

Special Photography Contest Edition

A Seasonal Newsletter of the Missouri River Bird Observatory

THE RECTRIX

Celebrating 15 Years



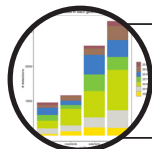
Volume 15 No. 4.
Winter 2025



Our Mission



To contribute to the conservation of birds and all wildlife through scientific research, education and outreach, and conservation policy advocacy.



Science

To gather information about avian communities and habitat use that will assist state, federal, and private natural resource managers in their efforts to implement conservation programs.



Education

To provide opportunities for people of all ages to learn about species and their habitats.



Advocacy

To advocate for sound, science-based conservation policies that benefit birds, other wildlife and environmental quality.

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A HUGE thank you to the volunteers who dedicated their service to MRBO in 2025.

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Steve Ferguson

Tammy Gillespie

In Memoriam

We honor the memory of cherished people who passed away in 2025.

Dorene Benedetti

Jeanne Hauser

Sue Kelly

They will be missed.

Aurora borealis, Saline County 11/11/25



HAPPY HOLIDAYS

FROM THE MRBO STAFF



DANA, ETHAN, MARLEE, TESSA, STORI,
KAYLEE, MELINA, ISABELLE, HANNAH



Welcome to the photo contest issue of The Rectrix!



Hope is The Thing With Feathers

The Missouri River Bird Observatory's
Tenth Annual Missouri Bird Photography Contest
July 1st - August 31st, 2025



This special issue celebrates the remarkable talent and creativity showcased in the Missouri River Bird Observatory's (MRBO) annual Hope is the Thing with Feathers Photo Contest. Each year, photographers from across Missouri turn their lenses toward the skies, prairies, and forests, capturing the brilliant diversity of the state's birdlife—and 2025 was no exception.

Running from July 1st through August 31st, the 2025 contest invited submissions in two categories: Conservation and General. Judges evaluated entries for originality, composition, and technical excellence. Conservation entries also included written descriptions. These are printed here as submitted with only minor edits for formatting, reflecting the photographers' perspectives and personal connections to their subjects.

This year's contest had a wonderful response: 140 photographs from 76 photographers, with 73 entries in Conservation and 67 in General.

Once the contest ends, the photographs continue to have a life of their own. MRBO uses these images widely—in presentations, educational materials, reports, and across social media—to spark curiosity and deepen public connection to Missouri's birdlife. Each photo helps us tell the story of conservation and encourages Missourians to take meaningful action for the wildlife that surrounds them.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Wood & Huston Bank of Marshall, whose steadfast sponsorship since 2016 has made this contest possible. Their support covers all prize funding, allowing every entry fee to go directly into MRBO's education and outreach programs. This year's awards included a \$1,000 Conservation Grand Prize, \$500 for First Place, \$250 for Second, \$150 for Third, and a Fourth Place prize of \$100. We also continued the MRBO Directors' Choice Award, which once again carried a \$200 prize in recognition of an image that resonated especially strongly with MRBO!

To everyone who entered—thank you for sharing your vision, your passion, and your artistry with us. And to our 2025 winners—congratulations! Your work inspires us all.



WOOD & HUSTON BANK
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Conservation Grand Prize Winner



Timberdoodle by Joe Fasig

How many people have been suddenly startled by an explosion out of the leaf litter while wandering around the forest? American woodcocks perfectly blend into the forest floor and wait until the very last moment to fly off from a potential threat. These are such unique birds, physically and behaviorally. For many people, their mating ritual or "Sky Dance" as described by the father of modern conservation, Aldo Leopold, indicates the presence of spring. Aldo Leopold describes, "The drama of the sky dance is enacted nightly on hundreds of farms, the owners of which sigh for entertainment, but harbor the illusion that it is to be sought in theaters. They live on the land, but not by the land." Unfortunately, this illusion is common in our society but if more people stopped to observe or even wandered nearby forests, then they may find some entertainment worth conserving. Even if that entertainment is an elevated heart rate from an exploding woodcock from the forest floor.



Winning Photographs



First Place Winner

Great Crested Flycatcher Next Generation
by Doug Hardesty



Second Place Winner

Tiny Traveler by Mary Moore



Winning Photographs



Third Place Winner
Double Catch! by Sherry Ma



Fourth Place Winner
Crimson Visitor by Robert Zhang



MRBO Directors' Choice
Autumn Pileated by Jared Watson

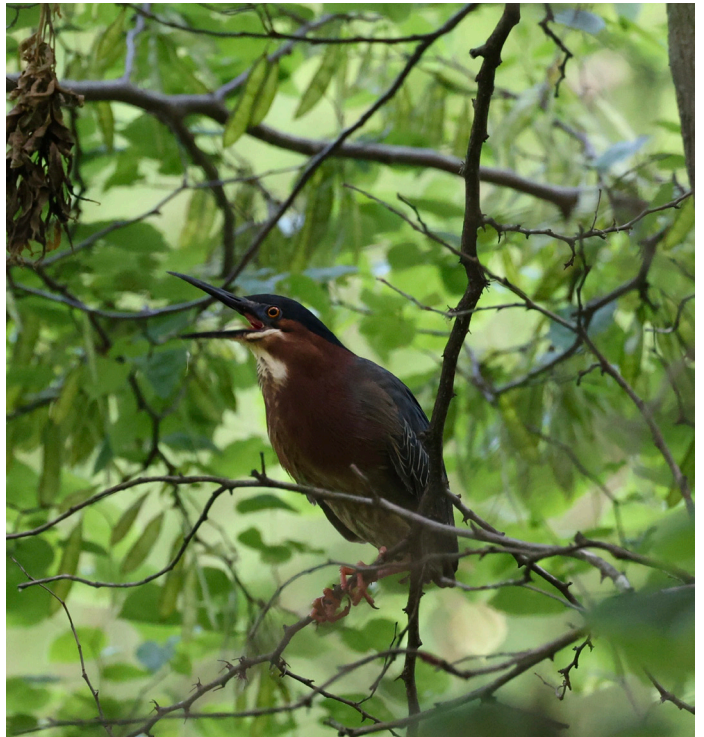


Conservation Entries



A Brief Hello by Stacie Laff

It is very rare for us to see this spring migrator in our yard. For only a few days we enjoyed his presence in our bald cypress tree. This year was extra special because we met his female friend.



A Call in the Air by Stacie Laff

The green heron is one of my favorite herons. This was one making a call to another. Since it was mating season I wasn't sure if it was a mating call or a territorial call. The habit sanctuaries in Missouri parks allow us to experience and learn something new every time we go birdwatching.



Amazing Adaptations by Stacie Laff

This fearless hunter in our backyard was keeping warm in the cold winter's air. With his foot tucked in and his feathers fluffed, you would never know the chill was there.





Autumn Pileated by Jared Watson

A pileated woodpecker doing what it does best, slamming its beak looking for lunch. This was taken during a staff float I did with my crew at the Springfield Conservation Nature Center. As we floated we saw a crew of pileateds bouncing from tree to tree. One of the naturalists spotted these and red headed woodpeckers close together. All the wildlife we saw along the float truly shows the diversity that Missouri's rivers and streams hold.

