



Wachiska
Audubon Society

Wachiska Audubon Society's vision: To share the experience
and love of nature—that life may flourish in all its natural diversity

The Babbling Brook

Our 48th Year of Protecting Nature 1973 - 2021

DECEMBER 2021

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Wachiska Program — Thursday, December 9, 7:00 p.m., via Zoom web conference (registration required)
Link to register: <https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUpceCsrzkrE9c5hp4fO3WJSndGL2HnKK3g>

What Bird Is THAT?

(Tricky Bird ID and Tips for the CBC Season!)

by Jason (the "Birdnerd") St. Sauver

A hhhh, winter in the upper plains. Temperatures drop, snows arrive, and . . . birds molt and migrate. With these changes, many new bird species arrive to our backyards and local parks, and some of our usual feeder favorites don't look like they used to all summer. Identification in the fall and winter can be much trickier than other times of the year. The lighting can make juncos look black in the shadows of the shrubs. The winter wind can make even the smaller sparrows look plump and large as they try to stay warm. So, what is a bird watcher and lover to do when you're unsure just which bird you saw? Ask the Birdnerd!

You'll get just that chance during our final monthly meeting of the year as Jason "the Birdnerd" St. Sauver will present our program. "I've come up with a fun and interactive presentation that should be enjoyable and educational for all levels of birders and



White-throated Sparrow
Photo by Dawn Phillips/Audubon
Photography Awards

bird lovers," says St. Sauver. "With the help of other local bird experts, we thought we'd show you some great tips on tricky birds to identify in winter and help everyone practice before Lincoln's CBC (Christmas Bird Count) on Saturday, December 18." Jason's program will have lots of great local bird pictures, identification tips, and perhaps some bird songs and sounds (made by Jason) to help us know what to listen and look for.



Red-bellied Woodpecker

Photo by Matt Pimm/Audubon Photography Awards

There is still time to sign up to help with the CBC by counting in the field or watching your feeders that day. Email Jason directly at scp@audubon.org. Don't forget – all ages, levels, and abilities are welcome! Jason will help you find just the right way to participate, have fun, and learn as you go.

So, join Wachiska on both December 9 for the presentation and if you can, on December 18 for Audubon's 122nd CBC Season!

This program will be presented via Zoom at **7:00 p.m.** on **Thursday, December 9**, and will be available to those who register at <https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUpceCsrzkrE9c5hp4fO3WJSndGL2HnKK3g>.

Copy and paste this link into your browser or go to Wachiska's website after December 1 and click on the link directly from the notice to register. You will then receive a confirmation with the meeting number and password. Keep the email and a few minutes before the program is to begin, click on that confirmation and you'll be invited into the meeting. Invite friends to join us, too!

Calendar

December

- 6 Education Committee via Zoom, 6:00 p.m.
- 9 General Meeting via Zoom, 7:00 p.m. "ID of CBC Birds," by Jason St. Sauver (**NOTE required registration**)
- 13 Newsletter submission deadline, 5:00 p.m. (date change due to holiday)
- 13 Conservation Committee via Zoom, 6:30 p.m.
- 18 **Lincoln Area Christmas Bird Count all day** (contact Jason at SCPAC)
- 21 Board Meeting via Zoom, 7:00 p.m.

Executive Director's Message

by Mark Brohman

What an honor to serve as Wachiska's first Executive Director. I have met many of you over the years attending monthly meetings, legislation committee meetings, the annual holiday potluck, seed collecting, or other Wachiska events. I look forward to meeting all of you in the near future, especially when COVID-19 breaks and allows us to have face-to-face events. In the meantime, I hope many of you will join us on Zoom for our monthly meetings.



Mark Brohman

Wachiska is a wonderful organization full of passionate members who, like me, care deeply about our state's prairies and wildlife, especially our avian friends. As a kid growing up in Nebraska, I was fortunate to have had two sets of grandparents who lived on ranches and many conservation-minded aunts, uncles, cousins, and family friends. I learned to love nature at an early age and knew from the time I was in third or fourth grade that I wanted to become a wildlife biologist. Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom and Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Disney steered me towards wanting to go to Africa and work in the Serengeti, but after college I was satisfied staying in my home state of Nebraska. I spent two summers monitoring the endangered least terns and threatened piping plovers on the lower Platte River. Every day I was on and along the river observing not only terns and plovers, but many species of birds and other fauna. From doing bird counts from an airboat to wading across the river to float eggs on an island and estimate hatching dates, it was a wonderful experience.

