



Sandhill cranes, dancing

JASON SAVAGE

Love Birds

Spectacular springtime courtship displays of 12 Montana species

By Ellen Horowitz

To really get to know a bird species, you can learn its shape, color, and flight patterns. Or you can identify its unique songs. Another way, perfect for this time of year, is to observe the bird's unique courtship behaviors.

Each spring, as days lengthen and temperatures warm, birds begin to search for mates. Males, in most cases, use voice, postures, and displays to advertise their strength, health, and suitability as a breeding partner. These behaviors can also announce territorial boundaries and warn rivals to stay away. Each species has a unique courtship ritual.

Some court in the air with sky dances, cartwheels, and roller-coaster flights. Others display on the ground by leaping, twirling, or bowing, or by clapping their wings, stomping their feet, or beating their chests. A few dance beak to beak. Some even produce non-vocal love songs—instrumentals played between feathers and wind.

What follows are 12 of my favorite bird courtship rituals, including where and when you might see them for yourself.

Sandhill crane

These tall, majestic birds use a courtship dance to select a mate and reinforce the bond a pair maintains for life. (Like other “lifelong” maters, if one bird dies the surviving crane seeks a new partner.) Sandhill cranes’ complex choreography consists of pirouetting, leaping, exaggerated bowing, spread-wing hopping, and head pumping. Sometimes a bird uses its bill to flip a stick or weed into the air, as if tossing a wedding bouquet. One pair of dancing cranes can inspire an entire flock to join the activities.

Though the male is similar in appearance to the female, he is typically larger and has a deeper voice. Various loud croaking and rattling calls, including duets, are part of the sandhill cranes’ courtship ritual and can be heard up to a mile away.

Where: Statewide in open grasslands and marshes

When: Early April to mid-May

Calliope hummingbird

The smallest bird in North America exhibits a big attitude when it comes to defending territory and wooing prospective mates with his displays. When wooing a female, a male zooms downward at speeds of 60 miles per hour. During his U-shaped dive, which may be repeated up to 20 times in succession, he passes over a female and performs a barrel roll. The encore performance takes place on an invisible stage in front of and slightly above the perched female. During this “shuttle display,” the male expands his glimmering magenta throat feathers while hovering, his rapid wing strokes producing a pulsating buzz. The enamored female may then join him in a dance where they whirl in aerial circles with bills touching.

Where: Western Montana along forest edges near dead branches or treetops

When: Late April to early June

Short-eared owl

The male performs his sky dance almost any time of day or night beginning in late winter. With slow, mothlike wing beats, he flies higher and higher in small circles, attaining a height of up to 300 feet. Then he hoots a courtship song, a pulsing *voo-hoo-hoo*—which some say resembles the sound of an old steam engine—before descending. During the dive he strikes his wings together beneath his body, producing a series of quick claps (resembling the sound made by a small flag fluttering in a strong wind). Just before reaching the ground, the short-eared owl swoops upward to repeat his aerial dance. Occasionally, a female joins the male for a courtship flight.

Where: Statewide in open country, grasslands, prairies, meadows, and marshlands

When: February through April

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Bald eagle

Though these large raptors typically stay with the same partner for life, each winter a pair will reestablish its bonds with midair displays. One of the most animated aerial antics is known as roller-coaster flight, performed by males to warn off rivals and impress females. The eagle soars high into the sky then folds its wings to dive at high speed. Just before reaching the ground, he swoops up and resumes the sequence. From a distance the rising and falling bird looks like he’s riding an amusement park roller coaster.

During what’s known as a cartwheel display, an eagle pair flies high into the sky, locks talons, and tumbles toward earth. The birds release their grasp just before striking the ground, then they return skyward with powerful wing beats to repeat the maneuver.

Talon grappling can also be a form of aggression between rival males. Other male birds, including ravens and short-eared owls, also aggressively lock talons during mating season.

Where: Statewide along rivers and lakes

When: January through March

Common goldeneye

The male goldeneye begins courting a female by jerkily thrusting his head forward as he swims, looking as though he’s trying to cough up something lodged in his throat. Then he abruptly tilts his head back onto his back with his bill pointing straight skyward, repeating this numerous times. As part of his

display, he kicks both feet backward, splashing water into the air. A female smitten by the displaying drake may follow and imitate some of his moves.

Where: Western and northern Montana lakes and large rivers

When: Mid-April to late May

Ruffed grouse

A downed log is usually the stage for this forest performer. While standing on his platform, the male ruffed grouse erects the dark-colored ruff around his neck, fans his tail, and starts drumming. With wings cupped, he beats the air in a forward motion to create a deep, hollow *thump-thump-thump*. Over the next several seconds the grouse drums progressively faster, producing a low-frequency sound resembling that of a lawnmower engine and audible from up to half a mile away.

Ruffed grouse are highly territorial. The drumming advertises the male’s real estate and warns other males to stay away. It’s common for competing males on neighboring territories to drum back and forth all morning. Drumming also sends an invitation to nearby hens. When an interested female approaches, the male shows off by raising the crest on his head, fluffing his neck feathers, flaring his tail, and strutting.

