Wild Times

The Habitat Connection

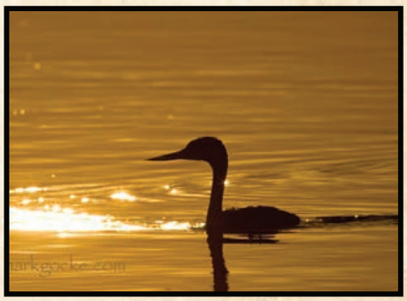
SOAR

When you think of wildlife in Wyoming, what animals come to mind? Maybe you're picturing an elk, moose, or bison. Or did you think of fish, like rainbow trout or cutthroat trout? Lots of times, Wyoming's feathered residents get overlooked as important wildlife species, but just like fish or big game mammals, birds are important to our state.

Wyoming has more than 300 species of birds. Some live in our state year-round, like blue grouse or the downy woodpecker. Others migrate, or travel, with the seasons to different habitats. In fact, some species will travel more than a thousand miles to find a better place to spend the winter or summer. Like all animals, they need the right food, water, shelter, and space to thrive.

Different areas in our state support different species of birds. Wyoming's mountain ranges and forests are home to owls, jays, chickadees, and woodpeckers. These birds like the quiet and the cool mountain air. They build nests in pine trees and feed off berries or bugs that live in the area.

Travel to Wyoming's prairies and you'll see different birds. Species like the burrowing owl and western meadowlark fit right in on these wide-open grasslands. The prairie is rich in wildflowers and grasses, but short on trees, so the birds who live here build their nests on the ground.



And still different birds live in Wyoming's riparian areas. Riparian means "on the bank of a river," and are the areas around water, like a river or pond. The trees, thick bushes, weeds, and tall grasses that grow along the water attract lots of birds because there are so many places to hide or build nests. Raptors, like the osprey, perch on high branches and hunt for fish in the stream. Wood ducks nest in dead tree trunks. Red-headed blackbirds and swallows catch insects in the leaves.

But whatever the Wyoming habitat, you're sure to find many kinds of feathered friends. Keep your eyes and your ears open as you travel the state to see how many birds you can find. If you want to keep track of all the birds you hear or see, get a copy of the Wyoming Bird List from a Wyoming Game and Fish Department office. How many species will you spot soaring Wyoming's skies?

-Photos by Mark Gocke

Wyoming Wildlife
A Free Publication of the Wyoming Game & Fish Department
Fall 2010

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FIELD Wildlife Journal

Darrell Meineke

RAISING PHEASANTS FOR WYOMING

Darrell Meineke is a biologist at the Wyoming Game and Fish Department bird farm in Sheridan. Meineke is one of several employees at Wyoming's two bird farms, and has been raising pheasants for more than 15 years. He works to raise ring-necked pheasants that the Game and Fish releases into habitats across Wyoming.

Life for a pheasant begins as an egg laid by a female pheasant, known as a hen. Male pheasants are called roosters, just like male chickens. In the spring, Meineke collects the eggs from the hens. The eggs are placed in an incubator, a machine that keeps the eggs warm. The incubator lets the unborn pheasant chicks grow and hatch without their mother around.

