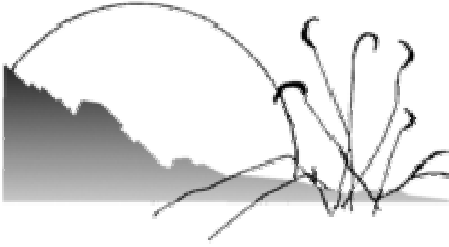


BOULDER COUNTY NATURE ASSOCIATION



Volume 23, Number 1
Winter 2006

Earth Almanac: Cranes, Crossbills, and Cycles of Life

One ominously warm morning in mid-November I was sitting on a log in a burned-over patch of forest on Shanahan Ridge when I heard a familiar trilling way up in the blue. I looked for the birds but couldn't find them. However, I knew from their distinctive calls that they were greater sandhill cranes, probably a flock drifting south from nesting grounds in the northern Rockies to wintering areas in Texas and New Mexico.

I hear the cranes almost every fall, but usually several weeks earlier. I wondered if the late migration was another sign of global warming. It just didn't seem right to hear cranes this late in the season.

As I walked back down the ridge, a garrulous mob of red crossbills flew by and landed in a ponderosa pine chock-full of fresh cones. I'd been watching the cones ripen all summer and had suspected we were headed toward a peak cone year. I was happy to see that the crossbills had arrived in force. Soon the northern pygmy-owls will be tooting away as they perch on bare branches waiting to pick off unwary songbirds.

Dave Hallock's pamphlet summarizing 20 years of Indian Peaks Bird Count data includes a graph showing numbers of irruptive seed-eaters on winter counts. These are the forest birds, including crossbills, pine siskins, and red-breasted nuthatches, that wander hundreds of miles searching for bountiful cone crops. The graph shows striking peaks during 1984, 1991, and 1995. Some of us participated in these counts and remember skiing through the woods as dozens of plump cross-

bills "chip-chipped" overhead.

In his 1970s study of seed-eater irruptions, University of Colorado ecologist Carl Bock documented astounding synchronicity in conifer seed crops throughout subalpine regions of North America and Eurasia. Periodic bumper cone crops ensure that some seeds will survive predation, but how several billion subalpine conifers agree to simultaneously produce bumper cone crops remains a mystery. Ponderosa pine crops are more random; this year, while most of the pines on lower Shanahan Ridge sport oodles of cones, most pines in upper Long Canyon remain bare.

As I reflected on these natural cycles, I wondered again about the cranes. It dawned on me (fortunately, this happens about once a week) that one observation does not exactly constitute data (a plural noun). Furthermore, in addition to mean daily temperature on planet Earth, there are a slew of factors that could influence reported timing of crane flight over

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Annual Meeting: "Ecuador: Highlands, Islands, and Rain Forest," with Dave and Elaine Hill

Join us for an evening of equatorial exploration, Saturday, February 11, 6-8:30. Bring an Ecuadorian, Andean, or other low-latitude-type dish to share. The potluck will be followed by elections, then Dave and Elaine Hill's slides from their recent trip to Ecuador's highest peaks, the Galapagos Islands, and the Amazon rain forest. Again this year, Orah Eliron has graciously offered to host. See the BCNA Winter Calendar for directions.

BCNA Winter Calendar

Indian Peaks Winter Bird Count. The winter count period runs through February 15. To volunteer or for information, contact Bill Kaempfer (Kaempfer@colorado.edu; 303-443-3175).

Saturday, January 21: Join Joyce Gellhorn (303-442-8123) on a snowshoe trip to Left-hand Reservoir to search for white-tailed ptarmigan in their winter habitat. Be prepared for cold, windy conditions. Adequate clothing including layers, warm boots, jacket with a hood, bealaclava or face mask, mittens and overmitts, and sunglasses and sunscreen is required. Also bring a lunch and a thermos with a hot drink. Meet at the parking area on the Brainard Lake Road at 8 AM.

