



THE PRIMARY SOURCE

Our mission is to conserve birds and their habitats.

RMBO Celebrates 20 Years of Bird Conservation

*Charles Hundertmark
Chairman, Board of Directors*

Weldon Lee's Piping Plover photo on the cover of Colorado Bird Observatory's (CBO) first annual report documented just one of the notable contributions made by the fledgling organization in its second field season. Along with Bald Eagle Watch and the Barr Lake State Park banding project, both of which continue today, one of CBO's earliest projects was an inventory of Least Tern and Piping Plover nesting in the state.

The terns had not been documented nesting in the state since the 1970s and the plovers since 1949. In pioneering field work at Adobe Creek Reservoir (Least Tern) and Nee-Noshe Reservoir (Piping Plover), CBO staff and volunteers confirmed the suspicions of ornithologists that these two threatened or endangered species nest in Colorado.

On August 16, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory will celebrate its 20th anniversary with its annual BBQ with the Birds Picnic. The anniversary marks 20 years of growing contributions to the conservation of birds in Colorado and the biogeographic regions that are included in the state.

In his director's letter in that first annual report, CBO founder Mike Carter



MacGillivray's Warbler

articulated a vision of an organization that married a scientific perspective with the work of bird conservation. That vision still informs much of RMBO's work today. While the scope of bird conservation work taken on by RMBO's staff and volunteers has grown phenomenally since the early days, the organization has remained true to its original mission "...to conserve bird diversity through education and research...."

By 1993, CBO had grown to a full-time professional staff of five and a seasonal staff of four. The staff were deeply involved with the Partners in Flight (PIF) effort to establish species priorities for bird conservation nationwide. The

observatory had ranked neotropical migratory birds in the 11 western states in 1992 and was working with the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) on priorities for Colorado birds. That early work with PIF has become a foundation block for bird conservation planning in Colorado and the region. RMBO continues to maintain the North American PIF database on bird populations, which is accessible via the website www.rmbo.org.

In 1990, CBO also offered the first of its Bird Monitoring Workshops for federal and state personnel with responsibility for managing bird populations on public lands. The workshops were roots for what became one of the observatory's most successful programs, Monitoring Colorado Birds (MCB).

The roots of RMBO's international program were also set during those years when staff and CBO members took three trips to Colima in western Mexico, where they worked with Mexican biologists to learn about the areas where more than 75 percent of neotropical migrants from the western United States winter.

Educational programs built around CBO's banding stations and Bald Eagle Watch were part of the observatory's operations from the start. In 1990, the Dinosaur Ridge Hawk Watch was



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Visit us at www.rmbo.org

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Layout by Scott Gillihan

Edited by Chuck Hundertmark

RMBO Staff Contact Information

Main Office:

PO Box 1232, Brighton, CO 80601
(303) 659-4348

Nelda Gamble - Bald Eagle Watch Coordinator,

nelda.gamble@rmbo.org

Nancy Gobris - Biologist/Banding Data Manager,

nancy.gobris@rmbo.org

Amanda Morrison - Education Coordinator,

amanda.morrison@rmbo.org

Starr Nicely - Biologist, starr.nicely@rmbo.org

Kristie Parker - Education Assistant, kristie.parker@rmbo.org

Jim Pauley - Accounting Manager, james.pauley@rmbo.org

Jill Phillips - Accounting Assistant, jill.phillips@rmbo.org

Fort Collins Office:

230 Cherry Street, Fort Collins, CO 80521
(970) 482-1707

Tammy VerCauteren - Interim Executive Director,

tammy.vercauteren@rmbo.org

Jennifer Blakesley - Biometrician, jennifer.blakesley@rmbo.org

Alison Cariveau - Research Division Director,

alison.cariveau@rmbo.org

Nancy Drilling - South Dakota Colonial Waterbird Project Coordinator,

nancy.drilling@rmbo.org

Seth Gallagher - Stewardship Division Interim Director,

seth.gallagher@rmbo.org

David Hanni - Monitoring Division Director,

david.hanni@rmbo.org

Greg Levandoski - Biologist, greg.levandoski@rmbo.org

Ross Lock - Mountain Plover Project Manager,

ross.lock@rmbo.org

Arvind Panjabi - International Programs Director,

arvind.panjabi@rmbo.org

David Pavlacky - Spatial Ecologist, david.pavlacky@rmbo.org

Matt Proett - Stewardship Biologist, matt.proett@rmbo.org

Chandman Sambuu - Computer Support Specialist,

chandman.sambuu@rmbo.org

Rob Sparks - Biologist/Information Management Specialist,

rob.sparks@rmbo.org

Eric Systma - Playa Technician, eric.systma@rmbo.org

Chris White - Biological Assistant, chris.white@rmbo.org

Nebraska Office:

PO Box 489, Scottsbluff, NE 69363
(308) 220-0052

Bart Bly - Nebraska Prairie Partners Coordinator,

bart.bly@rmbo.org

Amanda Keep - Nebraska Prairie Partners Educator,

amanda.keep@rmbo.org

Andrew Pierson - Coordinating Wildlife Biologist,

andrew.pierson@rmbo.org

Larry Snyder - Nebraska Prairie Partners Assistant,

larry.snyder@rmbo.org

West Slope:

Jason Beason - Special Monitoring Projects Coordinator,
jason.beason@rmbo.org

Glenn Giroir - Senior Biologist, glenn.giroir@rmbo.org

From the Director...

Tammy VerCauteren, Interim Executive Director

RMBO staff and board kicked off our 20th anniversary year with a two-day retreat to set priorities for the coming years. With staff heavily committed to their project timelines, it was challenging to find workable dates, but 23 staff and eight board members met in March to assess the challenges and opportunities ahead.

The retreat came at an opportune time. After six years of wrestling with our financial situation, we entered 2008 with a clearer picture of our finances and much better control over cash flow. As a result, we were able to focus on what is needed to allow RMBO continue to sink its talons into the challenges of bird conservation in our region.

Tim Merriman, the executive director of the National Association for Interpretation, was co-facilitator for the retreat and led a particularly instructive exercise relating mission to funding. We looked at each of our major activities in terms of whether it was mission-related and whether it generated revenue or lost revenue. We were gratified to discover that virtually all of our efforts support the mission of bird conservation.

However, like a pigeon struck from above by a peregrine, we were stunned to realize that almost all of our activities are either revenue neutral or revenue drains. Merriman was clear that a nonprofit organization, no matter how worthy its mission, cannot survive if money-losing programs are not offset by programs with positive revenues.

Merriman also urged us to look at our membership program. In recent years, RMBO's membership has been declining. This year, board member Carol Cochran is leading an effort with staff member Starr Nicely to rebuild our membership and deliver clearer benefits to our supporters. A step in the right direction is our continued improvement in the annual member picnic. We're also working to improve *Primary Source*, add new education programs, and develop other member benefits.

As we looked at the urgency of serving our members better, fund-raising needs, and the importance of communicating the outcomes of our work, better communication emerged as a clear priority. We've got to do a better job of letting our stakeholders know what we're learning about bird populations and what we're doing to support conservation of those populations. In the short term our staff biologists, with support from the board, will take on that task. In the long run, we need a professional communicator on staff to help tell the bird conservation story.

We also recognized the need to condense our mission, which now is *to conserve birds and their habitats*. We also modified our goals to *Science, Education, and Stewardship* to better reflect how we accomplish our mission. We believe **Science** provides the foundation for effective bird conservation, **Education** is critical for successful bird conservation, and **Stewardship** of birds and their habitats is a shared responsibility. Our vision is that native bird populations are sustained in healthy ecosystems. When you invest in RMBO you are helping make this vision a reality.

The past 20 years have been filled with growth and success. It is members and supporters like **you** that help RMBO continue to make strides for conservation throughout the western United States and Mexico. Thank you for your investment in RMBO. With your continued support, we can make a positive difference for birds and their natural environments.

We hope you will join us to celebrate 20 years of RMBO's successes at our annual picnic on August 16th. Festivities will include presentations, live music, a silent auction, and an opportunity to visit and interact with the staff and board who are our conservation practitioners. Please see the enclosed article on the picnic or our website to learn more.