I can't wait to get kids out to our prairies and places like Spring Creek Prairie and share my passions with them and all of you. I want to build on the great work that Wachiska has accomplished, including prairie preservation, restorations, education, and advocacy. In 2023, Wachiska will be celebrating its 50-year anniversary. I am very excited to be part of this outstanding organization.

Last Seminar in Fall 2021 Series

"Grassland Management in a Changing Climate" will be presented by Daren Redfearn during the final presentation in the Center for Grassland Studies Fall Seminar Series on Monday, December 6, from 3:00 to 4:00 p.m. in 150 Keim Hall on UNL's East Campus. It will also be available via Zoom. Call 402-472-4101 or visit grassland.unl.edu/fallseminars for more information.

Wachiska Remembers Long-time Leader, Marge Kennedy

by Arlys Reitan

On October 30, Nebraska's conservation community lost a faithful leader when Marge Kennedy, 77, passed away after a few days of battling COVID-19 related to COPD and pneumonia. For over 45 years she dedicated her time, energy, and support to several conservation organizations, including the Nebraska Wildlife Federation, the Friends of the Niobrara, and Wachiska Audubon.

Marge and her husband, Bruce, are considered to be charter members of Wachiska where they continued to fill leadership roles for many years. About the time that Wachiska Audubon was chartered in 1973, a serious issue arose involving a project to save the Platte River. Referred to as the Mid-State Project, residents of Kearney, Hastings, Grand Island, and nearby communities overwhelmingly voted to kill the proposed dam project. The Kennedys, along with a few other new members of Wachiska, had stepped forward to assist. After months of numerous trips to these areas to conduct meetings, do interviews, and write letters the small but determined group had defeated a Goliath-type idea that would have decimated the annual migration of sandhill and whooping cranes! It was truly a victory for all in 1975 and probably one that hasn't been matched in recent years!!



Marge Kennedy

But that successful defeat was soon followed by the threat to the Niobrara River. The Kennedys were instrumental in organizing The Save the Niobrara River Association which was formed as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit to maintain the in-stream flows by opposing the Norden Dam Project on this Nebraska wildlife gem. After the river was designated a National Scenic River in 1991, the group became inactive; however, a few years later it was apparent that development was encroaching, and brush was being cleared which had served as protective cover for all wildlife. Once again the group was revived under the name of Friends of the Niobrara, and it exists to this day to monitor legislation and development that might affect the natural river flows.

On the local front, whether attending Board meetings or serving as recording secretary for the legislation committee, Marge was an ever-present figure in Wachiska. Her shorthand skills served her well in notetaking, and the minutes were prepared and distributed in a few days. Currently, Marge was serving Wachiska as chair of the legislation committee. Now someone else will need to learn shorthand in order to capture the speed and detail for which we were accustomed. Our gratitude to Marge pours forth, and we remember and support Bruce as he navigates alone.

Johnsgard Memorial T-shirt Available to Wachiska Donors

Wachiska is asking for your year-end donation to support our Capacity Building and Prairie Preservation efforts. See last month's newsletter for details on all our ongoing projects.

Donate \$200 or more to Wachiska by 12-31-2021 and you can elect to receive a T-shirt commemorating Paul Johnsgard and his love of Wachiska prairies and the birds that depend on them. The shirt features a portrait of Paul drawn by Bob Hall. Give now and pick up your T-shirt in January. You can send in a check to the Wachiska office or donate online at www.WachiskaAudubon.com. Indicate what unisex size shirt you would like in S, M, L, XL, or specify preferences.



Paul Johnsgard was Nebraska's most renowned prairie advocate and a long-time Wachiska member and supporter. Wachiska is deeply grateful to this amazing man who taught us, inspired us, and helped us experience the joys and treasures of Nebraska's birds and prairies. Paul was a UNL professor of Life Sciences for 40 years, and authored approximately 100 books on birds, wildlife, and ecology.