Sunday, February 5, 8:30 a.m.- Noon. Winter is for Dippers and Kinglets. Buttonrock Reservoir. Join Scott Severs for a leisurely stroll at Buttonrock Reservoir west of Lyons to search for wintering flocks. To carpool meet at 8am at the Niwot Park & Ride, or meet at the reservoir at the end of County Rd 80 off of Hwy 36 west of Lyons.

Saturday, February 11, 6-8:30 p.m. BCNA Annual Meeting. Potluck dinner, followed by "Ecuador: Highlands, Islands, and Rain Forest," with Dave and Elaine Hill. Orah Elron's house, 4335 Caddo Parkway. From Baseline heading east from 30th St., turn south on Mohawk, then right after four blocks on Caddo Parkway. Bring a dish of any kind (Andean and other equatorial cuisine encouraged) to share.

Wednesday, February 22, 7-8:30 p.m. Alaska-ANWR to the Aleutians and assorted tidbits, with Glenn Cushman. This one-hour show takes you from the flower-filled Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to Denali National Park, to Nome and environs, and on a small ship cruise to Siberia, the Pribilofs, and the Aleutians. En route you will encounter caribou, musk ox, arctic fox, whiskered auklets, walrus, red-faced cormorants, Kodiak bears, and more. George Reynolds Branch Library,

Table Mesa Drive opposite King Soopers, in South Boulder.

Sunday, February 26, 5 p.m. Board Meeting at Jan and John Carnes' home in Niwot. We will have a potluck for our first meeting of the year. All members are invited to come. Please call Jan Carnes, (303) 827-3024 for details and directions.

Saturday, March 4, 7-10 a.m. Spring welcoming hike and potluck breakfast at Sawhill Ponds Wildlife Area, off 75th St. between Valmont and Jay roads. Bring something sweet, warm, tropical, or passionate to pass around. We should see raptors, ducks, and early-singing songbirds. Steve Jones (303-494-2468; stephen.jones@earthlink.net)

April 2, 4-9 p.m (MDT): Ecosteward rendezvous and boreal owl hunt at Eagle Peak Ranch. New volunteers are welcome to join us for cross-country skiing and potluck dinner at Gregg and Genie Burch's cabin near Gold Lake, followed by a moonlight boreal owl search near Red Rock Lake. Bring snowshoes or cross-country skis and dress warmly. To carpool meet at the Lee Hill Road open space parking lot (just west of Broadway) at 3:30 p.m. For directions to Eagle Peak Ranch, contact Gregg (burc7337@bellsouth.net) or Steve Jones (stephen.jones@earthlink.net; 303-494-



Cathy Comstock holding a silver-haired bat at a BCNA bat workshop. Photo by Rick Adams

Winter Natural Events Calendar

January 14: Full moon rises at 5:14 p.m.
 When the Snow Blows like Spirits in the Sun (Arapaho)
 Hunger (Lakota)
 Light of Day Returns (Osage)

Late-January: The great horned owls that nest on the CSU campus have laid their eggs as early as January 15. The Excel Valmont Power Station great horned owls have also begun nesting in January. You don't have to go looking for the first wildflowers of the year this month. Curt Brown found early Easter daisies (*Townsendia hookeri* and *T. exscapa*) blooming in Bear Canyon a few days before Thanksgiving--a new record date for Boulder's "earliest" wildflower.

January 27: Saturn is at opposition, meaning its closest approach to Earth. This is the best time to photograph it.

February 12: Full moon rises at 5:11 p.m.
 Frost Sparkling in the Sun (Arapaho)
 Just-Doing-That (Osage)
 When the Geese Come Home (Omaha)

Late February: Golden eagles refurbish their nests and prepare to lay eggs on foothills cliffs. Last spring André Carvalhaes and Susan Foster reported a previously undocumented nest in Lefthand Canyon, on the back side of Lee Hill. We now know of about 15 nesting sites throughout the county, 8-12 of which appear to be active each year. We still haven't found the golden eagle nest reported by Ernest Greenman in 1922 "on the crags" of South Arapaho Peak. Anyone have some time on their hands?

