

ALL for the Birds

Free Nature Education in the Flathead Valley

words by XXXXXXXX, photos by XXXXXXXX



A common interest in birds, habitat and protecting our natural environment draws residents of all ages from all walks of life together. Everyone is welcome to participate in Flathead Audubon programs and activities, regardless of skill level.

The Flathead Audubon Society is committed to providing free nature education to students in the Flathead Valley. Its Conservation Education Program takes children outdoors to experience, understand, value and ultimately care for the natural environment needed to sustain them in the future. In fact, the Conservation Education Program is dedicated to seeing “No Child Left Inside!”

Flathead Audubon recognizes that our young people are becoming increasingly

sedentary and involved with electronic media in indoor settings. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization warn that sedentary lifestyles are a global public health concern. Further, numerous studies conducted in the United States and abroad conclude that children, adolescents and adults who play in natural settings or have regular contact with nature are better able to cope with ADHD, obesity, stress and mental illness. To counteract this alarming trend, FAS believes

that outdoor experiences are needed for the future generation to develop empathy with other species in real, living landscapes. Flathead Audubon accomplishes this with a dedicated half-time Conservation Educator, Ashley Mason, and much support from a volunteer board and a generous membership.

Ashley Mason’s mission is an educational one. Her task is to promote a sense of wonder about natural places that surround us through engaging, interactive hands-on programs; to promote steward-

ship; to provide information on birds, habitat and conservation. She strives to reach a wide cross-section of the Flathead Valley, including schools, community groups and underserved populations. Each year, over 5,000 people are reached through Flathead Audubon programs.

NATURE EDUCATION PROGRAMS AVAILABLE

The programs offered by Flathead Audubon and delivered by Mason include classroom programs, community naturalist programs, a peer mentoring program, educational trunks and teacher workshops, and native plant habitat gardens.

Classroom Programs: Mason acts as a liaison between Flathead Audubon and local schools to provide natural history and avian education consistent with Flathead Audubon’s mission and goals through presentations to teachers and their students. Flathead Audubon is the only conservation organization that offers conservation education programs free of charge to local area schools. These programs include educational trunk usage, in-class, hands-on conservation units, assistance with bird counts, field studies and curriculum support. These programs serve students pre-school through grade 12 in public and private schools, as well as home school groups.

Community Naturalist Programs: Also free of charge, these programs are interpretive, educational programs with a conservation theme aimed at multi-age audiences—much the way that ranger-led programs are offered in the national parks. Some examples of community naturalist programs are: Winter Vacations Are for the Birds—Overwintering vs. Migration; Owls; and Nesting Neighbors. One of the main goals of this program is to reach underserved populations, such as, homeless shelters, Head Start and veterans’ homes, believing that nature’s salve is particularly important to those facing life’s biggest challenges. For example, a Nature Speaker series was presented over three nights at Samaritan House. These programs are also offered seasonally at county library branches.

Peer Mentoring Program: Every other year, Flathead Audubon partners with the Flathead Conservation District and several area schools in a two to three-day “Get Out” program at Owen Sowerwine Natural Area. This innovative program is designed so that high school students designated at risk of dropping out of school are paired up as peer mentors to 2nd, 3rd and 4th graders. Older students act as mentors in assisting younger students in a program that teaches about watersheds, ecosystems and habitat restoration at Owen Sowerwine Natural Area.

The goals of this program are a) to increase watershed knowledge and stewardship of the local environment, b) to inspire personal discovery and growth and c) get students outside and exploring the world around them. Curriculum content includes d) classroom study on watersheds, habitat and wildlife, e) field study while rotating through three stations—habitat enhancement and restoration, bird identification and nature journaling and f) cross-age youth peer mentoring.

Educational Trunks and Teacher Workshops: Mason maintains 11 FAS educational trunks that can be checked out free



of charge by educators. She also partners each fall with other educational organizations and agencies to put on a trunk workshop for area teachers. These very popular trunks are used by schools, community groups, churches and home schools and include:

- . Binoculars—Large and Small
- . Field Guides
- . Common Birds of the Flathead
- . Maggie the Magpie
- . Cavity Nesters
- . Hummingbirds
- . Riparian Habitat
- . Bird Costume—Elementary and Preschool
- . Snowy Owls
- . Gift of the Bitterroot—Indian Education for All
- . Bird Study Skins

Discovering Flathead's Feathered Friends—Enhancing School Yard and National Forest Habitat: During 2012-13, Mason has also been working under a grant from the Flathead National Forest to plan and develop four native plant gardens/school yard habitats at four local schools. These gardens will function as outdoor learning spaces, as well as provide important habitat for local bird species. One component of the grant provides for all involved students to do a service project on Flathead National Forest land as well.

Community Events: Flathead Audubon and Mason strive to provide a conservation-related display and hands-on activities at many community events, such as, Family Forestry Expo and Raptor Day. The latter is held every year on the first weekend in September at Lone Pine State Park. It celebrates the conservation legacy of Rod Ash. On September 7, 2013, Kate Davis of Raptors of the Rockies and her live “teaching birds” will present a program about owls, hawks and eagles. Raptor Day is also free of charge and geared to families and people of all ages.

PATH TO CONSERVATION EDUCATOR

Mason was educated at Gilford College in North Carolina before coming to Montana in 1992 to work for The Glacier Institute. For the past 21 years Ashley has worked in the field of conservation education in Northwest Montana for organi-

zations, such as, Flathead Land Trust, Crown of the Continent Ecosystem Education Consortium, Swan Ecosystem Center and as Ranger/Naturalist in Glacier National Park. She was named the 2012 Montana Audubon Educator of the Year. Her passion for habitat and birds is evident in her enthusiasm for education and knowledge about where we might be going if bird habitat is not protected.

AUDUBON SPONSORSHIP

Flathead Audubon is all about helping people enjoy birds and learn about nature, while supporting conservation through education and advocacy. It had its beginnings as the Bigfork Bird Club in 1975 and in 1977 affiliated with the National Audubon Society. Flathead Audubon is now one of nine chapters in Montana, exclusive of Montana Audubon in Helena. It has 425 members. (Some are chapter-only members and many are National Audubon members who automatically become members of the chapter in the region in which they live.) A common interest in birds, habitat and protecting our natural environment draws residents of all ages from all walks of life together. Everyone is welcome to participate in Flathead Audubon programs and activities, regardless of skill level.

To learn more about Flathead Audubon and how to become a member, go to www.flatheadaudubon.org or call (406) 837-0181. To request a program, please email Ashley Mason at Ashley@audubon-ashley@gmail.com. ■

