

Bird Watch on the Palmer Divide

Year of the Bird: Do birds really matter?



By Elizabeth Hacker

March is a cold, wet, and windy month. It's the time of year when birds appreciate a little extra food and water, and many people enjoy providing them. I often wonder who gets more enjoyment and benefit from this activity, our little feathered friends or we humans.

This year marks the centennial of the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), the most powerful and important bird-protection law ever passed. In honor of this milestone, nature lovers around the world are joining forces to celebrate the "Year of the Bird" and commit to protecting birds today and for the next hundred years. It's a good time to consider why birds matter.

In the past, I have written about how herons, a non-game shore bird, were hunted to near extinction for sport and the fashion industry. It took 19 years to bring a bill before Congress and another two years for Congress to ratify it. Conservation was not a popular concept then, and it still isn't today. If not for those who stood up for what they believe, herons, now common at the edge of most lakes, rivers, and wetlands, may have been but another extinction statistic.

It has never been easy to advocate for the environment, but in the years since MBTA there have been a few strong voices that have made a difference. One that has captured my attention lately is Marjory Stoneman Douglas, "April 7, 1890 - May 14, 1998, Marjory was an American journalist, author, women's suffrage advocate, and conservationist known for her staunch defense of the Everglades against efforts to drain it and reclaim land for development. Moving to Miami as a young woman to work for the Miami Herald, she became a freelance writer, producing over a hundred short stories that were published in popular magazines. Her most influential work was the book *The Everglades: River of Grass* (1947), which redefined the popular conception of the Everglades as a treasured river instead of a worthless swamp" (Wikipedia).

Does her name ring a bell? It was the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., where the latest school shooting took place. I have to believe her spirit lives on in the brave students who are standing up to the gun-rights establishment.

While gun rights and environmental issues are not the same, standing up for what you believe in and butting up against the establishment take tremendous courage but can make a difference.

Today there is a big pushback against environmental protections and regulations. In addition to sensitive habitat lost to development, there is an attitude that it's acceptable to trash the environment. There are so many plastic bags waving in the wind that I wonder if they've replaced our stars and stripes and if I need to stand up and salute.

While the MBTA addresses the hunting of non-game birds, it does not specifically address habitat loss, which today is the No. 1 reason for the decline in bird populations around the globe. At one time in the not too distant past, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency acted to protect sensitive habitats, but today this agency has been marginalized. In an effort to cut government spending, reduce cost, and expedite completion time for development projects, regulations and project review are now being left to the discretion of the developer.

Many people move to northern El Paso County because of the abundance of wildlife found here. Over the last 30 years there has been tremendous change. Ask yourself when you last saw a burrowing owl, a prairie dog, or a pronghorn antelope? Many people, most with a vested interest, fought listing the Preble's meadow jumping mouse as a threatened species. They paid their own "scientist" to discredit the agency's environmental scientists. It is easy to dismiss a mouse. After all, who can't relate to exterminating them in their homes? But this mouse is different. It has a very specific habitat and is a major food source for owls, the prairie falcon, and other raptors. If it disappears, there will be consequences.

The United States is not alone in its disregard for protecting sensitive environments and threatened species. Papua New Guinea (PNG), about the size of California, is an extremely poor tropical country that is home to over 700 species of birds, 11 of which are birds of paradise. Today, 100 percent of the bottom land along its rivers and wetlands have been converted to palm tree plantations for production of palm oil.

Palm oil, as you may know, is an ingredient found

in most processed foods and known to contribute to heart disease. When foreign investors cleared the bottom lands, the forest-dwelling native peoples of PNG were displaced. Few natives were hired to work in the palm oil industry, and the commodity and investment were shipped out of country. The plantations have created a monoculture in one of the most habitat rich and environmentally sensitive countries on the planet. PNG is on the other side of the globe, so why should we care if one or more species of bird of paradise becomes extinct?

In his *National Geographic* essay titled "Why Birds Matter," Jonathan Franzen writes that what birds do for us is to indicate the health of our ethical values. He writes that one reason wild birds matter, or ought to matter, is that they are our last and best connection to the natural world that is otherwise receding due to human self-serving interests.

What would it be like to wake up and not hear a bird chirping, if there were no ducks on our lakes or no hawk soaring overhead, or worse, what if birds stopped flocking to our feeders? Birds are a gauge on the health of our planet and they really do matter!

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Above: Give them a helping hand.
Illustration by Elizabeth Hacker.

Our Community Notices

By Judy Barnes, Events Editor

Although we strive for accuracy in these listings, dates or times are often changed after publication. Please double-check the time and place of any event you wish to attend by calling the information number for that event.

Tri-Lakes Meals on Wheels needs drivers

Meals on Wheels in the Tri-Lakes area needs regular and substitute drivers to deliver meals Monday, Wednesday, and Friday each week. Volunteers will have to complete an application with Silver Key and then undergo a background check. For more information, phone Sue Cliatt, 481-3175.