Beak-to-Beak by Ralph Horne

Territorial fighting around feeders and native plants.



Black-crowned Night Heron Eating Crayfish by Keith Woodyard

A Black-crowned Night Heron feeding on a medium size crayfish from the fish hatchery in Forest Park St. Louis. Water quality is necessary for a healthy population of invertebrates to support the large population of Herons found in the waterways around the Midwest.



Blue & Gold by Craig Alexander

The Missouri Department of Conservation plants sunflowers to support dove hunting and birds and pollinators. The fields also happen to be beautiful. This image is a Blue Grosbeak who was singing at sunrise while I was enjoying the flowers.



Blue Heron and the Frog by Marla Hribovsek

The undeniable proof of the cycle of life. Nature feeding nature.



Blue Night Heron by Randy Habel

As our communities expand, our feathered friends are often forgotten, ignored, or worse, as their habitat is slowly destroyed. They provide us with beauty, song, and enjoyment for all ages. Photographing them is two-fold – my enjoyment, and the ability to share the image with others.



Buzzard Buffet Line by Becky Petteway

There was one fish on the shore, everyone took a couple of bites and moved on to allow others to snack.



Can I Help You? by Joe Fasig

There are many who assume that nature can only be appreciated in far off destinations. This backyard photograph of red-shouldered hawks encourages the notion that nature can be observed and enjoyed at home. Wildlife is much more accessible than people realize, a concept that could highlight the importance of species and habitat preservation.

Cardinal by Scott Villmer

I was at Route 66 State Park photographing birds and butterflies. I was photographing a few butterflies when this Cardinal flew in behind me I spun my camera around on the tripod and started taking pictures of the cardinal.





Chillin' on the Ice by Steven Byers

In February of 2025, we had a bitter cold snap that lasted for days. Our small lake—and every body of water around—froze solid. But we have aerators that we run 24/7/365 that kept two water holes open. These rare openings became lifelines for overwintering waterfowl who used the openings for feeding and actually enlarged them through constant swimming. This male wood duck, resting on the ice beside one such hole on February 19, looks as content as one can be with the daytime high temperature struggling to get barely above 0°F. These two holes attracted scores of ducks of multiple species, including mallards and hooded mergansers besides the wood ducks. They stayed for several days until the thaw and left when other options began to open up in surrounding bodies of water. Ducks rely on open water for feeding, hydration and

their very survival. As climate patterns shift and winter extremes become more erratic, human managed habitats like this one can serve as vital refuges. This image reminds us that even small, local conservation efforts—like keeping an aerator running—can make a meaningful difference for wildlife in our own backyards.

Crimson Visitor by Robert Zhang

On March 23, 2025, I photographed this rare Vermilion Flycatcher in Eldon, Missouri, perched beside a rain-swollen stream during a spring downpour. I drove over two hours before sunrise after hearing the report. Native to the Southwest, this species is rarely seen in Missouri.

Its appearance may reflect changing climate patterns, reminding us why it's vital to preserve diverse habitats—not only for local birds but also for rare and unexpected visitors.



Dazed Owl by Joe Fasig

You don't see great horned owls resting on the ground too often. After slowly approaching to photograph and maintaining a safe distance, it was concerning that this owl was exhibiting abnormal behavior. Despite being approached, it seemed unfazed. The worry for potential injury to the bird arose. Head trauma from a vehicular collision or poisoning from lead shot or rat bait are common issues affecting the well-being of many raptor species. Even though the owl was not captured to determine if there truly was any human conflict, this photograph serves as a reminder that these conflicts exist and our presence can have a negative effect on wildlife.



Double Catch! by Sherry Ma

This moment captures the natural behavior of a heron hunting- a reminder of the delicate balance within aquatic ecosystems. Predators like herons help regulate fish populations and maintain ecosystem health. Disruption to this balance, such as pollution or overfishing, can destabilize entire food webs. This image underscores how birds like herons rely on clean, healthy waterways for survival. Herons depend on wetlands, rivers, and coastal areas--habitats increasingly threatened by development, climate change, and water pollution. This photo invites viewers to appreciate and protect these vital habitats. It helps to explain predator-prey dynamics, species interdependence, and the importance of preserving biodiversity. It can tell a rich ecological story in a single frame!



Ducks by The Dozen by Debby Fantz

My husband and I enjoy fishing and wildlife watching on Lake Taneycomo. One day we were fortunate to see this hen mallard swimming and feeding with her 11 ducklings. Unfortunately, the lake has problems with both point and nonpoint pollution sources that can negatively affect aquatic habitat, water quality, and aquatic life. Population growth, urban expansion, other land development, and agricultural practices that result in increased stormwater runoff and streambank erosion are some of the concerns for this lake. Continuing efforts by governmental and non-governmental conservation agencies and organizations, and local stakeholders to implement best management practices are important to reducing pollutants and ultimately improving the lake.



Eagle by Scott Villmer

This Eagle landed above my head and stayed there for a while, so I could photograph it. I'm guessing he wanted his picture taken.



From So Far Away by Stacie Laff

Warbler season is one of my favorite times for birding. These little gemstones of the birding world never cease to amaze me. The stopover habitats are so crucial to support their long and often treacherous journey to their breeding areas. Safe journey little palm warbler.





Golden Great Blue Heron by Jared Watson

This shows the great blue heron sitting next to a pond as the sun sets. As herons are wading birds, being near water is very normal habitat. Rutledge Wilson farm is popular with walkers and joggers, so this heron had no qualms with a photographer respecting it at a safe distance. I later saw people getting far too close, and the heron eventually flushed. These birds getting more comfortable with humans is a very bad thing, as this is not natural behavior.

Great Horned Stare by Jared Watson

This photo was taken at Bois D'Arc Conservation Area in the heat of the winter breeding season for great horned owls. I got very lucky this day as one of the owls flew near where I was stationed, and began hooting up a storm. Not long after another owl flew in, and they did not care much about me being there. Being able to watch great horned owl courtship was absolutely amazing. Raptors face many hardships, so seeing what is likely the start to a new wave of owls was a dream as photographer, naturalist, and birder.



Heron on the Lake by Sarah Kendzior

I took this photo of a heron from my kayak in Creve Coeur Lake on August 1, 2025. I did not alter the photo in any way. In the summer of 2025, St Louis endured a tornado, a heat wave, and wildfire smoke -- but the heron stood strong. That was not due to luck. That was due to conservation. The heron caught the light in darkening days. I'm sharing this photo because I want others to have a beautiful encounter with a bird in hard times. Conservation makes that possible.



Heron's Kiss by Rachelle Leonardo

The elegant great blue heron is always a sight to behold. Thankfully they are present in great numbers in Missouri waters. The great blue heron's nesting sites or rookeries are made of elaborate pile of sticks. Many herons go back to the same nests for the next breeding season, hence the importance of preserving these sites by not disturbing heron colonies especially during breeding season.