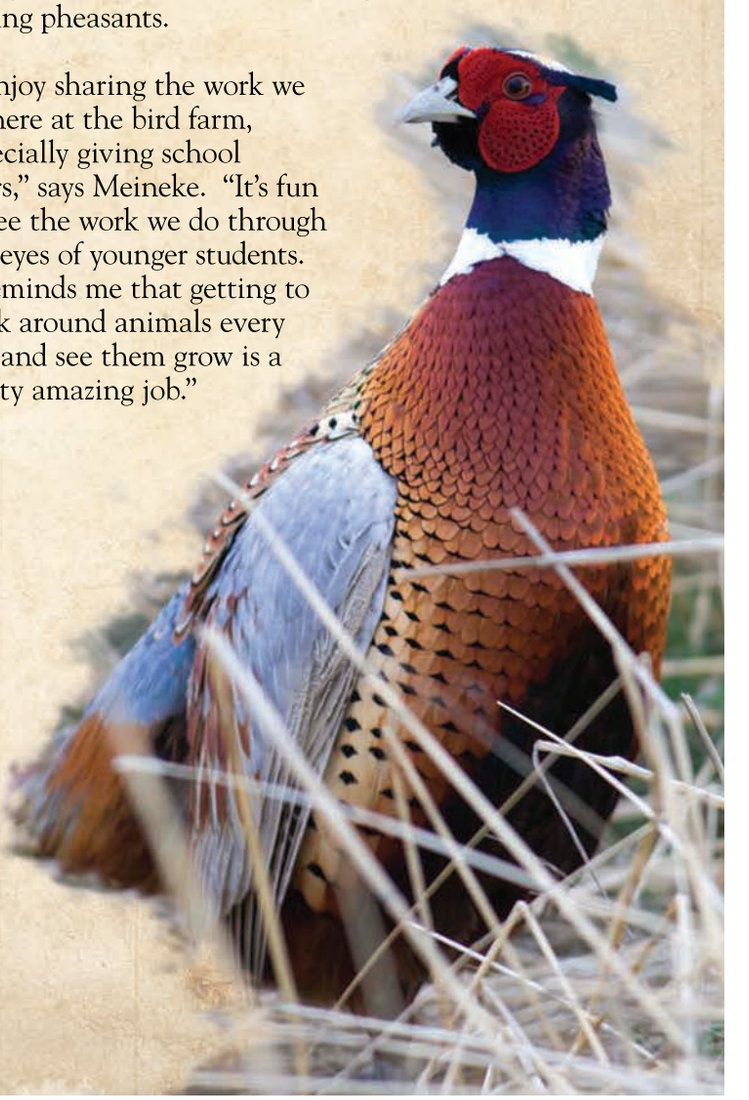
Hundreds of chicks will hatch at once in the incubator. After hatching and drying, Meineke will move the chicks to a new facility where they are kept warm with heaters and learn to eat and drink on their own. As the chicks get bigger, they are moved to different parts of the bird farm to give them room to grow. Eventually, they are released into outdoor pens that are covered with wire. The wire keeps the pheasants in and predators out!

Meineke spends his days caring for all the pheasants on the bird farm, which can be as many as 14,000 at one time. That's a lot of mouths to feed! Meineke says he keeps the birds fed and watered and makes sure the birds stay healthy. If the birds do get sick, Meineke will give them medicated feed until they start looking and feeling better. Meineke also repairs the facilities where the pheasants are raised, and is always on the lookout for predators. Dogs, cats, raccoons, foxes, and even owls might try to attack the pheasants for a quick meal.

In the fall when the pheasants are grown, Game and Fish begins releasing the birds into the wild across the state. Meineke will load the birds into cages on a truck and drive them to their new home, sometimes as far as a few hundred miles. Many of the birds are later hunted, giving Wyoming bird hunters a colorful and tasty challenge each fall.

Once the birds are grown and released, the cycle starts all over again in the spring with Meineke collecting eggs. He also gives tours to visitors wanting to learn more about raising pheasants.

"I enjoy sharing the work we do here at the bird farm, especially giving school tours," says Meineke. "It's fun to see the work we do through the eyes of younger students. It reminds me that getting to work around animals every day and see them grow is a pretty amazing job."



WILDLIFE PROFILES

Photograph by Mark Gocke

Photograph by Mark Gocke

Photograph by WGFD Staff

Photograph by WGFD Staff

WILDLIFE PROFILES

Mountain Bluebird

Size: weighs 2-5 ounces; 6-8 inches tall
Eats: insects and berries
Lives: open rangelands and meadows from Mexico to Alaska

This bright blue bird is an easy bird to spot as it soars across the skies. Adult males are a bright, turquoise blue. Female mountain bluebirds aren't quite as blue, but instead have a gray breast and dull blue wings and tails. They eat mostly insects, snacking on bugs like beetles, ants, bees, wasps, grasshoppers, and even stinkbugs!

Mountain bluebirds are cavity nesters, and will often use a nest box built by people. They also nest in trees and take advantage of old woodpecker holes. Even wildlife recycle!

Cinnamon Teal

Size: weighs to 1 pound, 14-16 inches in length
Eats: aquatic plant seeds and insects
Lives in: lakes and ponds throughout the western United States

Cinnamon teal are beautiful ducks that are fun to spot in the wild. The male cinnamon teal has a cinnamon-red head, brown back, red eyes, and a dark bill. The female is not nearly so colorful, and can be harder to tell apart from other ducks. Females are gray-brown overall with a dark bill and don't have the pretty red eye of the males.