March 14: Full moon rises at 6:05 p.m. Penumbral lunar eclipse.
 Sore Eyes (Arapaho)
 Snowshoe Breaking (Ojibwa)
 Little Frog (Omaha)

March 20: Spring Equinox.

Late March: Consider attending Ken Strom's presentation on Cranes of the World at the March 28 Boulder County Audubon monthly meeting; and then drive to Gibbon, Nebraska, to see tens of thousands of sandhill cranes descend into their Platte River roosts (visit AudubonNebraska.org for information). The cranes should stick around until about April 5. For the past several years, the Platte

River has run nearly dry in March due to drought and removal of water for power and irrigation upstream from Lake McConaughy Dam. A tri-state environmental impact statement containing well-researched recommendations for restoring Platte River flows has been stalled by political interests in Nebraska, Wyoming, and Colorado.

Editor's note: Do you enjoy this feature and want to see it continued? Please let us know.

Great Backyard Bird Count February 17 - 20, 2006

Scientists and bird enthusiasts can learn a lot by knowing where the birds are. Now that winter has gripped much of the continent, what are our birds doing? Bird populations are dynamic, they are constantly in flux. Scientists want to take a snapshot of North American bird populations and YOU can help. Everyone's contribution is important. It doesn't matter whether you identify, count, and report the 5 species coming to your backyard feeder or the 45 species you see during a day's outing on Open Space.

Last year Boulder citizens submitted the greatest number of checklists for Colorado at 62, and recorded the second highest species total for the state at 72 (Pueblo recorded 96 species). Longmont and Louisville also showed well in participation, both in the top ten for the state. Help us to keep your community at the top of the lists! To participate log on to <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/> Those without computer access may call the Wild Bird Center 303-442-1322 and order forms to participate.

Great Backyard Bird Count Birdwalk
 Saturday, February 18; 7:20 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.

Join members of the Audubon Society, BCNA and the Wild Bird Center for a count and tally of the birds for the Great Backyard Bird Count. Help us find and record local birds and we'll submit the results to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Meet promptly at the Wild Bird Center, 1641 28th St. Details: (303)442-1322.

Scott Severs

A Bumper Year for BCNA Volunteer Projects

More than 100 BCNA volunteers devoted at least 4000 hours to local conservation and research projects in 2005. If you would like to volunteer for any of these projects, contact the coordinator listed below. Don't worry about your level of expertise; all of us began this work as wide-eyed volunteers.

Allegra Collister Bird Banding: 600+ hours. Spring and fall bird-banding at this BCNA-managed preserve in Lykins Gulch helps track populations of neotropical migrant songbirds. On May 26 the volunteers banded their 10,000th bird. Noteworthy species banded this year included two chestnut-sided warblers, a palm warbler, a magnolia warbler, a prairie warbler, and a first captured western kingbird. Lead bander Joe Harrison retired this fall after 12 consecutive years working at the preserve. A new lead bander needs to step forward if the banding is to continue.

Avian Species of Special Concern Monitoring: 35 volunteers, 250 hours. Steve Jones (303-494-2468) and Dave Hallock (eldora@rmi.net). Osprey (6 nests) and American bitterns (5 territories) continue to do relatively well. Boulder County's three bald eagle nests fledged two young. For the first time in several years, no northern harrier young were observed at Boulder Reservoir. Three pairs of burrowing owls fledged only 5 young. A calling least bittern was heard at Walden Ponds in June, the first breeding season report in seven years. We found no evidence of nesting by red-headed woodpeckers, northern shrikes, northern bobwhites, lark buntings, or brown thrashers.

Cliff-nesting Raptors: 100 hours. To volunteer, contact Lisa Dierauf (Dierauf@ci.boulder.co.us) with Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks or Mark Brennan (mbrennan@co.boulder.co.us) with Boulder County Parks and Open Space. It was a relatively good year for golden eagles (at least 6 young from at least 6 nests) and prairie falcons (at least 17 young from at least 5 nests). Peregrine falcons fledged at least 4 young

Conservation Committees and Boards, other Conservation and Administration: 20 volunteers, 500 hours. Four members served on city and county open space boards; many others attended public hearings and meetings. Jim McKee (303-494-3393) and Barbara Hawke (303-527-1819), County Open Space; Bruce Bland (303-499-8612), Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks.