RMBO Assesses Relationship Between Plant Quality and Bird Populations

Alison Cariveau, Research Division Director

RMBO is working on a project designed to answer the question: “So, just how good are those wetlands anyway?” We all know wetlands are important. If you are a birder, you probably try to include a wetland, pond, river, or lake in every field trip. And, statistics support that preference. The Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) has found that 75 percent of the wildlife of Colorado use wetlands, yet these wetlands account for less than 2 percent of the state’s area.

Despite the importance of wetlands, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) estimates that approximately half of our nation’s wetlands have been lost. Threats to wetlands and rivers persist today – including development pressure, pollution, sedimentation, agricultural and municipal water needs, and invasive species of plants and animals. This sets the scene – we know wetlands are important, we know at least some of them need rehabilitation or protection, and so we are interested in conserving them. Where do we start?

Depending on the objective, we might be interested in restoring, enhancing, conserving, or protecting “high-quality wildlife habitat.” Are some wetlands “better” for wildlife than others? Well, yes. Again, thinking of outdoor adventures in rivers or streams, we might notice that if it is shady and hard to move through the brush (multi-story canopy layers), there’s likely to be more wildlife. Or, on open water, shorebirds, terns, and waterfowl congregate on the shallow wetlands rather than in the deep gravel pits.

Several studies, most sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), have set out to describe the “quality” of wetlands. This information is vital for

determining which excellent ones should be protected, which damaged ones need to be restored, and which are perhaps of little value to wildlife.

There is a great need for quick assessment methods because wetlands are scattered all over, acres are rapidly being converted, and funding is limited. As it turns out, most rapid assessment methods focus on plants as indicators of quality. This makes sense because plants are good indicators of soil, water availability, and other ecological conditions, and because animals generally key in on plants when selecting habitat. This brings us to the *Floristic Quality Assessment* developed by our partners at Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP). Their expert panel of botanists rated all of the plants of Colorado as to their “conservatism,” or the degree to which they required environments free from human disturbance in which to grow. So there is a great tool for assessing wetland conditions, and our question was, “Does this work for birds?” In other

words, do birds prefer wetlands with high quality plants, or not?

RMBO set out to answer these questions in the playas of eastern Colorado, where we have been gathering data since 2004 in partnership with CDOW, CNHP, Playa Lakes Joint Venture, USFWS, and the EPA.

Playas are isolated wetlands sprinkled about on the eastern plains of Colorado that provide terrific migratory bird habitat, particularly when they fill from rainwater. First we are testing the *Floristic Quality Assessment* to see if plant quality in playas matches up to a gradient of disturbances, which includes excavation and impoundment of the wetland basins, roads across the wetlands, agricultural uses throughout the watersheds, etc. Next we are comparing how bird use among playas lines up with plant quality among playas – to see if playas heavily used by birds are also those with high-quality plant species. We visited playas in the fall of 2006 to estimate use by birds during fall migration, and returned to the same playas twice last summer to compile complete plant inventories for each wetland. Now we are analyzing the data, and we will have a Final Report and technical publication sharing our findings

available this winter (like other reports, posted on our website at www.rmbo.org). Our findings should help guide partners in identifying which playa wetlands have the most potential for quality wildlife habitat and where to focus conservation efforts.



20 Years of Bird Conservation (from page 1)

initiated. In 1992, through partnerships with the Denver Museum of Natural History (now Denver Museum of Nature and Science) and the University of Colorado at Denver, education was added to the hawk watch program. A summer bird camp was added to the educational agenda in 1994, a year that also saw the initiation of Birds Without Borders. The latter program connects teachers and students in Colorado with their counterparts in western Mexico through the study of migratory birds.

By 1998, CBO's concept of a comprehensive monitoring program for all breeding birds in Colorado was gaining traction. In partnership with CDOW, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management, a monitoring strategy based on point-count transects in three habitats was piloted. At the same time, development of protocols to monitor special species was initiated. Special species are birds with limited or patchy distributions that elude detection via point counts and transects.

The same year saw the maturing of Prairie Partners into a major program to engage private landowners in the conservation of shortgrass prairie species. The concept was simple. Some 93% of the habitat for these birds is on private land. With voluntary cooperation from the owners of these lands, the prospects for survival of shortgrass prairie birds like Mountain Plovers can be significantly improved. Efforts focused on gaining landowner support for voluntary application of practices to support conservation of Burrowing Owls, Ferruginous Hawks, Long-billed Curlews, Lark Buntings, and Cassin's Sparrows.