Cinnamon teal live in riparian areas. They look for food in shallow water. They swim with their heads partly under water and filter mud through their bills. The female duck will build her nest below matted, dead stems of plants, so the nest is completely concealed on all sides and from above. She enters her secret nest hideout through tunnels in the vegetation below.

Golden Eagle

Size: weighs 6-13 pounds; 28-33 inches tall, 73-87 inch wingspan
Eats: mammals and birds
Lives in: open country like prairies, open coniferous forest and barren areas

Golden eagles are found throughout the Northern Hemisphere, but are most common in the western United States. It is one of the largest birds of prey in our country—only the bald eagle and California condor get larger. Golden eagles can kill large prey like cranes, young deer, or domestic sheep, but this raptor dines mainly on rabbits, hares, ground squirrels, and prairie dogs.

Golden eagles are dark brown all over, with a golden sheen on their heads. From tip to tip, their wings can measure more than seven feet. That's taller than many professional basketball players!

Sharp-tailed Grouse

Size: weighs 2-3 pounds, 15-20 inches tall
Eats: seeds, leaves, berries, flowers, and some insects
Lives In: prairies, grasslands, and open woodlands

During breeding season, male sharp-tails gather on a group breeding ground called a lek. To impress the females, the males point their tails up, spread their wings, hold their heads low, and stamp their feet in a sort of shuffling dance. It looks a lot like an airplane trying to take off! Sharp-tailed grouse are a mottled brown and gray bird. During spring, the male's eyebrows are yellow, and its air-inflated throat sacks look lavender in color. Native Americans call sharp-tailed grouse "firebirds" because the species depended on habitat that was kept open by burning fires.

Our Wildlife Heritage

PIONEERS OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

As a boy born in the late 1700s, Jean Jacques Audubon enjoyed wandering through the woods, collecting the wild things he found. He loved to fish, hunt, and explore the outdoors. He especially enjoyed watching the birds near his home in France. He drew pictures of the birds and animals he watched.

When Jean Jacques turned eighteen, he moved to America and changed his name to John James to sound more American. Audubon worked at his art, always trying to improve on painting birds. He developed a system of inserting wires into the bodies of dead birds so he could pose them for sketches. He also started the first known bird banding effort in North America by tying yarn to the legs of Eastern Phoebe birds. By tracking the birds, Audubon learned the birds returned to the same nesting spots every year.

In 1808, Audubon married his wife, Lucy Bakewell. He struggled to support their family, failing at business several times. He decided to try to make money selling his bird drawings. Like other men of his day, Audubon set out down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to find his fortune. He explored the country for new birds, paying expenses by painting portraits.

Seven years later, Audubon's volumes of his compiled paintings, known as Birds of America, began to appear in print in England. This important work had 435 hand colored prints of almost 500 different bird species. The success of these drawings made Audubon famous. He was soon considered the leading ornithologist (a person who studies birds) in his country, even though he never had any formal training. Through hard work and dedication, Audubon had succeeded in giving the world the first great collection of American birds, drawn in their natural habitats as close to nature as possible.

With his first published book finished, Audubon and Lucy moved back to America to tutor and encourage young scientists. After several years of illness, John James Audubon died in 1851. More than fifty years after his death, The National Audubon Society was named in his honor. It was started as an organization to protect wild birds, and today the National Audubon Society is a well-known conservation organization that works to conserve and restore habitats for birds and other wildlife. John James Audubon's legacy of learning and understanding our winged friends continues today.

Around Wyoming

GAME ON!

Do you get excited about fall? Do you look forward to the start of school or even football season? Maybe you just enjoy watching the leaves change colors and feeling the cool, crisp air of autumn. Fall in Wyoming can also mean the opening of many hunting seasons for game birds.

Wyoming offers the chance to hunt game birds like grouse, pheasants, or turkeys. Bird hunting helps wildlife managers control populations so that there aren't more birds than there is habitat to support them. Without enough food, water, or the right kinds of shelter, the birds can become vulnerable to predators, disease, or even starvation. Hunters enjoy the challenge of finding these game birds. Meat from these birds also provides a nutritious meal for hunters, just as it did for Native Americans or early settlers.