Ecosystem Stewardship Initiative: Steve Jones (303-494-2468). 300 hours. Forty volunteers have signed up for this long-term monitoring project, which began last spring. So far ecosystem stewards have contributed to successful rehabilitation of the Walker Ranch bluebird trail, improved dogs-on-leash enforcement on County open space, and efforts to minimize erosional damage by road sand in Gregory and Long canyons.

Ecosystem Symposium: 12 volunteers, 100 hours. Joyce Gellhorn (303-442-8123). About 140 scientists, naturalists, and other community members attended the April 2005 symposium, which focused on species in peril. The 2006 symposium will address "alien invaders."

BCNA Publications

Hallock, Dave, and Stephen Jones. 1999. Boulder County Avian Species of Special Concern. 35 pages. \$3

Hallock, Dave. 2004. Indian Peaks Four Season Bird Counts, Twenty-year Summary. 20 pages including a 20 graphs and charts. \$3.

Jones, Stephen, and Linda Mahoney. 2003. Owls of Boulder County. 52 pages including 20 black-and-white illustrations. \$6.50.

To order, write or e-mail Steve Jones, 3543 Smuggler Way, Boulder, CO 80305; stephen.jones@earthlink.net. Please add \$1.50 for shipping costs.

Field Ecology Classes: 8 volunteers, 100 hours. Carol Kampert (303-499-3049). We offered 13 classes which were attended by about 135 students.

Indian Peaks Bird Counts: 350 hours. Dave Hallock (eldora@rmi.net) and Bill Kaempfer (303-939-8005). Now in its 24th year, this remains the only high-altitude four-season bird count in North America.

Newsletter, Nature-Net, and Web Site: 15 volunteers, 200 hours. George Oetzel, web site (303-543-3712); Rebecca Hill (303-786-0553) and Steve Jones (303-494-2468), newsletter. Visit our web site (www.BCNA.org) or submit an article to the newsletter.

State Wildlife Issues: 150 hours. Jim McKee (303-494-3393) represented BCNA on the Colorado Wildlife Roundtable and at other Division of Wildlife committees and meetings. Progress was made on mountain lion conservation, prairie dog conservation, and other important issues.

Wintering Raptor Survey: 45 volunteers, 500 hours. Sue Cass (303-494-5345) This survey, now in its 23rd year, continues to chart steep population declines of wintering ferruginous and rough-legged hawks. This winter looks like a peak time for voles and we are seeing lots of northern harriers, prairie falcons, and American kestrels.

Thank you, BCNA volunteers!

Join The Nature Net List Service

For the Latest news and in-depth discussions of Boulder County natural history issues, go to:

[Http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nature-net](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nature-net)

E-mail BCNA at mail@BCNA.org

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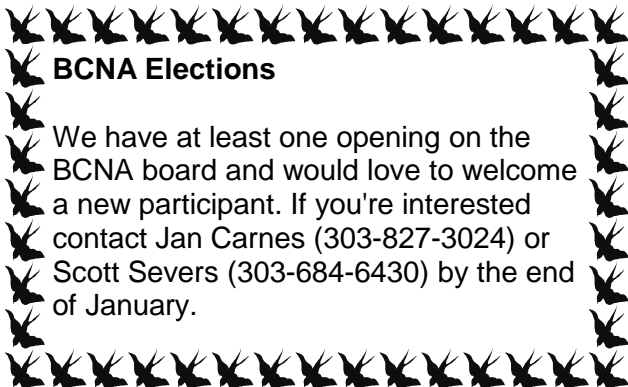
Boulder, including regional weather patterns, food availability, nesting chronology, outdoor habits of observers, and whim. So I called Alex and Gillian Brown and asked them to send me Boulder County Audubon wildlife inventory reports of sandhill cranes in Boulder.