1998 also marked the start of construction for the restoration of the Old Stone House. Completion of the restoration in 2000 provided a new home for RMBO.

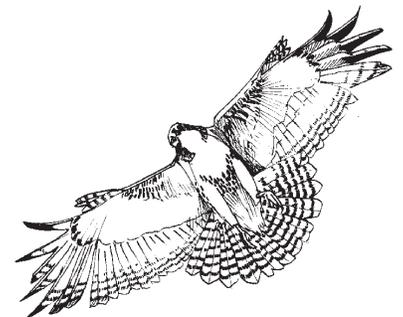
By 2001, CBO had outgrown its name. Prairie Partners was working in Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, New Mexico and Texas as well as Colorado. The rapid success of Monitoring Colorado Birds had led to expansion of the protocols to South Dakota and Wyoming. And studies were being conducted in the grasslands of central Mexico where many shortgrass prairie species winter. A change of name to Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory better reflected the organization's regional scope.

That year also saw the departure of founder Mike Carter who took on a new role as Coordinator of Playa Lakes Joint Venture. Mike had led the growth of the observatory from an organization with first year expenses of \$15,821 to one with annual expenses of \$993,695. Much of the revenue supporting those expenses were tied to projects and contractual commitments. The changing scale of RMBO's operations and responsibilities led new Board Chair Paul Slingsby to write in the 2001 annual report that "...the board must concentrate on its responsibility to assure that RMBO has employee and finance management practices that meet legal and contractual requirements."

Since 2002, the board and staff have worked to strengthen the management practices that Paul emphasized. The last two years in particular have seen substantial progress in the financial management of RMBO. As RMBO grows in its role as a leader in regional bird conservation, sound financial management is critical to maintaining the ability to continue delivering the scientific, educational, and stewardship work that provides the foundation for conserving bird diversity. And even as we have worked to strengthen the administrative base of the observatory, the conservation work has continued to grow.

In some ways, RMBO has become difficult to understand. With banding projects in multiple locations, the latest launched last year in Nebraska; monitoring programs in a handful of states; new projects in the central Mexican highlands; research on changing monitoring protocols to better meet the needs of long-term monitoring; research on the dynamics of playa ecosystems; habitat restoration; and new directions in landowner outreach and stewardship, RMBO is a bit like the proverbial elephant in the room with a group of blind men. Everyone who sees RMBO sees a different aspect of the organization. To many of our partners, we provide the on-ground field science needed to meet their land or habitat management requirements. To thousands of school kids, RMBO has provided direct close-up experience with wild birds. To landowners, RMBO is an organization that allows them to exercise a sense of stewardship while recognizing their need to manage their land for a livelihood. Collectively these efforts are promoting bird conservation at local, regional, and international scales and working toward a vision that native bird populations are sustained in healthy ecosystems.

Perhaps the best way to get a sense of what RMBO has become today is to talk with the staff at the BBQ with the Birds picnic August 16. You'll find an invitation elsewhere in this issue. Come help us celebrate 20 years of bird conservation that you have supported. And help us look to the challenges ahead.



Help Us Celebrate 20 Years of Bird Conservation!

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory invites our members, partners, and friends to celebrate our 20th anniversary during our annual picnic on Saturday, August 16, 2008 at the Old Stone House, Barr Lake State Park. American Birding Association editor and field guide author Ted Floyd will be our keynote speaker.

Appropriate to RMBO's role as a leader in field ornithology, Ted will speak on "Frontiers in Field Ornithology." The event also features bird walks, RMBO's banding station, birding workshops, children's activities, a silent auction, and our famous BBQ lunch. Last year more than 130 people attended and many opined that the BBQ alone would be worth \$15. Our cost this year will be a modest \$10 for RMBO members and partners and \$12 for non-members. Children ages 17 and under will be free.

RMBO's banding station will be open from 7 to 9:30 in the morning and field trips led by RMBO birding experts will leave from the Stone House between 7 and 9 a.m.

