Montana was selected as the site for Western Field Ornithologists’ 40th annual conference. This was the first time Montana had been chosen for a conference location and it proved to be an excellent choice. From several quality locations, Billings was ultimately selected for having a conference facility amenable to meeting the needs of WFO and the ease of travel to Billings with several airlines serving the city. A primary reason, however, was that the location provided easy access to a wide variety of prime habitats for WFO field trips. Field trip choices ranged widely from rolling prairies to high mountains. These trips were complemented with canyons whose rocky precipices and forested slopes revealed a wealth of birds. Augmenting these features, lakes, rivers, and streams provided excellent riparian habitat and a myriad of associated species. Also generating great interest were prominent historical sites such as the Little Bighorn Battlefield and Pompeys Pillar.

June was the chosen time so as to highlight the grassland species at their zenith. With grasslands being the most threatened and vanishing habitat in North America, a chance to view Sprague’s Pipit, Baird’s Sparrow, McCown’s Longspur, and other specialty birds was a key factor in selecting the date. As the field trip summary will illustrate, the birds were in place providing stirring memories for many happy participants!

From the foregoing, it is no wonder that the conference generated such great interest and so many participants. For a non-California conference, the meeting attracted well above the average number of participants, with 217 attending!

Thanks in large part to a contribution from Pasadena Audubon, we were able to provide scholarships to the conference to six promising young field ornithologists ranging in age from 12 to 18...

Left to right, and back to front:
Scholarship Youth: Wyatt, Tyler, Elisa, Isaac, Austin, Ryan Photo by Joyce Meyer
Workshops

We offered workshops on Sparrows, Owls, Flycatchers, and Raptors identification presented by Jon Dunn, Denver Holt, Dan Casey, and Steve Hoffman, respectively. Nathan Pieplow gave us a preview of his upcoming book on bird vocalizations, presenting a new approach to listening to and learning bird song.

Friday’s Sound ID Team Challenge with Nathan Pieplow and Saturday’s Bird Photo ID panel with Ed Harper were big hits and, as always, seamlessly blended humor, entertainment, and education.
Awards

Volunteer Service Awards were presented to Peter LaTourrette, who has served as Photo Editor for Western Birds for more than 20 years, and to Nathan Pieplow, who has conducted sound ID panels for ten years and sound workshops for many of those years. Vice President Tom Blackman presented Nathan his award after Friday’s Sound ID Team Challenge. Peter was unable to attend the conference; President Dave Quady presented Peter’s award afterward, back in California.

*Photo by Joyce Meyer*

In March the WFO Board selected Robert W. Dickerman as the first recipient of the Harry S. Swarth Award in Western Field Ornithology, for his body of work that significantly advanced field ornithology in the west. Tragically, Bob suffered a stroke shortly afterward, and passed away a few weeks later, unaware of the honor WFO intended to bestow upon him.
Guy McCaskie was honored with the Alan M. Craig Award. Intended to be given “on an irregular basis for exceptional service to the organization,” becoming the award’s third recipient. Guy was one of the six co-founders of California Field Ornithologists (which became WFO), Guy was its first president, and he served the California Bird Records Committee continuously since 1970 (excepting only a few years when he was term-limited off the committee), including as Secretary for the past 14 years.

President Dave Quady (“17”) presents the Alan M. Craig award to Guy McCaskie (“1”).

Photo by Raymond VanBuskirk
Science Sessions

The Science Sessions were excellent and well-attended, as always...

Photo by Joyce Meyer

Friday Night Reception:

A Western Style Buffet, a first for WFO, was held out in the Courtyard and was very well attended.

Banquet

Stephen Dinsmore presented an excellent talk on Plovers, prairie dogs, and plague: the Mountain Plover in Montana. This information, besides being informative was very entertaining. At the conclusion of his talk we had a better understanding of the population dynamics of the Mountain Plover and conservation strategies.
Grasslands greeted WFO participants as they explored Montana and its abundant birds.

**WFO 2015 Montana Field Trip Report**

Field trip planner and coordinator was Ed Harper, a Montana native. Drawing from his extensive experience and birding in Montana, Ed laid out a total of 42 field trips. Each trip had two leaders, nearly all being very experienced in leading birding field trips. Great emphasis was placed on grassland and sagebrush steppe specialties. Greater Sage-Grouse, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Gray Partridge, Ferruginous Hawk, Mountain Plover, Upland Sandpiper, Long-billed Curlew, Sprague’s Pipit, McCown’s Longspur, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Lark Bunting, and Baird’s Sparrow were all highlighted species and all were observed on various field trips. Away from the prairies, the high mountain vistas produced Calliope Hummingbird, American Dipper, and the much appreciated Black Rosy-Finch. Riparian habitats revealed many choice species including Least Flycatcher, Red-eyed Vireo, Plumbeous Vireo, Gray Catbird, Ovenbird, American Redstart, Yellow-breasted Chat, and amazing numbers of Yellow Warblers.

Most migrant species pass through in May so nearly all the recorded species on field trips were the expected breeding species. With so many birders saturating the region, there is always a surprise or two bound to happen. An Eastern Phoebe was found on the West Rosebud field trip. There are only about two dozen confirmed records of this species in Montana. Gray Flycatchers were confirmed in the Pryor Mountains where the species had been rumored to occur. In summary, 188 species were recorded. A host of happy faces revealed many “life” birds were in the mix.
McCown’s Longspur was a highly sought species and emblematic of the WFO meeting.

Rich Hoyer and WFO participants explore the Snowy Mountains Grasslands.

Chestnut-collared Longspurs added their voices to the thrilling atmosphere of prairie.

Gray Partridge was a species sought by many.
North of Lavina, Red Hill Road takes one through Greater Sage-Grouse habitat.

Greater Sage-Grouse, a species in serious decline, were found in prime habitat.
Green-tailed Towhees delighted many participants.

Yellow-breasted Chats were common.

Gray Flycatcher occurrence in the Pryor Mountains was documented by photos.
Mountain Plovers, some with young, were observed on several field trips.

Thanks to Ed and all the field trip leaders who contributed to the success of the conference by taking time to scout, compare notes and lead our trips. Also, a big round of thanks goes to Frances Oliver for her consummate help and guidance in making the conference a huge success.

Mark your calendars now for the next WFO Conference:  
Fortuna, Humboldt Co., CA  September 28-October 2 2016.