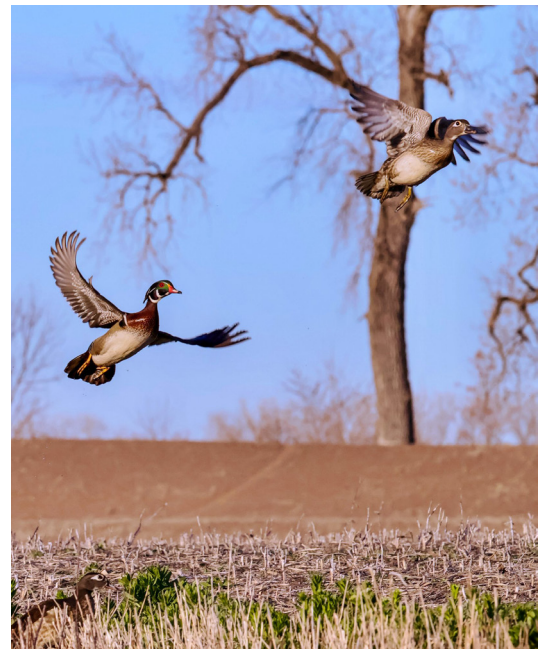


Hide and Beak by Brandi DeWitt

This beautiful jake is taking a rest in the tall grasses of Dunnegan Missouri. Turkeys benefit the local ecosystem as both predator and prey. They also aide in the distribution of seed to help support plant growth in their habitat. Turkeys across Missouri help to bring needed funds to conservation through the sale of hunting licenses among other hunting related items and taxes. Land owners across Missouri benefit greatly from the efforts to preserve, protect and grow turkey habitats. Ranging from soil health to wildlife activity, the benefits are abundant.

Hollywood Couple by Alex Dowil

The wood duck is one of the most beautiful, feathered creatures in North America. I remember the first time I saw one in the marsh. It was then I decided one day I would capture this art in flight with my camera. While spending time watching the ducks and angling for the best photos, I also read about the wonderful conservation story our "Hollywood" bird experienced. In the early 1900's, the wood duck was extremely near extinction. The Migratory Bird Act of 1918 was the beginning of a new era for all Missouri's birds, but especially for the wood duck. It banned hunting of them completely nationwide. As they made their comeback, limited hunting began to be allowed. In addition to the protected and limited hunting seasons, the Missouri Department of Conservation began even more intensive efforts. MDC partnered with Ducks Unlimited and began a multi-prong program for the colorful birds. It began with better forestry management. While all ducks thrive in marshlands, wood ducks are unusual in that they also require trees in the wetlands and bottomland forests. These are critical to their nesting requirements. Research including capture and tagging has been essential for monitoring their population. This research also includes Breeding Bird Surveys. Wood duck populations cannot be assessed from aircraft like other ducks as they are located hidden in trees and dense vegetation. These "BBS" surveys include physical surveys of harvested birds as well as data from hunters and returned leg bands. And lastly, the creation of artificial nesting boxes has been a huge success for the safe rearing of their young. These boxes were constructed to mimic tree cavities as seen in nature and placed near water sources. Even the research teams were astounded at how readily the birds accepted these boxes and happily used them year after year. As a result of all these activities, the wood duck population is estimated at well over 1 million birds. This photo is of a successful breeding pair in Marion County. Their nest was near the photo location and contained several healthy little babies which I was careful to stay far away from! This photo represents the success of a century of conservation.





Hopeful by Jared Watson

The morning after a fairly heavy snowstorm I ventured to the woods behind my house to see how the forest and wildlife fared. As this is my home turf I know a few favorite perches for this owl and went out to see if I would get lucky. I was happy to see this owl was alive and healthy! Wilsons Creek runs behind my house, and with it comes so much diversity and life. This goes to show you do not need to go any further than your home to see the beauty Missouri holds.

Hummingbird by Karol Dinwiddie

I love 'hummingbird season'.



Hummingbird by Scott Villmer

One wing looked shorter than the other and she was making a quick turn.



I am flying! by Hong Chen

This is my first year to start taking pictures of birds. I am so surprised they are so tiny and cute. I love them when I saw them. I'd like to let more people know about them and love them.





I Just Can't Get Enough by Dan Bernskoetter

Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird in petunia bloom.



I'm Sooooo Hungry Mommy! by Diane Kroupa

This baby robin only lived two days as a grackle swooped in and had him for lunch while Momma Robin was out getting food. More trees needed for habitat so the nests can be a little more obscure.



In Full Display by Stacie Laff

This red-winged blackbird was seen in Creve Coeur Lake memorial park. During mating season, he was in full display with his colors, tail flare and call keeping any competitors away.



In The Morning Light by Rosa Renner

Once teetering on the brink of extinction, this iconic raptor has made a remarkable comeback thanks to decades of dedicated conservation work. But its journey is far from over. Their adaptability is impressive, but their survival hinges on the health of aquatic ecosystems and forested shorelines. The bald eagle's flight is not just a triumph of wings—it's a triumph of will, science, and community. Let's keep it soaring.





Indigo Bunting and Bee by Randolph Bretton

An indigo bunting and a bee were in a sunflower field in early August 2025.

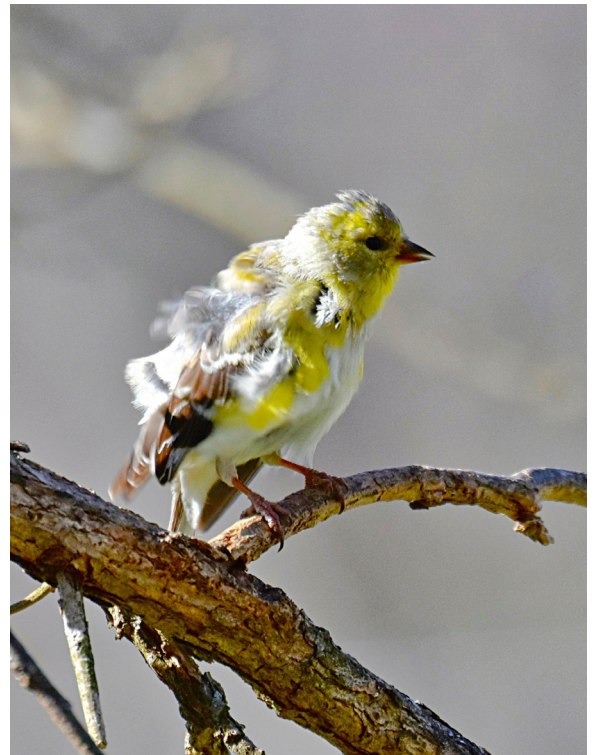


Indigo Bunting by Yi Pan

An indigo bunting was in a sunflower field in early August 2025.