The data surprised me. Fall migrating cranes have been reported over Boulder as early as September 16 (1979) and as late as December 1 (1990). Though the majority of observations have occurred during October, cranes have been reported on November 11 (1979), November 21 (1993), November 22 (1994), and November 27 (2001). So my observation was not at all "out of the ordinary."

What all this may demonstrate is that there's more going on in nature--cycles within cycles within cycles--than we can easily absorb or comprehend. We tend to oversimplify: "Gosh, it just doesn't snow around here like it used to," "Where have all the crossbills gone?" or "We're not supposed to hear sandhill cranes in November--it's global warming again."

We're right to a point. It doesn't ever snow one year the way it snowed during a previous year. The crossbills have gone somewhere--of their own choosing. And it is global warming, along with countless other trends and natural cycles. Observing these complex patterns and pondering over their origins and outcomes makes each hike an adventure.

Steve Jones



BCNA Elections

We have at least one opening on the BCNA board and would love to welcome a new participant. If you're interested contact Jan Carnes (303-827-3024) or Scott Severs (303-684-6430) by the end of January.

Owls Capture The Imagination

Of all the birds, it seems that owls capture the imagination of the young more than any other bird. Maybe it is because they are mysterious, coming out silently and elusively after dark (and after bed-time). It could be that they are so easily recognizable with their large eyes and wide faces.

Both of my sons, Charlie (3) and Thomas (1), learned to say the word 'owl' even before 'bird.' We often flip through field guides and look at the illustrations of the birds. Although my own interests were oriented more towards woodpeckers and hawks, they both gravitated toward the owls. For both boys, once they learned to recognize owls, they seemed to pop up in most of the other children's books we have. Like foxes, owls seem to have a well-established niche in the literary environment, often representing wisdom and keen observation. Thomas says, "Ow! Ow!" every time he sees one.

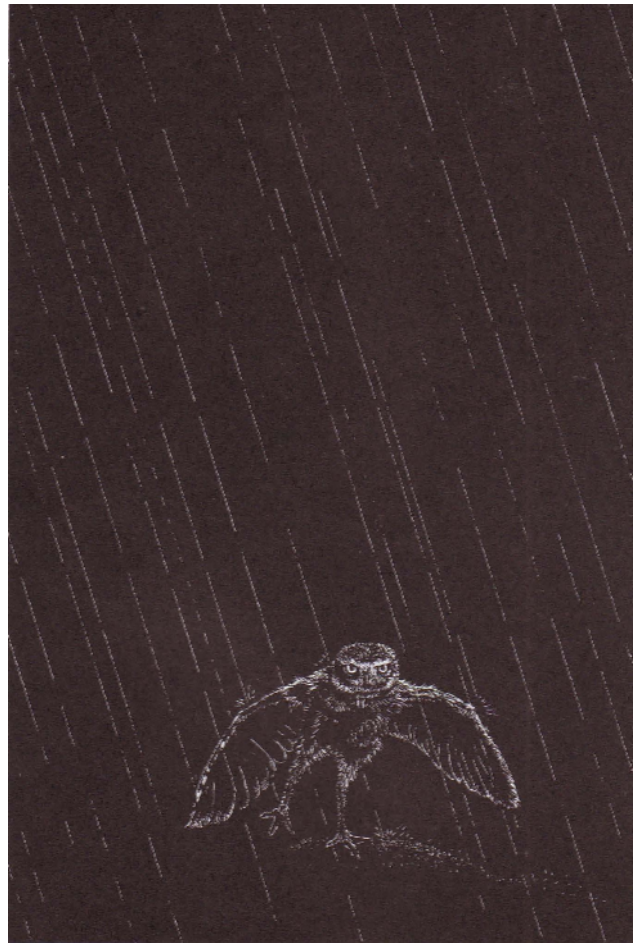
Once I knew they were interested, I began playing owls with my boys. We build a nest out of blankets, fill it with Easter eggs, and then they sit in it to incubate the eggs. I am the Mommy owl and they are owlets and we hoot, flap, and dance like owls. Our inspiration for the owl dance came from the story of burrowing owls in the book "Owls of Boulder County." The otherwise sleepy burrowing owls wake up and begin to dance after the start of a summer rainstorm.