Reusable Bag Program Benefits Wachiska

The Wachiska Audubon Society has once again been selected by local HyVee stores' leadership as the benefiting non-profit in the Reusable Bag Program!

For the month of December 2021, Wachiska will receive a \$1 donation from each purchase of the \$2.50 reusable red "My Heart" bag at the HyVee at 7151 Stacy Lane in Lincoln. If you buy the bag at other Lincoln HyVee locations, tell the cashier the donation should go to Wachiska Audubon. The bags are located at the front of the store near the checkout counters. Learn more about this program: <https://hy-vee.bags4mycause.com/faqs/>.



Annual Meeting Presentation Available On Website

The annual meeting PowerPoint presentation is now on Wachiska's website. Look for "Click here to see highlights from the 2021 annual meeting."

The Harpy Eagle by Richard Peterson



Harpia harpyja (Linnaeus, 1758) is a neotropical bird species inhabiting the canopy layer in tropical lowland rainforests. They are found from southern Mexico to Brazil. It is the largest and most powerful raptor found in its range.

The upper side of the adult bird is covered with slate-black feathers; the underside is mostly white. A broad black band across the upper breast separates the gray head from the white belly. The head is pale gray and is crowned with a distinctive double crest. The plumage of the sexes is identical. These raptors are largely silent away from the nest; but often the adults give a penetrating, melancholy scream.

Males weigh up to ten pounds and can be 3.5 feet long. Females weight up to 20 pounds. The relatively small seven-foot wingspan is an adaptation for maneuvering in close quarters through forested habitat. These raptors are truly majestic.

Harpies routinely take prey weighing more than 15 pounds and can lift prey up to their own body weight. They like to perch-hunt, scanning from trees for prey between short flights to another perch to search afresh. The preferred prey is tree dwelling mammals like sloths (two- and three-toed species) and monkeys (capuchin, howler, squirrel, etc.). If these are not readily available, they will hunt porcupine, squirrel, anteater, armadillo, kinkajous, coatis, and opossum.

There is no apparent display between mating pairs, and it's believed that they mate for life, raising one chick every 2-3 years. Males and females take turns incubating and foraging for the eaglet's food.

The harpy is considered critically endangered in Mexico and Central America. In Mexico, it probably occurs only in the state of Chiapas. The cause of their decline is known to be habitat destruction from logging, mining, cattle ranching, agriculture, and prospecting, pushing this eagle to near extinction. Initiatives to protect the harpy are ongoing in Panama, Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and in Belize, where habitat corridor linkage with Guatemala and Mexico is important on a regional level.

Finally, we lived in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas, Mexico during the 1980s. Outside of the capital, on the jungle's edge, was the Zoologico Miguel Alvarez del Toro, named after Mexico's best-known conservationist. The zoo contains only species native to the state. As you stroll through the zoo, you feel like you're walking through the jungle while observing the wildlife. I met the zoo's namesake, and he autographed his book, *Las Aves de Chiapas* for me. He also gave me an 18-inch-long harpy feather. Long story short . . . I happened to be live-trapping opossums which I donated to the zoo to feed the harpy.

How Songbirds Evolved a Sweet Tooth

by Pat Leonard in the October 13, 2021 publication of
The Cornell Lab

Anyone who's seen an oriole lapping up grape jelly knows that some birds have a sweet tooth. But the dinosaur ancestors of modern birds lost the sweet receptors in their taste buds millions of years ago. So why do some birds seek a sugar fix?

Research published in the journal *Science* in July 2021 shows that evolution retooled the umami receptors of songbirds to taste sweet stuff. The study builds on prior research that showed hummingbirds also have sweet taste sensory perception.

"This study fundamentally changes the way we think about the sensory perception of nearly half the world's birds," says study coauthor Eliot Miller, the Macaulay Library collections development manager at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Songbirds account for nearly 40 percent of the world's bird species.