It's OK, I'm Molting by Julie Brown Patton

It may look alarming to people who see birds without feathers while they're molting. However, in most cases, molting is essential to birds' lives, reproduction and survival. Molting is especially important to American Goldfinches, who typically undergo two molts each year, which is more frequent than many other bird species. Goldfinches shed old feathers and grow new ones to ensure they have a fresh set for warmth, insulation, flight efficiency and protection from outdoor elements. Feathers are made of keratin, which means they don't repair themselves if damaged. In late winter and early spring, male Goldfinches molt into their bright yellow breeding plumage to attract mates. In late summer or early fall, they molt again into a duller olive-brown plumage to provide camouflage from predators during colder months when food is more scarce and foliage is less dense. Their winter plumage also includes denser feathers that provide better insulation. Interestingly, along with feather changes, the American Goldfinch's legs, feet and bill also change color with each molt. Ornithologists confirm that molting is a vital process for American Goldfinch in Missouri, allowing them to adapt to seasonal changes, maintain healthy feathers for flight and insulation, attract mates and enhance their chances of survival. Even though I'm aware of the reasons for molting, it still makes me want to scoop up feather-sparse birds and help them somehow. One way to bolster them is to provide extra thistle seeds or sunflower heads when they're seen shedding.





Just Takin' a Look-see by Marie Sevigny-Penrod

When I observed this beautiful Barred Owl just above my head, I was so excited and awestruck. Even giddy, feeling like a child again. The owl is just out there living its life, sharing space with us humans. It reminds me and I hope that it reminds others that these birds are always out there, always around us and everything that we do (or don't do) may impact them. Nature isn't just an abstract concept - we are part of nature and we are also being watched!



Love at First Coo by Lonnie Gatlin

Conservation areas are the home of the wildlife that live there. Conservation area destruction may lead to the extinction of its wildlife. When wildlife becomes extinct, ecosystems become unbalanced. As ecosystems become unbalanced, human existence is jeopardized. The Homo sapiens "wise human" must protect conservation areas that in turn, protect all lives, humans and wildlife. Life is a "thread" of checks and balances humans can easily manage.



Lonesome Dove by Aubrey Moore

This bird used to be part of a pair, but is now all alone.



Migrating Rose-breasted Grosbeaks by Marvin De Jong

Migration and subsequent breeding, nest building, laying eggs and raising a family require, from the point of view of a bird, large amounts of energy. Humans can help by providing food along the path of the migrants, and that is what this photograph illustrates.





Mr. People Watcher by Melinda Baitinger

Red- shouldered Hawk

Nature's Post by Logan Hutchison

This image captures the connection between the woodpecker and its habitat. The woodpecker uses the stalk for food and shelter. While also playing its part in the ecosystem. When the woodpecker gets food from plants like this they help spread seeds around contributing to growing new plants.



Northern Woody by Jen Larson

The Northern flicker finds its safe space in the woods behind our home and loves to hang out on our back deck. This species is protected and the population is not in danger. However, the holes this bird creates help other birds to thrive.

Owl See You by Donna Walters

The owl was perched on one of the arborvitae bushes in my backyard. They live in these trees and I occasionally hear them calling as I drift off to sleep. They sometimes hang out and rest in the thick, tall row of arborvitae bushes in my backyard. It is very fulfilling to know I provide an extension of their habitat that provides safety and comfort.





Peek-a-boo! by Rachelle Leonardo

A beautiful majestic bird, the great Egret is a symbol of successful conservation efforts in Missouri. The egret's beautiful plumes were once used for ladies' hats. Many thanks to conservation efforts, they now gracefully walk through the Missouri waters, like here in Lake Springfield.



Prairie Acrobat by Jian Xu

For years, I dreamed of capturing the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in its signature "X" shape—a split-second pose when its long tail feathers flare open as the bird twists midair. On this summer evening, as the flycatcher danced above a field of wildflowers, the moment finally came together. Freezing that instant in my frame felt like achieving a long-awaited goal, one that spoke to both patience and the magic of timing in bird photography. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers depend on open fields, prairies, and grasslands, all habitats that are increasingly

threatened by urban expansion and agricultural development. Protecting and restoring these landscapes not only safeguards this striking species, but also countless other birds including Henslow's and Grasshopper Sparrows, along with native pollinators and wildflowers, pollinators, and native plants that call Missouri's grasslands home. This image is a reminder of the beauty that thrives when we preserve these vital ecosystems, and why conservation efforts are essential for the generations to come.



Pruning Time by Stacie Laff

Usually so stealthy, waiting to catch the next meal, this one landed in Forest Park's hatchery for some necessary preening. One of the many faces of the green heron; its raised crest almost looks like a different bird!



Red Winged Blackbird by Scott Villmer

This red winged blackbird kept flying down in The Cattails and flying back up. The pair kept bringing insects to the young.





Resilience by Carol Bock

A Great Blue Heron perched on an old tire in a muddy riverbed scattered with other trash and debris. Polluting our waterways puts not only the wildlife in danger but also destroys the environment.

Rusty Winter Visitor: Brown Thrasher by Debby Fantz

Conservation practices in your own backyard, even on a small scale, can help birds and other wildlife. Brush piles are incredibly valuable to wildlife, especially during the winter, providing shelter, food, and protection from harsh weather and predators. During winter, usually before a big snow, I like to add small brush piles to our yard near the feeders for our neighborhood birds. These yard brush piles are heavily used and can also provide exceptional wildlife photography opportunities!



Sleepy Hollow by Angela Helbling

A pair of Great Horned Owls chose the perfect tree to raise their family of 3 owlets in North St. Louis County, Missouri. In this picture, the mother owl snuggled one of her babies and went to sleep shortly after the sun came up. Shot on Canon R6 / Sigma 150-600mm.

Song of the Wild by Robert Zhang

Photographed on May 11, 2025, at River's Edge Park along the Missouri River in Chesterfield, this Yellow-breasted Chat sang boldly from spring foliage. As a species that depends on dense riparian thickets, its presence highlights the importance of preserving river-edge habitats within urban landscapes.





Standing Proud by Dewayne Thoenen

Heron looking for its next meal.



Still Singing in the Scraps by Hari Prasad Karnam

This photograph captures the Northern Mockingbird not in pristine wilderness, but atop a rusted post—an emblem of survival in human-altered landscapes. Its sharp gaze and poised stance reflect a species that thrives amid encroachment, adapting to urban sprawl and fragmented habitats. For me, this image is a quiet testament to resilience and

coexistence. It invites viewers to see beauty not just in untouched nature, but in the margins where wildlife persists. By spotlighting this adaptable songbird, the photo encourages awareness of how even common species need protection, and how conservation begins with noticing what sings just outside our windows.



Swamp King by Scott Laurent

Conservation preserves the mystery and beauty of life.



Sun-kissed Finch by Allison Wright

Perched in mid-afternoon an American Goldfinch pauses atop a sunflower. He has frequented this sunflower patch often for an easy meal during the summer. I was drawn to capture this image and others like it because of the commonality in colors. I camped out in my father's garden several days to collect the image I envisioned - which showcased the beautiful colors of the two species working together in their symbiotic relationship.