Concurrent workshop sessions will begin at 10 and 11 a.m. Susie Mottashed, author of *Who Lives in Your Backyard? Creating a journal that opens your eyes and heart to nearby wonders*, will present a workshop on field-sketching birds. Attendance at this popular workshop will be limited, so reserve early.

RMBO biologists Arvind Panjabi and Jason Beason will speak on "The Mexican Connection" and the "Yellow-billed Cuckoo," respectively; Mike Carter, RMBO's founder, will talk about the beginnings of the organization; and Lynn Wickersham, coordinator of the Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas II, will discuss that project.

Please RSVP to Starr Nicely (starr.nicely@rmbo.org or 303-659-4348 ext. 17) by August 13. Check the RMBO web site for directions to the Old Stone House and additional information.

Celebrate RMBO's 20-year anniversary and help support our conservation efforts by purchasing a commemorative t-shirt designed by Sherrie York, local artist and past RMBO employee. The official debut of this t-shirt will occur at our annual picnic. We will have standard (S-2XL), women's (XS-XL), and youth (M-L) sizes available to purchase for \$20 (10% discount for RMBO members). Place an order for this limited-edition t-shirt while supplies last! Contact Starr Nicely at starr.nicely@rmbo.org or 303-659-4348 ext. 17.



RMBO Invites Nominations for Levad Award

RMBO has established an award to honor the memory of Rich Levad, who made outstanding contributions to Colorado ornithology throughout his career as a teacher and as an RMBO staff member. Rich was a key player in starting RMBO's *Monitoring Colorado's Birds* program, which helped identify new breeding sites for such species as the Black Swift and Purple Martin, and he started *Project Colony Watch*, a volunteer-driven effort to gather data on 16 of Colorado's colonial waterbird species.

The award recognizes persons who, like Rich in his incredibly productive lifetime, have provided distinguished service to the ornithological community, made scholarly contributions to the field of ornithology, and/or have enthused others about conserving birds and their habitats through sharing their personal knowledge and experience.

Nominations may be submitted online at our website (www.rmbo.org). The deadline for submission of nominations is **July 15th**. The award will be presented at the RMBO annual picnic in Brighton, CO on August 16th. The award winner will receive a carved bird by Jack Whiting and be added to RMBO's Levad Award plaque that is displayed at our headquarters in Brighton.

Nominations can be made by anyone and should highlight a nominee's contributions to ornithology, conservation, and/or success in sharing their knowledge of birds with others.

Hawk Watch 2008

Amanda Morrison, Education Coordinator

For the 18th year of RMBO's Dinosaur Ridge Hawk Watch, we added something new. On April 12, RMBO hosted its first Migration Celebration. The event was conducted in partnership with Dinosaur Ridge Visitor Center, Morrison Natural History Museum, Jefferson County Open Space, and Wild Birds Unlimited. Participants learned about raptors, migration, and the history of the hawk watch through educational and informational booths, guest speaker workshops, and a guided hike to the watch site to observe migrating raptors and data collection.

The celebration was featured the following weekend on CBS's Saturday program, Colorado Getaways.

Hawk watchers for the 2008 season were Stephen Wilson, Nick VanLan, Doug Faulkner, Tony Leukering, and Buzz Morrison. Dinosaur Ridge, near Golden, is one of dozens of Hawk Watch sites around the world. Raptors concentrate at these sites during migration due to wind currents and updrafts created by topographic changes like the ridge near

Golden. These features help define the migratory pathways of raptors which need good thermals to assist them in their annual migrations. The sites are great places to learn about migratory patterns and identify potential changes. They also provide an opportunity for the public to learn about the different raptors migrating through the area, the challenges they face, and conservation needs. There are many hawk watches across the western United States. Most counts occur during the fall; however, our watch is one of a handful of counts that are conducted in the spring.

While trained counters collect data, RMBO education staff is busy conducting field trips where participants learn about raptors including species characteristics, migration habits, basic identification, and about data collection. All participants also learn about the importance of migratory pathways and their preservation for future generations to enjoy. Between March 15th and May 9th, 346 students and adults participated in our Hawk Watch education program.

Bald Eagle Watch 2008

Bald Eagle Watch nest monitoring got off to a good start in January with 30 volunteers monitoring the Barr Lake nest and 18 others across the Front Range in Colorado. To date, 15 of the 19 nests have been successful, hatching a total of 31 eaglets. By the time this newsletter reaches you, the eaglets should be fledging.