Sugar is a vital carbohydrate providing lots of energy. Most bird lineages can't taste sweetness, but songbirds and hummingbirds can, allowing them to detect sugary food sources that may have contributed to their evolutionary success.

Lights Out Programs Lead the Way to a Safer Future for Birds

Twice a year, billions of birds make perilous migrations, mostly at night. Many of these birds risk colliding with illuminated buildings. With the help of BirdCast migration forecasts, Lights Out Texas and other initiatives are spreading the word to turn off or dim non-essential lights during peak migration. It saves birds, saves money, and saves energy.

Track the Peak Migration Nights in your area. BirdCast migration forecasts help you plan when to turn out your lights at night and when to wake up early the next morning to catch waves of migrating birds moving through your region.

National Audubon Society's Lights Out program, which raises awareness of the dangers that urban lights pose for migrating birds, is currently operating in 39 cities in the United States (Miami will be the 40th). Audubon and partners created the first Lights Out program in Chicago in 1999. The Chicago program was modeled after the Fatal Light Awareness Program (FLAP), created in Toronto in 1993.

In 2020, Audubon launched a partnership with International Dark-Sky Association (IDA), combining Audubon's bird migration knowledge with IDA's light pollution technical expertise to join forces to reduce light pollution, benefitting both birds, other wildlife and us.

Birds Need Clean Air Safeguards Just as Much as We Do. Here's Why

by Ariel Wittenberg, *Summer 2021 Living Bird magazine*

Clean air is key to human health, and new research reveals that mercury and other pollutants can affect birds as well—and not just through the air they breathe. Another new study shows that the Clean Air Act has saved more than 1 billion birds since 1970.

For decades, songbirds were used to signal hazardous air. Caged canaries brought deep underground into coal mines served as living, breathing carbon monoxide detectors for workers throughout the last century. Still today, the mention of "canaries in the coal mine" connotes a warning of imminent danger to humans.

But the reverse of that maxim is rarely considered: How does bad air that harms human health affect birds?

Two years ago, a landmark study published in the journal *Science* documented a staggering decline in North American breeding bird populations—nearly three billion birds lost since 1970. The declines occurred among birds in every biome, with more than 300 species suffering population losses. But the study did not examine what caused the declines. Lead author Ken Rosenberg, a conservation scientist at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, said he and his coauthors figured the bird losses were driven by a number of overlapping causes, habitat loss chief among them.

Then he attended a Zoom presentation at the virtual North American Ornithological Conference last summer about increasing mercury levels in blood samples from birds, and he began to wonder: What role might air pollution have played in the bird declines?

That presentation by Marie Perkins, assistant professor of wildlife ecology at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, described her research examining mercury levels in songbird feathers from seven species. She found that mercury increased over time in six of the seven bird species she studied, with samples collected after 2000 showing two to 17 times more mercury than historic samples. Air pollution was "the major source" of mercury contamination, according to Perkins. The greatest increase was in the rusty blackbird, a species that has declined by 90 percent since the 1960s.

Nebraska Birding Trails

Olivia DaRugna, the Watchable Wildlife biologist with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, is working with a small team to update the Nebraska Birding Trails website. They want to hear from bird watchers in Nebraska about what information they would find useful on the updated website. Olivia has developed the brief google survey linked below to collect this information. Check out this site and respond to the brief survey: <https://forms.gle/3D44gTE6Y9hKkUws8>.

Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments Restored

(from a letter by John Horning, Executive Director, WildEarth Guardians)



Formations in Bears Ears National Monument

On October 8, President Biden issued proclamations restoring the boundaries of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments in Utah, protecting cultural sites and biodiversity in Utah once again.

Many tribes advocated for this reversal of former President Trump's attempts to destroy and gut the area. Over 14,000 communications were sent to President Biden urging him to restore these national monuments.

The proclamations immediately renewed protections for innumerable cultural and paleontological sites on public lands in southern Utah. Biden's orders fulfilled a campaign promise and came four years after Trump gutted two million acres from the monuments in 2017.

From a biodiversity standpoint, it is difficult to overstate the importance of protecting these two places. Bears Ears is in the top 10 percent of similarly sized places in the American West for both ecological intactness and connectivity—two factors considered essential for biodiversity and landscape-level conservation. Grand Staircase-Escalante is in the top four percent for ecological intactness and the top six percent for connectivity.