Some of the game birds found around Wyoming are blue grouse, ruffed grouse, sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, partridge, pheasants, ptarmigan, quail, and wild turkey. Some are native to Wyoming, but others were brought here from other continents. Want to know more about these unique and important birds? Read below to get the score on some of Wyoming's lesser known game birds.

Native game birds

Blue grouse can be found in many of Wyoming's forests. Like the name says, blue grouse are bluish or brownish-gray in color. Some people call them fool hens because they can seem very tame and show no fear of people.

Ruffed grouse have lived in the United States for the last 25,000 years. They are named for the black ruff of feathers on the side of the neck of males. Native Americans often ate ruffed grouse as a main part of their diet. In years when ruffed grouse were scarce, tribes often died from starvation. Ruffed grouse were also a main food item for the Pilgrims, who called them wood hens. Almost all the ruffed grouse in Wyoming live in the western quarter of the state.

Non-native game birds

Chukars, a kind of partridge, have not lived in Wyoming very long. Most of them were transported to the United States from Asia around 1925. They are light brown and gray birds. Each chukar has a wide black band that runs across its forehead. The black band looks like a mask worn by outlaws of long ago. A chukar's call is a loud, rapid chuck chuck chuck noise. Some people say it sounds as if the birds are laughing! You can find chukars in dry, rugged areas in north-central Wyoming.

Gray partridge are also called Hungarian partridge, or huns for short. These are plump birds with short, rounded tails. They are brown or buff colored with feathers barred with streaks of gray and black. Like chukars, huns were transplanted from Europe and Asia almost 100 years ago. Most huns live in the Big Horn Basin area of Wyoming.

Outdoor Classroom

Sound Off!

People sing and birds sing. But birds don't sing just for the sake of sounding pretty. They sing and call to threaten intruders, attract a mate, warn others of danger, communicate with their young, or to identify one another.

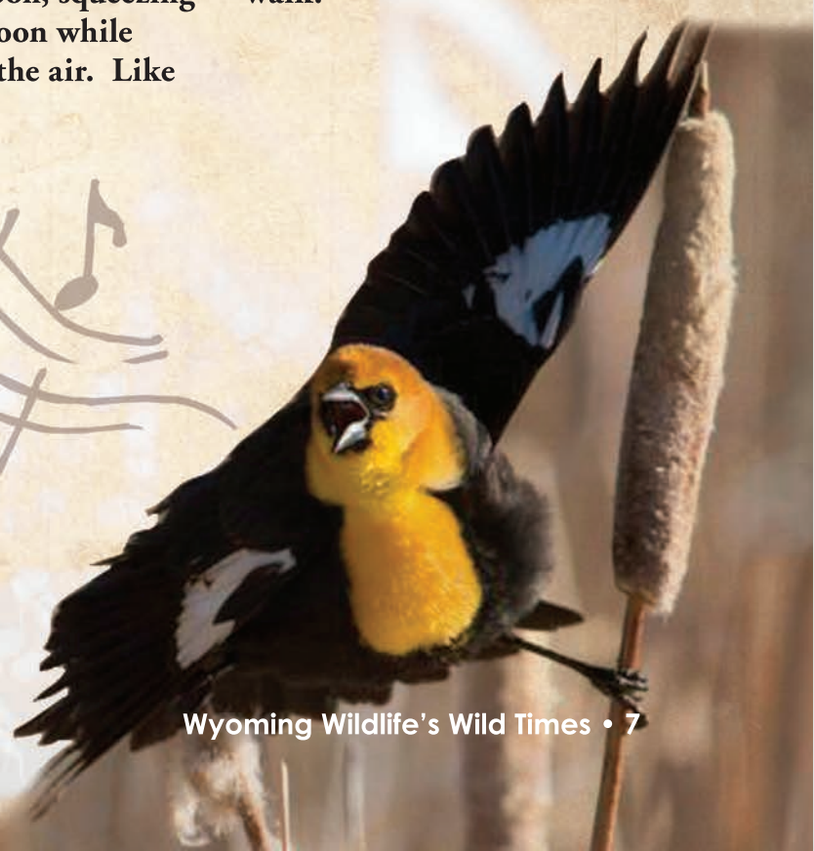
Take a walk outside in the morning or evening. Can you hear different birds singing? Some sing pretty songs, while others chirp, coo, screech, or even squawk. Try to identify as many different bird songs and sounds as possible. Now try singing like the birds you hear. It's not as easy as it sounds!

