was the twelfth year of having kids make little movies, and pictured are the last of the shots that will appear on TV on Friday at 4:30 pm - all 14 students leaping into the air with joy, oldsters like me making a little hand gesture. We made a crime drama, suspenseful bit about a missing raptor, and talking birds with my voiceovers. Fun and make sure your kids sign up for next summer. We had a big waiting list including James Cameron who wanted to shoot in 3D (just kidding.)



SATURDAY, JULY 9, 2011

Raptor Ranch Renovation

A very busy week starting with an art opening at the Prudential building last Friday night, then renovations galore at our facilities. Here is my friend Carmen Bassin's daughter Madison and her boyfriend Adam, power-washing the eagle building then mowing and tons more work to get ready for the team of volunteers that arrived later in the week. Then our team stained each and every one of our 11 enclosures with rollers and brushes, replaced the astroturf on the perches, new shade cloth, EVERYTHING to make sure that they last another ten years.



MONDAY, JULY 11,
Montana Folk
Festival

Saturday was a 300 mile round trip to the Folk Festival in Butte, a sunny day and mild temps of 75 degrees, just right. We had a booth and shared the stage with the legendary Vince Yannon from Fish, Wildlife and Parks (or as one little girl recently called it "Fishin' Life's Wild Parks." HA) He brought a very vocal raven and Great Horned Owl, and we had our trusty Golden Eagle Nigel and Alisa the Red-tail. Big laughs and a lot of fun. Wished I could have checked out the music!



...and Bald Eagle nest Blogs galore

Glimpse into a Bald Eagle Nest With Four Young



The huge stick nest is about fifty feet up in a Ponderosa Pine on the banks of the Clark Fork River and material has been added each year since initial construction in 2000. Neighbor Sue Erickson has been watching constantly every year with a spotting scope in her home office trained on the nest across the highway. She was shocked and delighted to notice four downy heads in Mid-April and I was contacted. Our friends the Everetts allowed me access to their property, and Pete Lawrenson, Chief of Security for Montana Rail Link made sure I was a safe distance from the train tracks and wished me luck. Quite often I had company, when Carmen Bassin came along with her spotting scope and keen eyes. We even had Annie Garde from Montana Public Radio's children's programming along and she taped some exciting feeding bouts and the associated narration, which we played on Pea Green Boat.

The prey items were surprising, not fish but mammals and birds with the spring floods. Many of these sure did not resemble road kill, and looked as if they were just caught, tough and agile prey for such a big bird. Remember the news story about the "flying deer fawn" that ended up on a power line and caused an outage in East Missoula? Our family. Sue Erickson called me in hysterics late one Saturday evening - a huge black bear had climbed the tree and was just under the nest. The female stood her ground while the male flew at the bear until after dark. All accounted for the next morning, whew!

Kate Davis photos ©



Four downy heads, we kept the news quiet for fear a bunch of intruders would threaten the health of the youngest nestling.

I rented a 500 mm f/4 from Borrowlenses.com for a week, and it rained for three days, but got some good images.



Left: Another delivery of what we can only guess is part of a Canada Goose gosling, white down flying when it's plucked. They always returned from the direction of a golf course. Above: Young are treated to a duck head.

Right: The male was smaller and had more of a wing molt all summer, so we could tell them apart.



Left: One Eastern Fox Squirrel, coming right up. Also on the menu, Columbian Ground Squirrels, pigeons, and starlings. Above: A family of Eastern Fox Squirrels actually shared the nest, and the young of each would often give each other curious looks. Living on the edge, those guys.



They became so accustomed to one or two people on the hillside and train traffic that it was impossible to get their attention for a "all four heads at once" shot. Occasionally, you luck out.

In late June, after hours of nothing, in flew the male with the back half of a yearling deer, both legs and pelvis! With a few laps around he made it up to the nest. A treat to see all four young patiently being fed, and looking my direction for once. The female later brought in the other two legs, one at a time, coming from the direction of Marshall Grade. Road kill? Who knows, but a month later we spotted her across the river feeding on a fawn that she must have just killed. Tidbits were brought back to the nest and the male also fed on the fawn, the poor mother just a few yards away, stomping her feet and wagging her tail.



The young grew with such a healthy diet, and practiced their flying skills in the nest. The first big female fledged on June 27th, but it was weeks before the nest was completely empty, and not for long. The young return, and still are at the time of this writing in late August.