Bears Ears is also home to at least 13 species listed under the Endangered Species Act, including the California condor, Mexican spotted owl, and greenback cutthroat trout. Grand Staircase-Escalante is believed to offer an even greater diversity of species, with more than 200 species of birds and—*incredibly*—more than 650 species of bees.

It's clear this won't be the final battle to protect Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante because there is little doubt that industry groups, the state of Utah, and those hostile to national monuments and public lands will file lawsuits challenging Biden's proclamations.



Grand Staircase-Escalante Formation

2021 Prairie Discovery Day

by Tim Knott, Chair, Education Committee

This fall, probably because of COVID-19 concerns, Wachiska held only one Prairie Discovery Day, and it was a successful event on September 9. Over 60 fourth-grade students from Syracuse Elementary School and their teachers met Wachiska volunteers at Dieken Prairie on a beautiful, cool Thursday afternoon. The kids were full of energy as usual, but after an introduction to some basic facts about prairie soils and Wachiska's prairie program, they settled down to listen to a Nebraska abolitionist.



The guest speaker was Dr. Sara Crook from Peru State College, who assumed the role of a well-known Nebraska abolitionist and underground railroad activist, Barbara Kagi Mayhew Bradway. Most of the students accepted the idea that Ms. Bradway was about 190 years old and, in the course of her presentation, learned important and interesting facts about our state's territorial days in the 1850s, including the issue of slavery. Dr. Crook always does a fine job of holding the kids' attention as Ms. Bradway and fields difficult questions about how she could live to be so old!

Bill Smith, a Lincoln area insect expert, did a great job of introducing students to the world of prairie bugs. Using humor and informal quizzes, he explained basic differences between bugs, beetles, grasshoppers, and others. He got the kids off to a good start as they netted and identified their own insects.

Later Wachiska volunteers helped by providing snacks of apple slices and water and by leading the creative writing and plant ID activities. The primary educational benefit, though, was giving the students an opportunity to see and experience a real native prairie for themselves.

Laredo Birding Festival

After last year's virtual festival, this event will be back in-person February 2-5, 2022, in celebration of the 10th anniversary. Take in the stunning birds and landscape of South Texas in an exclusive journey to bird by boat, on historic ranches, and in local birding hot-spots. The keynote speaker will be Robert McCracken, curator of art and artifacts with the Academy of Natural Sciences. Register now at bit.ly/lbfreg2022. For more information check out laredobirdingfestival.org.

Climate Change Update

by Marilyn McNabb

Quiz: In the last 40 years, what federal law saved the lives of 1.5 billion birds? According to a study by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 12/8/10, it was the Clean Air Act. The abstract concluded, “Environmental policies nominally aimed at humans can also provide substantial benefits to other species.”

Hannah Waters, a senior editor of Audubon magazine reported in November about a new study that estimated the (human) lives that could be saved in the short term by decarbonizing the U.S. economy. She wrote, “While it would take decades for carbon to leave the atmosphere, the air pollution particles that embed in lungs and dissolve in bloodstreams would clear up soon after fossil fuel plants are shut down. Lives would be saved almost immediately, by 2030.”

Waters summarizes the study’s conclusions about the effects of decarbonizing the U.S. economy with policies to prevent global warming. In the U.S. that would prevent hundreds of thousands of premature deaths by 2030, 1.4 million in the next 20 years, and 4.5 million by 2070. The State of the Air 2021 by the American Lung Association reports that 40 percent of Americans—over 135 million people—live in unhealthy levels of particle pollution and ozone and people of color are over three times more likely to be breathing the most polluted air than white people.

The Cornell study feeds my hunch that what is healthier for humans will be healthier for other creatures, including birds. (Note: the largest source of air pollution in Lancaster County is NPPD’s coal plant in Hallam.)