The Moment of Beauty and Curiosity by Xia Guan

This photograph captures a moment of beauty and curiosity as a Baltimore Oriole perches on a tree trunk, with its vivid colors strikingly contrasting with the natural texture of its surroundings. As migratory birds, Baltimore Orioles choose to breed in our state, enchanting us with their vibrant plumage and melodious songs. They play an important role in the forest ecosystem by pollination and insect control. However, their population faces significant threats from habitat loss, climate change, and pesticide use. How can we better protect the planet's diverse flora and fauna, especially birds?



The Line Up by Rebecca Roseman

A beautiful group of wild turkey hens. From the ground up, the importance of the wild turkey in our Missouri ecosystem is apparent and, by protecting and acting in conserving their brooding, nesting and foraging habitats, we will ensure a healthy population remains. At ground level, their foot-treading and foraging behaviors help to aerate the soil, and their nutrient-rich manure acts as a natural fertilizer, increasing the soil organic matter, thus improving water and nutrient retention of the soil, fostering an enhanced living soil ecosystem. Something that the wild turkey provides and is often overlooked is the crucial survival of various plant species, and with their foot-treading and their broad

foraging range, they are great at seed dispersal. Promoting biodiversity as both prey and predator, wild turkeys help control populations of bugs, small reptiles and amphibians as well as provide great value as prey, being a food source to many animals as eggs, poults, and adults. And finally, in conserving and fostering a healthy habitat for wild turkey, we also increase overall habitat quality for other animals. This, in turn, brings economic value through tourism in observation as well as hunting.

The Patient Green Heron by Ainsley Hamilton

Forest Park is a beautiful, thriving, green space nestled within the bustling city of St. Louis Missouri. Every morning the park is visited by countless bikers, walkers, and joggers traversing its network of paths. Alongside the exercising humans you can see several different species of herons hunting the waterways, chimney swifts swooping around in the sky, and maybe an owl or a hawk perched up in the trees if you're lucky. It's not the perfect embodiment of the untouched wilderness, but it really is a success story of humans and animals coexisting in a public space.





The Rorschach Test by Stacie Laff

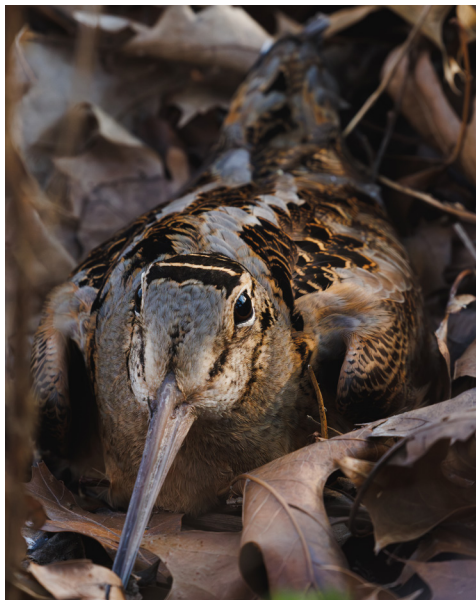
Is this an adaptation to scare predators while feeding or human projection seeing a large face? Either way, I can't un-see it! This eastern blue bird was enjoying some dried mealworms this past winter.



The Swamp Candle by Jared Watson

We have a prothonotary Bird Box monitoring program at the Springfield Conservation Nature Center and I was helping with it. I naturally brought my camera, and while one of the naturalists was checking a box for eggs I kept my eye out for a mother to come poking around. My watch paid off and she flew right near me where I got this shot. Being a part

of this science project reminds me why I love nature, science, and Missouri.



Timberdoodle by Joe Fasig

How many people have been suddenly startled by an explosion out of the leaf litter while wandering around the forest? American woodcocks perfectly blend into the forest floor and wait until the very last moment to fly off from a potential threat. These are such unique birds, physically and behaviorally. For many people, their mating ritual or "Sky Dance" as described by the father of modern conservation, Aldo Leopold, indicates the presence of spring. Aldo Leopold describes, "The drama of the sky dance is enacted nightly on hundreds of farms, the owners of which sigh for entertainment, but harbor the illusion that it is to be sought in theaters. They live on the land, but not by the land." Unfortunately, this illusion is common in our society but if more people stopped to observe or even wandered near by forests, then they may find some entertainment worth conserving. Even if that entertainment is an elevated heart rate from an exploding woodcock from the forest floor.



Tiny Traveler by Mary Moore

Prairie Warbler during spring migration.





True blue by Hal Moran

I was driving along a newly constructed road in St. Peters that is lined with warehouse buildings when I noticed several blue grosbeaks and dickcissels flitting about the weed stalks early in the morning. I was able to slowly pull off the road and get out and wait for the two grosbeaks to land on the stems. Most of the field was of dry scrub, probably awaiting the next building to go up. In the meantime the weed seeds provided a food source for these wonderful birds.



Trumpeter Trio in Flight by Michael Meredith

20 years ago Trumpeter Swans were rare visitors to Riverlands. Now through the remediation efforts of many organizations, we've counted as many as 1,250 in January.



Transformation by Stacie Laff

This little blue heron appeared to be hunting all on its own, enjoying the habitat created in Forest Park. We have never encountered a juvenile little blue. The beautiful plumage took my breath away.



Under My Wing by Angela Helbling

Mature Bald Eagle in Lincoln County, Missouri. This photo was taken on a very hot 90 degree day. This resident bald eagle was perched near his nest with a wing and leg extended in an effort to keep cool. I love his expression. This moment felt like being visited by an angel. Shot on Canon R6/150-600 Sigma Lens.

Waiting for Lunch by Jacob Walter

Shaw Nature Reserve showcases the importance of protected wilderness areas with diverse ecosystems. Walking through Shaw Nature Reserve's prairies and forests, countless insects seemed to take an interest in me whilst birding. I'd be lying if I say I never get frustrated with these insects, but seeing an amazing bird like this Eastern Wood Pewee helps allow me to realize how important they are. Insects fuel these birds and act as a vital link in the food chain. Pesticides, habitat loss, invasive species, and a warming climate all threaten the insects many deem annoying. However, all species are crucial to allow us to celebrate amazing animals such as the Pewee.



Winter Backyard Birdwatching by Stacie Laff

Winter is my favorite time to observe woodpeckers. I love watching them hop up bare trees in search of food. Outside my window, I spotted this red-bellied woodpecker diligently foraging for food on the sugar maple tree.



Winged Warrior by Julie Brown Patton

Although Hummingbirds may be perceived as fragile due to their small stature, they're actually strong, skilled mini-combatants. When first glancing at their antics, one might think they're playing. Not usually the case. They primarily fight to defend their territories and food sources, given their high metabolism and limited availability of nectar. Their need to feed frequently leads to strategic competition among them, which seems to prompt aggressive behaviors, even when they have plenty of open spaces at feeders. I can imagine they don't know what tomorrow will bring in the manner of food, so every flower and drop counts. During breeding seasons, Hummingbird males become even more territorial as they fiercely compete for mates, sometimes even stabbing each other with their beaks. Bird experts indicate some Hummingbirds have evolved straight,

spear-like beaks, while others have serrated edges used to slash at opponents in mid-air. From monitoring these flying jewels who come to our house each summer, it's interesting to see they sometimes give warning signals in the form of sharp chirps, flared neck feathers, hovering and dives, to discourage and frighten intruders. Sometimes, they appear to be puffing up just to establish dominance. I've so enjoyed watching the courage of the Colibri leader I captured in this image, and affectionately call him "Sarge."