Left: Magpies nested all around and frequented the nest to grab tidbits.
Right: Finally in July when the water dropped a bit the fishing resumed, with suckers, pike minnows, and whitefish delivered. Bald Eagles are known to steal from Ospreys, but I'll bet they caught these on their own. Way into August, fish were brought back to the nest where the young were waiting (and begging) or flew in for feeding. One small fish was swallowed in one gulp by the quickest of the three.



Above: A pair of tiny Bullock's Orioles constantly harass the fledglings, even bouncing off their undersides. This youngster was so flustered that when he fled, he crashed through the foliage and got a big wad of cottonwood leaves stuck in his mouth.
Left: Beautiful in flight, but as raptor biologists always say, "they know how to fly, just not how to land." We witnessed lots of crash landings, but skills improved and some day they'll be hunting on their own. We're curious to see how many young they'll have next year!





Finally Some Great Grays and Thanks, Jack

Last year on June 1st, my pal Keith Fialcowitz and I were guided in to this nest in the Big Hole Valley by Jack Kirkley, and the young had already fledged. We just missed them by a day or two and nowhere to be found. So one year and two weeks later we lucked out with the female and these youngsters, standing in what's left of an old Goshawk nest. Jack is a Professor at U of M Western, and his specialty is the Northern Goshawk, and this day, eco-tour guide! One of us (okay, me) forgot a bunch of gear and Jack kindly returned to town to fetch it. Keith asked that he also bring back a reflector to make his photographs "pop." So two hours later, Jack returned with my pack, a chunk of cardboard, two sheets of aluminum foil and some duct tape. Voila! Instant reflector, which saved the day. Jack even suggested that he might return later and fix up the nest a bit, as it is about to tumble from the tree. Owls don't build their own nests, and might need a little help if they are to pull off another year like this one.



Thanks to our friends at Bannack State Park!



Riverside Ospreys

A tough spring for our local Ospreys, and the high, turbid water made fishing really tough. The family at the Osprey Stadium figured out how to shop at the near-by Silver's Lagoon in McCormick Park, but still lost two of the four chicks to starvation. This is a natural occurrence, as the eggs hatch days apart and the older chicks have the distinct advantage at feeding time. The weaker ones don't make it. Same with the Riverside Health Care nest, but the one that survived is strong and healthy. She fledged on August 7th and we could see her standing on the cliff across the Clark Fork, mother 20 feet away.

This nest was watched from around the world via web cam, and in July the chick was banded before a big crowd of residents, staff, media, and kids from MNHC.

Left: Erick Greene explains the science and Heiko Langner takes blood and a few feathers to analyze for toxins. Then quickly back to the nest and the return of the female, male on a pole downstream.

Right, I lucked out 5 days after fledging and got this shot of her coming back to the nest. Young Ospreys can hunt on their own after leaving the nest but must figure out that crazy light refraction of observing a fish under water and scoring a meal. Parents will be heading back to South America in the next month, with youngsters soon to follow. The babies remain in that "wintering ground" until they are old enough to breed for perhaps three years, which is atypical for any migrant, the only raptors to do this that I can think of (aside from one Hawk-eagle) and another reason to love the Ospreys!



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Suggested adoption rates, and receive a matted photo of your bird and tax-deduction receipt, plus be listed on our web site and next newsletter. Thanks adoptive parents for your support!

Raptors of the West: Captured in Photographs

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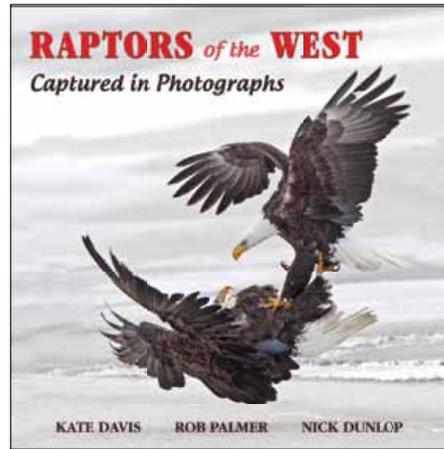
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Thanks Montana Rail Link!



Kate Davis photo ©

Northern Pygmy-Owl
photo from the new
book, *Raptors of the
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