In 2008, 495 students and adults participated in Bald Eagle Watch education programs provided by RMBO educators at Barr Lake. In this 2-hour program, participants take a guided hike to learn about the natural and political history of the Bald Eagle, view eagles on/in the nest, and learn about conservation practices that help ensure the survival of the species.

WOW CAMP Becomes Summer Bird Camp in 2008

Amanda Morrison, Education Coordinator

Four years ago I started a small day camp at RMBO that was offered to local children in Brighton. The goals of the program are to:

- Bring children out to experience our natural areas and teach them about birds and the importance of quality habitat for all wildlife.
- Create excitement for and encourage interest in birds and other wildlife.
- Help make RMBO a familiar name in households within Brighton and surrounding communities.

In 2008 the camp, formerly Wonders of Wildlife, was renamed RMBO's Summer Bird Camp and the emphasis was on birds and their natural habitats. The number of weekly camp sessions was increased from 4 to 5, and we have added a field trip component to each session with visits to places such as local natural areas and raptor rehabilitation facilities.

Each weekly session had its own theme and included outdoor hikes that incorporate observation time and journaling, educational games and activities, and bird study projects. We have also expanded our range and now have campers coming from as far away as Loveland and Boulder. Several kids came back to camp for their third or fourth summer with us.

Educational programming is supported by the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District and Adams County.

Educational Activities Expand in Nebraska

Amanda Keep, Nebraska Prairie Partners Educator

Bird Banding:

In 2007, Nebraska Prairie Partners (NPP), a cooperative effort between RMBO and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, implemented an educational bird banding station at the Wildcat Hills Nature Center just outside of Gering, Nebraska. More than 1,000 students and teachers saw birds in the hand, learned about collecting scientific data, and became more familiar with the birds in the Wildcat Hills of Nebraska. Funding from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and the Nebraska Department of Education made this opportunity possible. Funding included busing since many schools in western Nebraska have limited resources for field trips. With limited resources many students are not receiving hands-on learning opportunities especially in the outdoors. This effort is an important step in connecting students with their natural environment and the magical wonders of nature.

This year NPP plans to continue the Wildcat Hills Nature Center fall banding station from September 2nd – October 7th. NPP also plans to implement a mobile banding station that will be setup

in Chadron State Park from September 8th –September 26th and then near Kimball, Nebraska from September 29th – October 7th. There will be a public open house at the Chadron State Park and Wildcat Hills banding stations on Saturday, September 13th. Please contact Amanda Keep at 308-220-0052 for more information. We are also implementing a Flying WILD workshop to complement the banding stations and help teachers better integrate the field experience with their classroom environment both before and after visiting the station.

Panhandle Eco-Extravaganza about Prairies (P.E.E.P.)- bringing prairie and riparian conservation messages to students throughout western Nebraska.

A new program to be implemented this year by NPP is Panhandle Eco-Extravaganza about Prairies (PEEP). This program is modeled after Eco-X in Canada. This is a fun, interactive educational program that will emphasize and address conservation needs in the panhandle of Nebraska. PEEP will focus on native prairie and riparian stewardship of western Nebraska and will be offered

to 4th and 5th grade classes. Programs will feature hands-on, inquiry based activities. Students will work together to manage cattle along a riparian area to promote conservation. They will learn about and conduct skits on unique birds of western Nebraska including the Mountain Plover. We will also bring in a rehabbed Burrowing Owl so students have the opportunity to have a close encounter with one of Nebraska's unique shortgrass prairie species. The program will run from October 27th –November 7th and will be held in the southwest portion of Nebraska's panhandle. We already have more than 450 students enrolled.

Educational efforts in Nebraska are made possible with a grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and local support from Educational Service Unit 13, Wildcat Hills Nature Center, Playa Lakes Joint Venture, North Platte Natural Resources District, Upper Niobrara White Natural Resource District, Riverside Zoo, and Nebraska State Forest Service.



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MEMBERSHIP QUESTIONS?

Call (303)659-4348 or e-mail starr.nicely@rmbo.org

THANK YOU for supporting Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory and western bird conservation!

Show your support for Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory!



10% discount for members!

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