Where: Western Montana in brushy mixed conifer and aspen forests, often along stream bottoms

When: Late April to mid-June



Short-eared owl, sky dancing



Calliope hummingbird, shuttle displaying



Bald eagles, cartwheel displaying



Ruffed grouse, drumming



Common goldeneye, splashing with head tilted back

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ANDREW KANDEL; ALAN G. NELSON; KEN ARCHER; STEVE MITCHELL; CINDY GOEDEL



Western grebes, in rushing ceremony



Great blue heron, displaying mating plumage



Ruddy duck, bubbling



Wilson's phalaropes, male atop female

Ruddy duck

The drake ruddy duck's oversized blue bill, stiff upturned tail, and rust-colored body make him easy to recognize. He also has the thick neck of a linebacker and sports two feathered "horns" on his head.

He begins his unique courtship routine, called "bubbling," by puffing his breast feathers then beating them progressively faster with the underside of his bill. Air forced from the feathers creates bubbles in the water directly in front of his breast. The male uses the bubbling display to ward off rivals and attract females.

Ruddy ducks are among the few species of stiff-tailed ducks in the world. During the bubbling display, the male holds his long, stiff tail straight up to impress a female.

Where: Statewide in marshes, ponds, and lakes

When: Mid-April to late May

Wilson's snipe

The hollow, low-whistled sound of the male snipe's love song is produced by its thin, curved tail feathers during the bird's high-speed aerial dives. This mottled, robin-sized bird flies hundreds of feet into the air with rapid wing beats. During his daredevil descent at 25 to 50 miles per hour, he flaps his wings to maintain his balance against the force of wind on the splayed tail feathers. As the outside feathers vibrate, they create a tremulous sound called "winnowing." This haunting *who-who-who-who* broadcasts from different parts of the sky as he flies and dives in a circuitous route. Snipe display most actively in morning and evening. During a full moon, these high-flying suitors winnow all night. To further impress females, they sometimes fly upside down for short distances.

Where: Statewide in marshes, wet meadows, and wet pastures containing tall grass for hiding cover

When: Mid-April to mid-June

Western grebe

Neck stretching, head shaking, bill dipping, and crest raising are all part of this grebe's courtship displays. But some of the most

spectacular behavior involves the "rushing ceremony." Here a male and a female, swimming side by side, lunge forward until their bodies rise completely out of the water, and then run across the surface.

The courting couple also perform the "weed ceremony." This involves stretching their necks and shaking their heads before diving for underwater vegetation. With aquatic plants dangling from their bills, they raise their bodies out of the water, stretch their necks, and place chests and bills close together while dancing in circles. The ceremony ends when the vegetation is shaken free. Then the birds dive and swim off.

Where: Statewide in marshes, ponds, and lakes

When: Mid-April to early June

Wilson's phalarope

This is one of the few bird species in which the female is more colorful and initiates courtship. Female phalaropes aren't territorial, but they do fight over an available male. Several pursue him as he swims nervously along a pond's edge. The dominant female swims closest to the male and drives off rivals. Aggressive posture and behavior by these shorebirds include forward and retracted head movements and aerial chases. When a pair bond is established, the courting couple bow to each other and extend their beaks skyward.

Once she has finished laying eggs, the female leaves for good. The male incubates the eggs and cares for the young.

Where: Statewide along freshwater ponds and marshes

When: Mid-April to early May

Sharp-tailed grouse

Male sharptails compete for female attention on dancing grounds known as leks. With wings outstretched, tails pointed upward, heads extended forward, yellow eye combs erect, and lavender neck air sacs inflated, male sharptails begin to dance. The birds rapidly stomp their feet up and down—moving slightly to the left, to the right, and then forward—their vibrating tails rattling. They

look like wind-up toys. A dozen or more may dance together in the open area then stop simultaneously as if part of a rehearsed choreography. Periodically a bird flutter-jumps.

Females interspersed among the dancers appear bored, but they're actually judging and deciding with whom they'll mate. The best dancer, dominating the center of the lek, will breed most of the nearby females.

Male vocalizations during the dance include coos, clicks, cackles, whines, gobbles, and cork-popping sounds. When heard in unison, it resembles what my husband describes as "Martian talk."

Where: Eastern and central Montana grasslands with some shrub cover

When: Mid-March to mid-May

Great blue heron

Each spring herons congregate in nesting colonies, usually cottonwood groves near rivers. A male builds a new nest or repairs an existing one. His mating display is intended in part to defend the nest from interlopers.

The most common display of these elegant wading birds is the "stretch." The male heron gracefully lifts his head and long, slender neck until his bill points skyward, uttering a *gooo-gooo* sound. In this stance, swaying gently, he shows off his magnificent mating-season neck plumes, colored skin around the eye, and bright yellow bill. The female sometimes mimics this display when a male offers her a stick to add to the nest.

A male great blue heron also shows off the long, sleek plumes of his head, neck, breast, and back during the "snap" display. Here he extends his head straight forward and rapidly opens and closes his beak, creating a snapping sound.

During another part of the mating display, the male and female whack their long bills together, as if in swordplay.

As with other bird species, herons should not be bothered during mating and nesting season. Please keep your distance.

Where: Most nesting colonies found in cottonwoods along major rivers and lakes throughout Montana

When: Early March to late April 🐾

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DIANA LEVASSEUR; EVAN GRAFF; BILL MARSIK; FRANCIS & JANICE BERGQUIST