Yellow-billed Cuckoo by Maria Moore

My 2nd favorite experience this spring was a surprise close encounter with a yellow-billed cuckoo. I was driving down county road 417. I was watching a couple of killdeer on the ground close to a cornfield. I stopped, hoping to get a picture. They scurried into the field out of sight. I sat there for a few minutes hoping for them or the dickcissel I was hearing to come out. Something made me glance toward the other side of my car when I happened to see a yellow-billed cuckoo non-chalantly perched in the ditch. I rolled my window down thinking it would fly off but it didn't! It sat there patiently while I snapped off a bunch of pictures. It was a great end to what was almost a frustrating day. The only other times that I had seen these birds was at a good distance high up in the trees. Again, I felt very blessed to be in such close proximity to such a beautiful bird.



Yellow Warbler Singing by Eric Flanagan

Yellow Warbler singing in the early morning sunrise!



Yellow-throated Warbler by Maria Moore

This is probably my favorite bird experience to date. It's always exciting to see a warbler but I didn't expect to be so close to one for such a prolonged period of time. I pulled into the conservation area parking lot near the cemetery at the trail entrance. Before I could even shut off my car, this yellow-throated warbler landed on the hood of my car. I thought it would soon fly back into the trees. It proceeded to fly from windshield to passenger side then driver's side windows, over and over. At times, it would try to intimidate its own reflection in the side mirrors. This went on for quite some time. I took a video with my phone of its fascinating persistence. Finally, I decided to hike up the trail and returned to my car about 45 minutes later. It was still at it! Shaking my head, I chanced scaring it away by getting into my car. It flew away and I rolled down my window hoping it would return. I didn't have to wait long. It hopped around on my car for a bit longer before perching on a nearby branch. I was finally able to get a photo with the bird in a natural setting. I felt very blessed and grateful to have witnessed nature in action but at the same time, I felt bad that my presence had unintentionally made the bird feel like its territory was threatened.



General Entries



Bad Hair Day by Sue McIntosh



A Young Owl in Springtime by Logan Bush



All In by Andrea M. Wren



American Bald Eagle by Amanda Borders





And We Have Lift Off by Rebecca Roseman



Balance in a Single Step by Casey Hunt



Bald Eagle #1 by David Butel





Bald Eagle #3 by David Butel



Bald Eagle #2 by David Butel



Bald Eagle Parent and Chick by Marvin De Jong



Barred Owl by Reva Dow





Barred Owl by Jonathan Cubillo



Black-crowned Night Heron by Ruth French



Blue Blue Birdie by Donna Walters



**Black-chinned Hummingbird Taking
a Rest by Veronica Johnson**





Bluebird Partners by Marvin De Jong



Change of Pace by Brandi DeWitt



Bluejay in Winter by Marvin De Jong



Breakfast and More by Jamie Davis

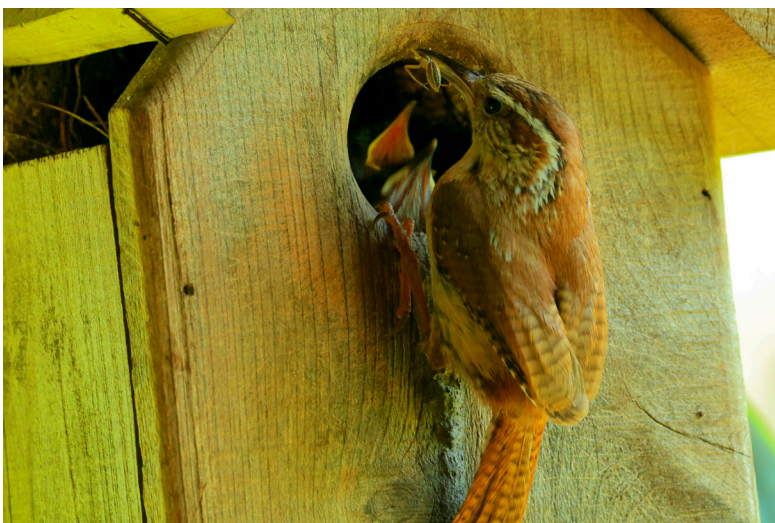




**Care to join me? Inviting Ruby-throated Hummingbird
by Rebecca Roseman**



Carolina Wren and Family by Marvin De Jong



Carolina Wren Feeding Chicks by Marvin De Jong





Chilling In The Winter Chill by Julie Brown Patton



Delicate little taste by a female Ruby-throated Hummingbird. by Rebecca Roseman



Dark Eyed Junco by Amanda Borders



Dos Egrets by Christopher Dohm





Eagle and Fish by Marvin De Jong



Eye on the Prize by Joe Fasig



Eastern Kingbird by Nancy Schanda



Feathers, Fruit, Fellowship by Casey Hunt





Female Hummy by Jessica Johnson



Flicker in the Snow by Marvin De Jong



Geese Morning Walk by Cindy Coonce



Egrets on the Wing by Christopher Dohm



Fishin by William Allen



**Great Crested Flycatcher Next Generation
by Doug Hardesty**



**Grace in Every Glance by Casey
Hunt**



Great Crested Flycatcher Dining on Escargot by Craig Alexander





Hummingbird in the Sunrise by Aubrey Moore



Hummingbird Nesting: A Rare Sight by Steven Byers



Lunch Time by Lisa Martin



Kingdom declared! Baltimore Oriole couple claims feeder by Rebecca Roseman



Night Heron Vs Crayfish by Nancy Schanda



Male Baltimore Oriole by Kaitlyn Schwes



Pileated Woodpecker by Marvin De Jong



Incoming! Red Bellied Woodpecker front and center! by Rebecca Roseman





No Post on Sundays by Brandi DeWitt



Should I or Shouldn't I? by Nancy Schanda



Red-headed Woodpecker with Mulberry by Marvin De Jong



Morning Zen by Karen Freund

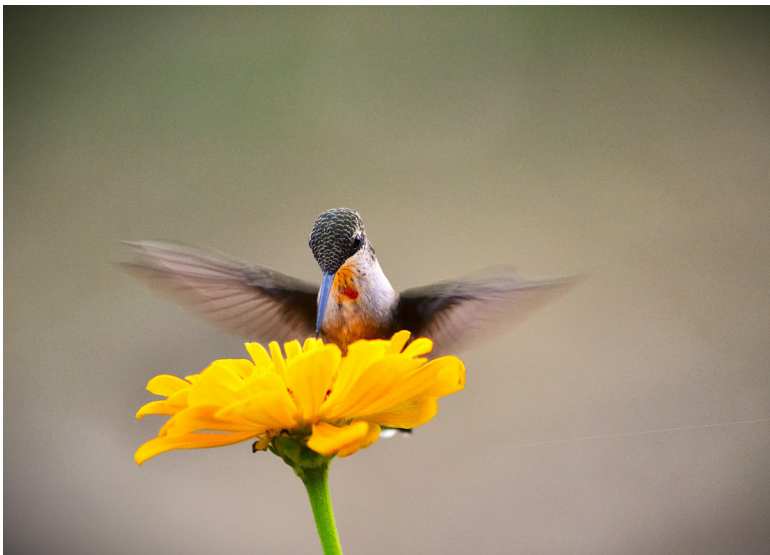




Proud Blue Jay by Kathy Cass



So Berry Good by Julie Brown Patton



Sipping the nectar of life. Juvenile Ruby-throated Hummingbird. by Rebecca Roseman



