

MAY 2021

# NOTES OF A NATURALIST

A monthly newsletter bringing you the species, landscape, history, and happenings of the Taft-Nicholson Center

## Centennial Valley's Wonderful Wetlands

Centennial Valley hosts one of the largest wetland complexes in Montana and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Wetlands provide essential ecosystem services, like flood control and water filtration. They are highly productive systems and vital habitat for flora and fauna alike. The expansive wetlands of Centennial Valley contribute to the valley's rich biodiversity by hosting numerous plant and animal species. Many of the bird species that call Centennial Valley home, either part-time or year-round, rely on these wetlands, including the iconic trumpeter swans.

Trumpeter swans are the largest waterfowl and heaviest airborne bird in North America, reaching over 5 feet long and weighing up to 30 pounds. Because of their size, trumpeter swans must run 100 meters across the water's surface before they can take off. These impressive birds can often be found in Upper and Lower Red Rock Lakes, Sparrow Pond, and the surrounding wetlands. They mate for life. Each spring, mated pairs build nests upon muskrat dens and other pre-existing structures in the water.

Red Rock Lakes Wildlife Refuge was established in 1935 to protect the Centennial Valley trumpeter swans. At that time, less than 70 trumpeter swans were known to be residing in the Yellowstone region. This small population is thought to be all that remained throughout their range in the lower 48 states after they were nearly extirpated due to overhunting for their feathers. Today there are around 500 resident swans in the Greater Yellowstone region, including those in Centennial Valley. Their current success is in part due to conservation efforts at the Red Rock Lakes Wildlife Refuge. The Red Rock Lake population has even been used to help repopulate other areas within these birds' historic range.

## Wildlife Sightings

In true spring fashion, the weather has been quite sporadic. Late-season snowstorms have been mixed in with warmer periods and rain showers. Recent rains have us hopeful for a wet spring, especially after such a dry winter. Despite the intermittent snow, the landscape is slowly turning green once again as aspen and willow leaves begin to emerge.

Recent wildlife sightings include 11 moose and over 200 elk, all in one night. A large group of trumpeter swans was seen on Upper Lake. Migratory birds like kestrels and great blue herons have been spotted throughout the valley as well.



Moose spotted near the Center  
Photo Credit: Carol Bergstrom



## Wetlands (cont.)

The future of this species as a whole still hangs in the balance as the habitats they rely on, like wetlands, continue to be at risk. There has been a severe loss of wetlands across North America since European colonization. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has estimated that about half of the total acreage of wetlands in the United States was lost between 1780 and 1980. Conservation practices have helped to slow the rate of wetland loss dramatically, but wetland areas across the country continue to be threatened by land alteration and development, human use, pollution, and invasive species. Continued cooperative conservation efforts between public and private entities in places like Centennial Valley are necessary to ensure the health of wetlands and the species that rely on them.



Trumpeter Swans  
Taft-Nicholson Center Photo Gallery

## For the Birds

During spring and summer, the Red Rock Lakes and associated wetlands are bustling with bird activity. The extensive bird list includes migratory species that might be surprising to find here. Gulls, pelicans, and cormorants may seem to be more at home in a marine environment, yet they thrive in the expansive wetlands of Centennial Valley. Phalaropes stir up invertebrates by swimming in circles to create mini whirlpools in seasonal ponds. Avocets and other shorebirds wade through the shallow waters skimming for food. Several songbird species prefer to nest in wetland areas, like yellow-headed blackbirds and marsh wrens, who are known to have vicious rivalries for prime nesting spots. Even raptors frequent these areas. Northern harriers, also known as marsh hawks, are often spotted circling above, looking for rodents, amphibians, and other small prey. Red-tailed hawks and bald eagles can occasionally be seen perched on posts nearby.

## 2021 Season Projects

We are excited to be returning to the Taft-Nicholson Center, with a closer-to-normal summer in store. We will once again be closed to classes and other large groups due to the continued risk of COVID-19. However, we are excited to once again be hosting Artists-in-Residence throughout the summer, as well faculty fellows in the month of July. Read more about the upcoming faculty fellows and their proposed projects [here](#).

We will continue efforts to maintain and improve the Taft-Nicholson Center campus and will once again be taking on some major projects. We are particularly excited about installing a 14 inch telescope, two greenhouses, and significantly upgrading our audio visual equipment.

Stay tuned for more updates throughout the summer!



American Avocet  
Photo credit: Chris Montgomery

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