This year for Halloween, Charlie was planning to be a construction worker. I began collecting items for his costume: a reflective vest, shovel, and a tool belt. I was about to buy a hard hat when the magic of the owls started to lure him in. Charlie and his dad were intrigued when they found a fresh owl pellet near our sandbox. We pulled it apart and tried to decipher what sort of bones were inside. Not being a mammalogist by training, we could only try to imagine what the owl had captured and eaten.

Shortly after that, on a Saturday evening Thomas and his dad were on a walk and discovered a great horned owl perched on a light post near our apartment building. It flew up to the peak of our roof and perched there for a while. Charlie was asleep and didn't see it. When we told Charlie about it the next morning, this owl quickly became the legendary "great horned owl Daddy saw on Saturday." He made us promise to wake him up if we ever saw it again.

Now more than anything else, he wanted to be a great gray owl for Halloween, which was only a few days away. So, getting inspiration from "The Book of North American Owls," where great gray owls attack a hiker during nesting season, we drew him a beautiful mask with large facial disks, and made him wings and feathers out of a paper bag.

The owls had captured him, too.



Burrowing Owl Rain Dance
By Linda Mahoney from "Owls of Boulder County"



Adult Mountain Lion
Photo courtesy of Borealforest.org

Mountain Lions

Some bad news, but mostly good. First, the bad. The Colorado Wildlife Commission did not approve a female sub-quota for mountain lions. They did, however, reduce the quota an additional ten to 557 lions for the 2006 season. Further, in an attempt to reduce female take, they approved the development of mandatory education for all lion hunters in how to distinguish males from females when treed (to apply to the 2007 season and beyond). This was supported, not only by the conservation community but also by the Colorado Outfitters Association.

A new carnivore biologist has been hired to lead the front range lion study. Matt Aldridge, a PHD wildlife biologist has accepted the position and will, I assume, begin to plan the study in the near future.

Jim McKee

BCNA Board of Directors

President.....Scott Severs (303-684-6430)
Vice President....Sue Cass (303-494-5345)
Treasurer.....Vickie Flower (303-684-9030)
Secretary.....Jan Carnes (303-827-3024)

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Michael Delaney (303-494-8583)
Kim Graber (303-494-7971)
Barbara Hawke (303-527-1819)
Jim McKee (303-494-3393)

Committees and Contacts

- *Allegra Collister Birdbanding Site:*
Joe Harrison (303-772-3481).
- *Education:*
Carol McLaren (303-530-9108) and
Carol Kampert (303-499-3049).
- *Indian Peaks Bird Counts:*
Dave Hallock (303-258-3672) and
Bill Kaempfer (303-939-8005).
- *National Forest Management:*
Tim Hogan (303-444-5577).
- *Newsletter:*
Rebecca Hill (303-786-0553)
rebecca.hill@gmail.com
and Steve Jones (303-494-2468).
- *Website:*
George Oetzel (303-543-3712).
- *Publications:*
Steve Jones (303-494-2468).
- *State and Regional Wildlife Issues:*
Jim McKee (303-494-3393).
- *Wintering Raptor Survey:*
Sue Cass (303-494-5345) and Jim McKee

Visit Our Website

For the calendar, class offerings, research results, publications, and other related information: www.bcna.org

Support the Boulder County Nature Association

Name _____

Address _____

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Type of Membership:

_____ Student/Senior (65 or over)	\$15
_____ General Member	\$20
_____ Family or Household	\$30
_____ Supporter	\$40
_____ Founder	\$100
_____ Life Member	\$300
_____ Corporate	\$500

The membership year is January 1 to December 31. Those who join after October 1 are considered members in good standing through the following year. All members receive this quarterly newsletter. Supporter-level members and higher also receive a complimentary copy of each BCNA publication.

Please make checks payable to "Boulder County Nature Association" or "BCNA" and mail to: P.O. Box 493, Boulder, CO 80306.

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