One reason people have a hard time sounding like birds is because we make sounds differently than birds. Humans have vocal chords, which make sound by vibrating when air is forced over them. We can change the sound of our voices by changing the tightness in our vocal chords. Imagine the noise a stretched rubber band makes when you pluck it…that's sort of like our vocal chords.

Birds don't have vocal chords. Instead, they have a voice box called a syrinx. When air is pushed through the syrinx, it causes the thin skins, or membranes, to vibrate and produce sound. A bird controls the vibrations in its voice box by using sets of muscles. Birds like pigeons have only one pair of these syringeal muscles, so they can make only simple cooing sounds. Other birds, like crows or magpies, can make lots of sounds because they have eight pairs of syringeal muscles. The two halves of the syrinx can even make different sounds at the same time!

Try it! You can use balloons to better understand how a bird's syrinx works. Try blowing up a balloon, squeezing the top of the balloon while slowly letting out the air. Like a bird's voice box, air forced out of the balloon "lungs" is forced through the voice box, vibrating its membranes. Your fingers are like the syringeal muscles that control the vibrations in the voice box. Now blow up another balloon or have a friend help. Use each balloon to make different noises. This is like the two halves of a bird's syrinx making different sounds at the same time.

See how many different songs or sounds you can make by letting air out of the balloon in different ways. Can you make your balloon sound like the songs you heard on your bird walk?



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

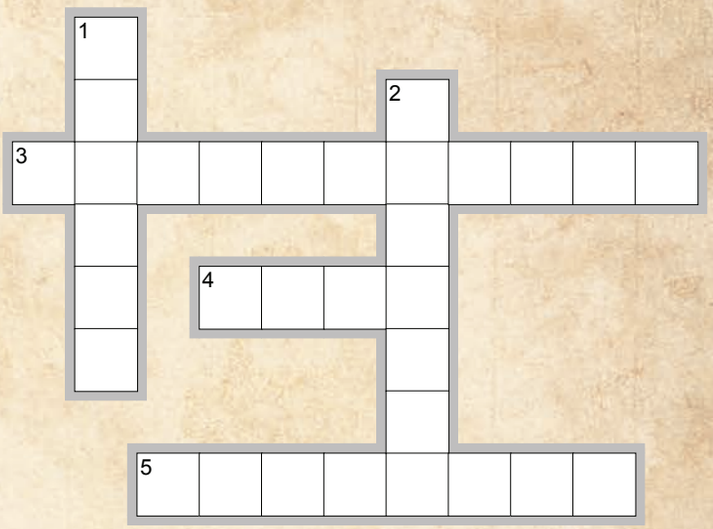
Crossword Puzzle

ACROSS

3. The study of birds is called_____.
4. Grouse breeding grounds are called_____.
5. Green vegetation areas that surround water are_____ areas.

DOWN

1. A bird's voice box is called a _____.
2. A male pheasant is a_____.



Across
3. *ornithology*
4. *leks*
5. *riparian*

Down
1. *syrinx*
2. *rooster*

LEARNING LINKS

Want to learn to speak owl or examine the eye of an eagle?

No matter where you live, raptors surround you – peregrine falcons, bald eagles, osprey, vultures, or even owls might live right in your neighborhood. These birds are the most efficient winged predators in the world. Raptors are stronger, faster and have sharper senses than their prey. This website will teach you more about these astonishing birds using photos, flight silhouettes, range maps, and species information. You can even find out how to dissect an owl pellet or build a raptor nestbox!

http://www.allaboutbirds.org Developed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, this site will teach you all about birds and bird watching. See a "nest cam" and watch barn owls hatch. Listen to bird songs or improve your bird identification skills. You might even get your own bird photo posted on the site!

Volume 9, No. 1
Fall 2010
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Wyoming Wildlife's Wild Times is published four times during the school year (October, December, February and April). Please direct inquiries and changes of address to Wild Times, Education Branch, 5400 Bishop Blvd., Cheyenne, WY 82006; (307) 777-4538.

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