

Birds of a Feather

By Denise Pengeroth, Forest Wildlife Biologist

In May of last year we held our first annual International Migratory Bird Day Celebration for the folks of Helena. While we've been engaged in other celebrations across the Forest in the past, 2004 marked the first year that citizens of the Queen City were able to participate in a local, home grown celebration!

The theme: *Conservation of Colonial Birds*. The place: *Helena Valley Regulating Reservoir*. Our celebration began at o-dawn-thirty. Local bird experts and enthusiasts – volunteers who donned their field clothes and binoculars and chugged their early morning coffee – led bird hikes around the reservoir.

Why celebrate? Migratory birds are some of the most beautiful, observable, remarkable wildlife that share our world. They are harbingers of spring as well as an important economic resource, controlling insect pests and generating billions in recreational dollars. Unfortunately, many migratory birds face a growing number of threats, the majority of which are human related. Some of the most significant threats of the past century have been overcome due to increased awareness and advocacy for birds; however several threats still persist. International Migratory Bird Day is a call to action, and it's fun! Public awareness and concern are crucial components of migratory bird conservation.



Bird enthusiasts enjoy one of the many activities provided at the Celebration

Colonial nesting birds; think *birds of a feather nesting together!* Coloniality has been a successful evolutionary strategy for many bird species. Birds nesting together may enjoy “safety in numbers” in terms of chasing off predators. Also, colonial nesters may learn the whereabouts of scarce food resources from their neighbors. Coloniality may have its disadvantages – colonies may actually



At the overlook near the heron rookery

attract predators or lead to higher rates of disease. Regardless, colonial birds and their colonies are often highly visible and impressive such as the great blue heron rookery at the Helena Valley Regulating Reservoir! With several spotting scopes available at our overlook near the rookery, visitors enjoyed observing these seeming remnants of a prehistoric time.

International Migratory Bird Day is an event that takes many partners to ensure its success! In 2004, we strengthened existing partnerships and forged new ones. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, Audubon, Montana Discovery Foundation, Capital City Sports, Helena Flying Tigers, Knights of Columbus, Shades of Green and several dedicated individuals came together to celebrate migratory birds! Over 100 folks – young and old! - attended the festival. Several activities provided opportunities for folks to test their creativity and knowledge. Kite-making was a huge success as well as bird origami, bluebird mobiles, woven nests, and nesting box construction. An innovative game of Bird Jeopardy provided a fun exploration of the feathered world around us “*I’ll take Endangered Birds for \$200!*”

See you on May 7th at the Helena Regulating Reservoir. Birds Hikes begin at 6:30 am, hands on activities begin at 9:00 am.