After nearly a decade of student protests, Harvard University has agreed to sell its fossil fuel holdings. With a \$42.9 billion endowment, the largest of any university in the world, Harvard joins Oxford, Cambridge, Brown, Cornell, the universities of California and Michigan, Georgetown, Loyola, and others in divesting its coal, gas, and oil industry investments. Maine’s retirement funds are being divested as are New York’s city and state employees’ funds. The Episcopalians, Unitarians and U.S. Lutherans have divested. Large foundations now include Ford, MacArthur, and the Rockefellers Brothers Fund. Wikipedia has a more complete list under “fossil fuel divestment” totaling about \$14 trillion--and growing.

Bloomberg Green (10/8) reported that investments selected for positive environmental effects “surpassed \$35 trillion last year and are on track to reach more than \$50 trillion by 2025, roughly a third of the world’s assets under management. That’s a colossal pool of capital.”

Katharine Hayhoe is a climate scientist and professor of public policy at Texas Tech University. Her new book, *Saving Us: A*

Climate Scientist’s Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World, is well worth reading. She writes, “True hope must begin by recognizing the risk and understanding what’s at stake. Rational hope accepts that success is not inevitable, or even entirely probable.” She calls for “hope as a practice, rather than an emotion or value.” If we want to find hope, “we have to roll up our sleeves and go out and look for it.” And then practice it.

NAS Announces Dr. Elizabeth Gray as New CEO

The National Audubon Society (Audubon) recently announced that Dr. Elizabeth Gray, currently serving as acting CEO, will become the organization’s 11th leader and the next CEO. Dr. Gray will be the first woman to hold the CEO title in the organization’s 116-year history.



Dr. Elizabeth Gray

Dr. Gray is a trained ornithologist, a global climate change and conservation expert, a strong and proven fundraiser, and a seasoned organizational leader and team builder who has a long track record incorporating equity, diversity, and inclusion in the work she leads.

Dr. Gray joined Audubon in March of 2021 as president and chief conservation officer and accepted the role of acting CEO in May. Gray says this opportunity is like a homecoming for her. Birds launched her career into conservation, and they opened her eyes to the importance of tackling climate change.

Dr. Gray has spent more than three decades as a dedicated conservationist, including considerable time in the field nationally and abroad. A champion of science-based conservation, her work has focused on building strong partnerships with local communities as well as state, national, and international environmental partners to protect the planet.

Gray joined Audubon from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) where she served in a number of leadership roles, most recently as global managing director for climate. She has a significant track record on climate change leadership at the national and global level including serving as a global spokesperson for TNC’s climate change work at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change meetings; launching regional programs in climate adaptation and natural climate solutions across the U.S., Canada, and the Caribbean; and publishing numerous scientific papers focused on her research in climate-impacted areas such as Latin America, East Africa, Hawaii, and the Pacific Northwest.

Dr. Gray has worked to empower the next generation of conservation leaders through a young professional’s network and youth advocacy program. She earned her Ph.D. in ecology from the University of Washington and holds an A.B. with highest honors in psychology from Harvard University.

Public Officials

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Governor Pete Ricketts

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State Capitol Switchboard

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Lincoln Journal Star

Letters to the editor, 926 P St, Lincoln NE 68508
E-mail: oped@journalstar.com

Join now! Become a Friend of Wachiska Audubon Society!

This local chapter membership provides you with voting privileges and access to all our events, programs, and committees, **plus 100 percent of your membership donation goes directly to the Wachiska chapter. In addition, Friend members receive our monthly newsletter, *The Babbling Brook*, in their choice of print or electronic form.**

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Name _____

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- ___ \$1000 Peregrine Falcon Friend

Select the level of support that is right for you and make your check payable to **Wachiska Audubon Society**. All funds will remain with our local chapter and are tax deductible. Mail to:

Wachiska Audubon Society
Attention: Membership Committee
4547 Calvert St Ste 10
Lincoln NE 68506-5643



American Goldfinches

___ **I prefer to receive my newsletter by email.**

Please note: If you are already a member of National Audubon Society (NAS) you automatically become a member of Wachiska, but not a Wachiska Friend member. Only Wachiska Friends receive the printed newsletter each month. If you wish to join NAS or receive *Audubon* magazine, please contact the National Audubon Society directly.

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