Meals on Wheels by Silver Key

If you're a homebound senior age 60 or older, you might qualify to receive meals delivered to your home through Silver Key. To register or volunteer, call 884-2370. See ad on page 5.

Volunteers needed for

Board of Adjustment, apply by March 9

The El Paso Board of County Commissioners is seeking community-minded citizen volunteers to serve on the Board of Adjustment. Applications are due by **March 9**. The volunteer application is located at www.elpasoco.com. Click on the "Volunteer Boards" link. For more information, call 520-6436 or visit www.elpasoco.com.

Tri-Lakes Women's Club announces 2018 grant process, ends March 15

Tri-Lakes Women's Club's (TLWC) grant application for 2018 is available online through March 15 on the TLWC website, www.tlwc.net. Eligible organizations include non-profit and public service organizations and public schools that serve the Tri-Lakes area. Special program and project requests are welcomed. The application package includes the instructions as well as other important qualifying information. For more information, contact Barbara Betzler, bbetz@me.com.

2018 Trees for Conservation seedling tree program, order by April 4

The Colorado State Forest Service Nursery provides landowners with low-cost container and bare root seedlings to help achieve conservation goals. Order online until **April 4** at <https://cfs.colostate.edu/buying-seedling-trees>.

Upcoming elections

Make sure your voter registration is up to date at www.govotecolorado.com.

Free income tax help

Through its Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program, Pikes Peak United Way, in partnership with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), provides free income tax preparation assistance to individuals and families with a household income of \$54,000 a year or less. To find out if you qualify or to schedule an appointment, call 2-1-1 Monday through Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m.; or visit www.ppunitedway.org/vitaetc.html.

Tri-Lakes Y Youth Spring Sports, register now
Practices begin **April 2** for outdoor soccer, volleyball, and flag football; **April 14** for indoor soccer. Financial assistance is available. Register at www.ppymca.org or at the Y, 17250 Jackson Creek Parkway, Monument.

Lewis-Palmer School District Hall of Fame, nominations accepted through April 27

The community is invited to nominate a person who has made significant, ongoing contributions to the excellence of D-38 schools. More information and nomination forms are posted at www.lewispalmer.org under the Community tab. See ad on page 9.

Lillian's Second Annual Cinderella Fairy Godmother Project, donate by April 30

Lillian's of Monument will accept donations of gently-used, ready-to-wear prom dresses, shoes, and accessories (no more than 5 years old) to give to teen girls for prom. You may drop off your donations through April 30 at 251 Front St. Suite 4, Monument. For more information, phone 488-3550. See ad on page 32.

Yoga classes at Woodmoor Barn

Raleigh Dove is now teaching three weekly yoga classes at the Woodmoor Barn. Classes are open to everyone, and each class is a different level. For more information, visit www.yogapathwaysstudio.com. See ad on page 4.

Monument Hill Kiwanis grants, apply by May 15

The Monument Hill Foundation, the charitable arm of the Monument Hill Kiwanis Club, has an annual granting program. Grants are awarded to charities as defined by the IRS,

to various qualifying youth activities and to schools for various educational activities and scholarships. Applications will be accepted until **May 15**. The grant application is available at www.monumenthillkiwanis.org/forms/mhf_grants. See ad on page 11.

Art gallery show entries due by May 31

Palmer Lake Art Group is seeking new submissions for its upcoming Color Splash gallery show at Tri-Lakes Center for the Arts. All artwork must be produced by exhibiting artists and not have been previously showcased. The group will accept entries through **May 31**. For more information, email plinfo@palmerlakeartgroup.com. Find details on how to enter your artwork at www.palmerlakeartgroup.com.

Mountain View Electric Association board nominations now open

The board election will take place during the annual meeting **June 7**. If you are interested in being a candidate, find application details at www.mvea.coop. For more information, phone 719-494-2528 or email candidate@mvea.org. See ad on page 14.

Host families needed

Become a host family for only one month this summer! Host a student from Europe in June/July. Family will receive a stipend to support activities. For more information, phone 481-4412 or visit www.xploreUSA.org. See ad on page 4.

Monument Academy now enrolling

Monument Academy, a free public school of choice, features academic excellence, award-winning programs, and more. For more information or to schedule a tour, call 481-1950 or visit www.monumentacademy.net.

St. Peter Catholic School now enrolling

The school offers full and half-day preschool, Core Knowledge Curriculum with small class sizes, Christ-centered education, athletics, and more for preschool-eighth grade. Call or visit: 124 First St., Monument; 481-1855; www.petertherock.org. See ad on page 2.

Air Force Academy construction project at South Gate Bridge, through June 2019

The New Santa Fe Regional Trail will remain open through the construction site; all trail users must use the metal connexion box tunnel. All bicycle and horseback riders must dismount before entering the tunnel. Periodic trail closures