Sentinels of the Golden Stone by Garrett Frandson





Spring Cardinal by Reva Dow



Sparkling Heron by Christopher Dohm



Testing the Waters by Brandi DeWitt



Streamside Lunch by Bart Gulshen

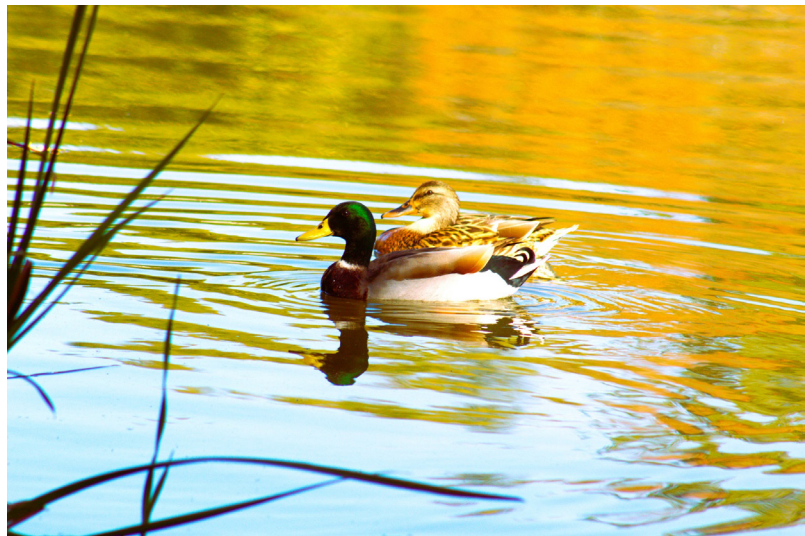




Trio in Flight by Alex Dowil



Thankful For Peace And Quiet by Julie Brown Patton



Till There Was You by Rich Hogan Jr.





Who, who, who are you? by Nancy Schanda



Wood Duck in Forest Park by Joseph Burkes



Why, hello there little one. by Rebecca Roseman



Wilson's Phalarope by Paul Moffett





Yellow Breasted Chat by Paul Moffett



Young Barred Owl by Rebecca Roseman

Thank you, contest photographers and judges!

Photo Contest Judges

David Stonner	Missouri Department of Conservation Photographer
Eric Ward	Vice President for Public Programs at Linda Hall Library
Tina Casagrande	The New Territory Founder and Publisher
Krystal Anton	Center for Sustainability at Johnson County Community College
Steve Garr	President of the Missouri Bluebird Society

Photo Contest Participants

Ainsley Hamilton	Cindy Coonce	Hong Chen	Karol Dinwiddie	Melinda Baitinger	Ruth French
Alex Dowil	Craig Alexander	Jacob Walter	Kathy Cass	Michael Meredith	Sarah Kendzior
Allison Wright	Dan Bernskoetter	Jamie Davis	Keith Woodyard	Nancy Schanda	Scott Laurent
Amanda Borders	David Butel	Jared Watson	Lisa Martin	Paul Moffett	Scott Villmer
Andrea M. Wren	Debby Fantz	Jen Larson	Logan Bush	Rachelle Leonardo	Sherry Ma
Angela Helbling	Dewayne Thoenen	Jessica Johnson	Logan Hutchison	Ralph Horne	Stacie Laff
Aubrey Moore	Diane Kroupa	Jian Xu	Lonnie Gatlin	Randolph Bretton	Steven Byers
Bart Gulshen	Donna Walters	Joe Fasig	Maria Moore	Randy Habel	Sue McIntosh
Becky Petteway	Doug Hardesty	Jonathan Cubillo	Marie Sevigny-Penrod	Rebecca Roseman	Veronica Johnson
Brandi DeWitt	Eric Flanagan	Joseph Burkes	Marla Hribovsek	Reva Dow	William Allen
Carol Bock	Garrett Frandson	Julie Brown Patton	Marvin De Jong	Rich Hogan Jr.	Xia Guan
Casey Hunt	Hal Moran	Kaitlyn Schwes	Mary Moore	Robert Zhang	Yi Pan
Christopher Dohm	Hari Prasad Karnam	Karen Freund		Rosa Renner	





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The following individuals and organizations, along with several anonymous donors, provided support during 2025. We give thanks to them and to all who have supported the Missouri River Bird Observatory! **YOU make our work possible.** *Please note that donations received after December 16th, 2025 - the date this issue went to print - will be acknowledged in the next issue of the Rectrix!*

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Special thanks to our monthly donors. Your recurring gifts allow us to plan and budget in advance, which is not always easy for a nonprofit. Thank you so much!

**Myra Christopher
Allison Tellman
Steven Johnson
Meredith Donaldson**

**Steve Schnarr
Linda Graue
Nicole LaPlante
Virginia Wallace**

Upcoming Events & Learning Opportunities



2026 WINTER WEBINARS *Naturalist Series*

JOIN US EVERY OTHER MONDAY ON ZOOM AT 6:30 PM CST
FROM JANUARY 19TH TO MARCH 30TH

Box-nesting Birds

American Kestrels and Prothonotary Warblers with Ann Tanner of Burroughs Audubon Society and Marlee Malmberg of MRBO.

Fish

Missouri's fish from darters to sturgeon, with Dr. Brittany Harried of the Missouri Department of Conservation.

Amphibians

Natural history and conservation of Missouri's amphibians with Prof. Waylon Hiler of Missouri Valley College. Special emphasis on Ozark Hellbenders.

Turtles

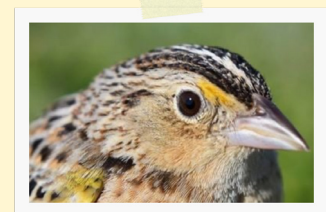
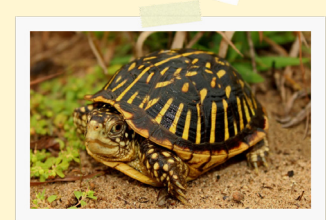
Missouri's turtles with Alex Heeb and Christine Light of the Turtle Conservation Group. Special emphasis on box turtle conservation.

Aquatic Invertebrates

"Packing a Pinch: The Diversity and Importance of Missouri's Crayfish" with Dr. Cheyenne Stratton of the Missouri Department of Conservation.

