

# Using Birds to Guide Management<sup>1</sup>

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Most years, bluebirds come home to Wyoming on the 23rd day of March. I know this date because I have watched the birds for decades. It is not a date of great ornithological importance. The 23rd of March is my mother's birthday, and my mother loves bluebirds. As a son, you tend to remember things like mothers and bluebirds.

For a land manager, these things become fact, irrefutable correlations of centuries of observation. Scientists may show data to refute such and land managers may be impressed, but data will not change the fact that bluebirds come home to Wyoming on or around the 23rd of March. If those bluebirds aren't there around the 23rd of March, something is wrong. And, when bluebirds return, it snows. That's just the way it is. Of course, some may choose to "pick nits" about whether these blue birds are Lazuli Buntings (*Passerina amoena*), Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*), Eastern Bluebirds (*S. sialis*), Indigo Buntings (*Passerina cyanea*), or Blue Grosbeaks (*P. caerulea*). This is ridiculous trivia. These are birds, and they are, in fact, blue.

Lately I have learned that the first returnees are usually Lazuli Buntings and Mountain Bluebirds. On the eastern slope of the Wind River Mountains where I live, these species usually arrive earlier than the other blue birds. Over in the Wyoming range, there aren't so many buntings, and the blue birds there are Mountain Bluebirds. Perhaps they are so important to residents because they are harbingers of spring; and after long winter months of nothing but snow and brown grasses, they mean color again will become part of life.

It may surprise some to learn that I am not an ornithologist. Some may be dismayed to find that I am not even a qualified birder, though I can name many birds by their calls, including meadowlarks, geese, ducks, and Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*). I've just always liked birds. I grew up with wonderful, powerful women who loved birds. They were not well-educated in avian ecology. They just loved birds. When I was a little boy, my great-aunt would "sit" me at the window of her cabin and shush me, then tell me about each of

the birds that fed on her handmade feeders or that nested in the cracks or boxes she had built for them to make a home. Mountain bluebirds and wrens were her favorites, but she did not care if the bird was brown or indigo. When we fished, she pointed to dippers, mergansers, and teal. And when she died, the birds she loved were in another part of the world, another continent, another ecosystem.

No matter. She always seemed to be happy to provide for birds in the world in which she lived, a summer place and a place where birds came and went as the snow and the cold moved in and out. She was very content with her world and with her part in the life of "her" birds. She had no control over the fate of birds that left her ranch when they departed in the fall; and while she cared deeply, she understood she had no control. There is nothing so disheartening as the feeling you have staring into a cage in Central America, suddenly able to buy a songbird with a band on its leg that has your own "return address."

When that return address is a patch of willow you nurtured, a bird in a cage makes the willows and the water and the changes in management seem small, but it does put your role in context. All I can do as a land manager is give the birds a place to breed and, hopefully, fledge more of their own.

The men in my life also connected with birds as much as they connected to plants and big animals. My grandfather called goldfinches "canaries," and I still do, just to aggravate ornithologists. He graduated from high school without much teaching in avian science, but he knew a "black-winged canary" from a "yellow canary," and he loved them both. One was a finch, the other a warbler. Some would hasten to point that out to him, I suppose, to keep him in his place. But few could manage willow thickets as he did, and none could care more. Nor could any of them take all of the willows away, as he could have done on any given day, by dropping a dozer blade, selling lots, or just quitting to care.

We will not make the world a better place for birds by simply showing graphs and data to each other. We will not make more habitats for birds by making those who feed birds feel insignificant or inferior to supreme intellect. We will make the world a better place for birds by engaging the innate sense of affection people have for bright creatures in their lives, and by telling a story of what these creatures need and like. Show a

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rancher a flycatcher and tell him what they need. Love knows no boundaries. Thickets will abound.

Nor will any amount of law, order, arrogance, or education replace the simplicity of intimacy with a single piece of land. Leopold (Tanner 1987) said it most elegantly....."There is no conceivable way by which the general public can legislate crabapples, or grape tangles, or plum thickets....nor will the resolutions or prayers of the city change the depth of next winter's snow nor cause corn shocks to be left in the fields to feed the birds. All the non-farming public can do is to provide information and build incentives on which farmers may act."

In order to care for the long-term welfare of birds, we must understand the land and know where birds live. But we must also understand and appreciate the economic realities that place pressure on others. Until we can seek mutually beneficial outcomes for birds and those who raise them, we cannot even speak the same language. As in nearly all cases of natural resource conflict, the greatest barrier to getting the job done on the land is communication.

I am a land manager and a rancher. I like cows and I raise cattle, but I really love other things about ranching and what it offers the world. My "favorites" list is pretty simple: green grass, river otters, rain, weasels, sedges, bobcats, mule deer, willows, lizards, frogs, wrens, sagebrush, hummingbirds, fish, bears, falcons, fire, blue grama, wolverines, bighorn sheep, and blue-bunch wheatgrass.