Grassland Birds

Prairie-obligate species, their continued declines, and what we can do to help, with Dr. Alice Boyle of the University of Western Ontario.



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<https://bit.ly/2026NaturalistSeries>





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Join the Missouri River Bird Observatory and Stream Teams United for a hands-on workshop designed to empower you with the knowledge and skills to join the effort to reduce plastic use and pollution in Missouri



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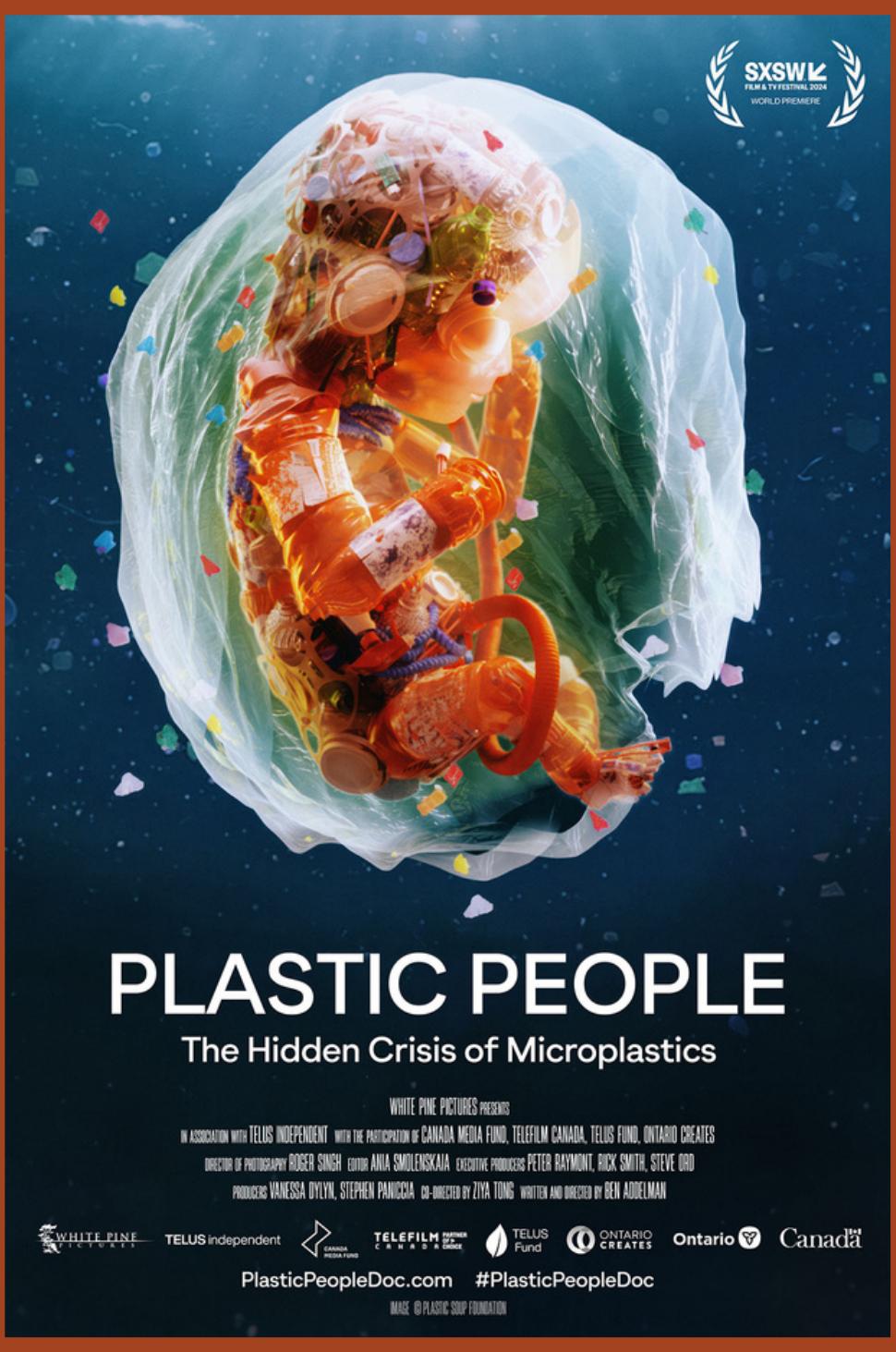
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For more info, contact: dana.ripper@mrbo.org

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2026 PLASTICS LEARNING SERIES

Whether you're an experienced plastic reduction advocate or brand new to the topic, our expert speakers will provide you with the tools and inspiration to build a healthier environment for all.

Join us on Zoom every other Monday at 5 pm CST
from January 19th to March 16th



How Did We Get Here?

Rebekah Creshkoff, Beyond Plastics Speakers Bureau



Plastics & Human Health

Dr. Megan Wolff, Physician and Scientist Network
Addressing Plastics and Health



The Environmental Injustice of Plastic

Rachana Shah, Aspire to Zero



Tackling Plastics through Local Action

Jacquelyn Casazza, Go Green Glen Ellyn



The International Plastics Treaty and Effective Plastic Laws Around the World

Luz Rooney, Beyond Plastics MO/WI
Madison Dennis, Plastic Pollution Coalition



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Missouri River Bird Observatory

There is still time to support MRBO and many other great mid-MO organizations on CoMoGives! Check us out at: <https://www.comogives.com/organization/MRBO>
Open until December 31st at 11:59 pm CST
Photo - Egrets on the Wing by Christopher Dohm (page 41)

CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

Costa Rica | Rhythms of Nature: Coastal Conservation and Tropical Forest Ecology

with Missouri River Bird Observatory

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Sep 23 - Oct 1, 2026

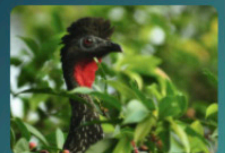
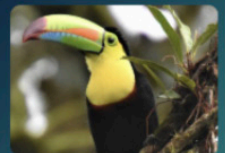
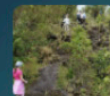
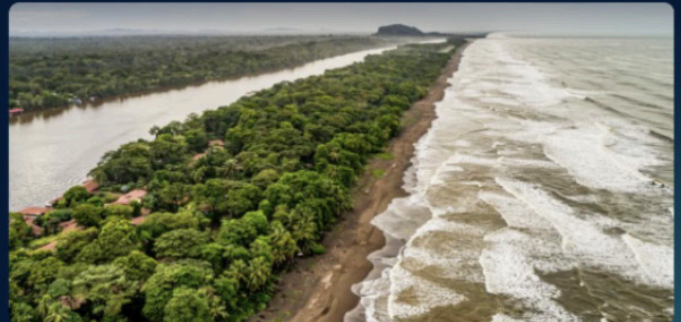
DURATION:
9 Days

PRICE:
From \$3,945

INTERESTS:
Natural History

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Print Itinerary



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Learn more at: <https://bit.ly/MRBOCostaRica>



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Rusty Winter Visitor: Brown Thrasher by Debby Fantz