I like rain and hate drought, though both have always been part of my world. I am allergic to sagebrush but cannot live without it. I like big systems, big process, and all the little things that make time and space meaningful. I like diversity, and I like chaos. I like to see systems in various states of degradation and repair. One really hard rain can ruin my life's work on the land, and someday a hard rain will take my work away. I try to think in geologic time. I hope to act in my own time. I fully understand the paradox.

In recent years, I have come to the realization that birds offer land managers much more than color and sound. They are not just background or soundtrack to our work. Birds offer insight and feedback to management of natural resources. Making that information available and usable to landowners is key to more enlightened choices of how large landscapes may be managed. In most cases, there is no need for detailed analysis or statistical integrity. Mere presence or absence is often the indicator necessary to guide management. The need is great for simple identification of key species as indicators. Land managers will quickly pick up on those needs and make adjustments, just as my pre-

decessors have done. A positive message will generate positive feedback. Instead of bemoaning missing species, we will be best served by using species that are strong indicators of particular habitats.

The presence of American Dippers (*Cinclus mexicanus*) on our creeks is a credible indicator of water quality and forage base for a species that is fairly picky about where it lives and eats. Likewise, abundant kingfishers, Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*), and other fishing birds speak to the health of the aquatic system. Flashes of yellow, whether American Goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*) or Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica petechia*), tell me we are maintaining structure and density of woody species that house and feed those birds and others. Willow (*Empidonax traillii*) and Dusky (*Empidonax oberholseri*) flycatchers are great indicators of habitat in riparian areas, while Sage Thrashers (*Oreoscoptes montanus*) and Brewer's Sparrows (*Spizella breweri*) offer testimony to the quality of open sagebrush habitats. Newcomers like Bullock's Oriole (*Icterus bullockii*) and Blue Grosbeaks indicate we are maintaining structure for species that are perhaps slightly out of their normal range.

And sightings of birds less common often help me to remember the need for chaos that leads to a diversity of habitat types. For instance, as we have increased the scale and frequency of fire, we see Clark's Nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*) and other species that thrive in a dynamic system. Absence of some species may help us understand deficiencies of the system, or remind us that we need to maintain specific habitats because it is difficult to take joy in something that is missing. For landowners, the real, the here and the now, will tell more than the maybe. As a result, indicators keyed to required habitats for many species are most desirable.

At Red Canyon Ranch, we are fortunate to have a banding station (MAPS) that is operating in its seventh year. From that meadow site, my learning curve has heightened and feedback to management is stronger and more constant. Andrea Cerovski has been able to teach me in the field, at my pace. She and her helpers have captured 96 species of birds on that small 60-acre site, mostly Neotropical migrants. Those species and their habitat requirements guide management of the area.

The meadow is small, and rather than cut hay, we normally graze the area in early spring and late fall to allow ground-nesting birds a full season without disturbance. By moving cattle keyed to birds' reproductive needs, we have been able to reduce the number of captures of cowbirds which indicates less potential for parasitism. We still remove the same amount of forage, but do so at times when we benefit by not feeding hay, or at times where the nutritional value of the grass is optimal to put on weight or improve condition

of cattle. We have been able to expand willow and shrub habitat by reducing mechanical harvest of forage. By knowing our bird clientele, we have been able to develop a mix of grasses and forbs that best provides seeds of the size most beneficial to those species. When we do cut the meadow, we time it to allow fledging. These are all management options that will work, not guided by all 96 species but by a handful of key residents that speaks for the whole.

A Yellow Warbler was captured on the ranch last year that had been banded 6 years earlier. This year, a bird estimated to be 6 years old was recaptured. The fact that these birds have migrated successfully back to this ranch for 6 to 8 years is astounding, but also an indicator that our management should not be altered greatly in the near future.

The next step for avian biologists and ranchers is to develop simple, abbreviated guides to different ecosystems and types, based on the birds we see. While most ranchers do not discuss warblers at peer meetings, they are universally drawn to birds and are truly curious about what birds tell them about the sustainability of

their own ranches. Bird books are impressive, but intimidating. Song guides are helpful, but only if there are not too many notes in the tune. By making identification simple and correlating color and song with habitat and management, we will quickly see results on the ground. Results will be even more prevalent where mandate and regulation are absent.

The issues facing birds are the same issues facing land managers. Large habitat bases are being lost to rural subdivision and other alternative uses of the landscape. Habitat fragmentation and loss of large, open ranching landscapes are real and prevalent threats for many species. By using the responses of birds to guide our management of habitats, we will be able to sustain many species, and provide color and sound for those who love “bluebirds” and “canaries.”

### Literature Cited

Tanner, T. 1987. **Aldo Leopold: The man and his legacy.** Soil and Water Conservation Society of America; 175 p.