

Blue Mountain Audubon Society

The Magpiper

December, 2008

December Calendar

Dec. 2,9,16,23,30 - 9:00 a.m.
Bennington Lake Walk

December 11 - 7:00 p.m.
Board Meeting
219 Newell Street

December 14 - 7:30 a.m.
Walla Walla Christmas
Bird Count

Field Trip Information

Trips depart from Harper Joy
Theatre parking lot on
Whitman College Campus

Bring plenty of food and
water

Plan to carpool whenever
Possible and reimburse for gas

Contact trip leader if you plan
to attend

Changes, cancellations and
trip results will be posted at
<http://www.blumtn.org>

Meetings

There is no regular membership meeting of Blue Mountain Audubon in the month of December.

Walla Walla Christmas Bird Count

Sunday, December 14 - 7:30 a.m.

Harper Joy Parking Lot

From December 14, 2008 through January 5, 2009, tens of thousands of volunteers throughout the Americas will take part in a adventure that has become a tradition among the birding community. This tradition began over 100 years ago with a small group of people who decided to count birds instead of shooting them on Christmas Day. Last year over 60 million birds were counted by thousands of volunteers who chose to leave the warmth of their homes on a winter day in the name of "citizen science". Counting is the first step in learning how environmental threats are affecting our birds. The proverbial "canaries in the coal mine" birds provide an early warning indicator of the health of the world we all share.



Here in Walla Walla we will congregate at Harper Joy parking lot on the Whitman College campus where Mike and MerryLynn Denny, the leaders of our Christmas Count, will assign us an area to cover. We are to count all birds we see and hear within that area. Inexperienced birders will be paired with those with higher identification skills, so everyone can enjoy the event. The weather does not always cooperate, so everyone should come dressed for it all - rain, snow, wind, etc. It is important that

everyone bring a pair of binoculars, water and food because this is an all-day event.

At 5:30 we will reconvene at the Muse home (219 Newell) for soup and yummy desserts (you are welcome to bring a dessert). After supper, each group will go over the list of birds they have seen during the day. Mike will take these lists and make an official 2008 Walla Walla Christmas Bird Count list to send to National Audubon. This is a really fun day - don't miss it! **Call Mike or MerryLynn Denny at 529-0080 if you plan to participate.**



President's Corner

THE BMAS CHRISTMAS (COUNT) STORY

(The Gospel Truth According to Ain't Tom)

Chapter 1

1 There was in the days of King Carter, as in Jimmy, a murmur among the people about the many feathered creatures that did walk and fly about the land.

2 And the whole multitude did ask for to know the names of these feathered creatures and their number.

3 And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Mikeus Dennyucus that these creatures should be numbered and named, like unto a tax.

4 And many, yea, members of a sect, known as BM of AS, went up from their homes unto Harper, even of Joy, there to assemble for to count and be counted.

5 And it came to pass that while they were there did Mikeus Dennyucus cause their number to be divided, even into small groups, for to go forth upon the land to see and count the many feathered creatures.

6 And lo, while they were about the land, seeing and counting, the angle of the sun came unto them and warmed their hands and feet, for it was cold and snow did cover the ground.

7 For unto them that day, members of BM of AS, was born a new tradition, in the City of Walla, a Christmas count.

8 Yea, verily, thus saith Mikeus Dennyucus, that from that humble beginning would each year the members of BM of AS gather at Harper of Joy for to see and count all the feathered creatures that walked and flew about the land, yea, even those that swam.

9 And eventually there was with this first assembly a great hunger, such that after seeing and counting those feathered creatures that walked and flew and swam they did cry for food and warmth.

10 So it was that one Shirley, she of Muse on Newell, did invite the scattered multitude to her own abode, there to light candles on a tree and to eat and drink and make merry. Yea, even to sing.

11 And it came to pass, as the angle of the sun went away, that the counters said, one to another, let us now go even unto Muse on Newell and see this thing that Shirley hath made known to us.

12 And they came with haste and found Shirley, and Merry of Lynn, and even Priscilla and Art of Rempel and Ballantine, also known as Tom. And many did join and make merry.

13 And while thus assembled did three come from the east, yea the foothills of the Blues, and did bring gifts of gold (-crowned sparrows) and Frank (-lin's gulls) and Myr (-tle warblers) for those who had that day seen and counted.

14 And each year thereafter did those of BM of AS assemble and count the feathered creatures of the air, and the land, and the water. And this tradition has increased in stature and in favor of men and women of good spirit.

15 Thus may it long continue.

Spotlight on Nature

COLUMBIA BASIN SHRUB-STEPPE

East of the Cascade Mountains in the Columbia Basin lies an arid landscape that many people consider a barren wasteland. However, it is a unique ecosystem known as shrub-steppe - and it is rapidly disappearing.

Shrub-steppe gets its name from the woody shrubs that grow in this region including sagebrush, rabbitbrush, greasewood and bitterbrush; and steppe which is a place where drought-resistant perennial grasses dominate. Under natural conditions, shrub-steppe is made up of four vegetation layers: shrubs, perennial grasses, wildflowers and a thin biotic crust composed of lichens and mosses. Historically steppe vegetation made up about 89% of the region; today it occupies only a small fraction. Human-altered areas now occupy most of the region, with almost all of that being land used for agriculture. Increased farmlands in this fragile landscape brings a sharp increase in soil erosion which causes blowing dust and silt in local waters. Cheat grass and other invasive non-native vegetations have largely fragmented or eliminated the native vegetation altogether. Although change is a natural part of landscapes, such rapid change severely affects native wildlife. When the native vegetation disappears, so too do many of the animal habitats.

A shrub-steppe ecosystem supports a variety of birds. More than 200 bird species have been recorded in the region. Of these, less than 60 are considered common at the present time. The ferruginous hawk, greater sage grouse and loggerhead shrike are on the federal list of threatened species. Many more are on state and federal "species of concern" lists.

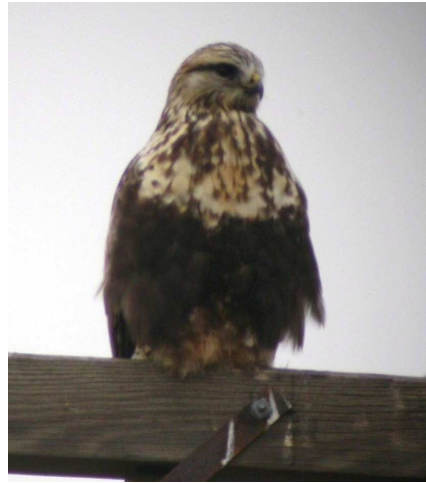
Of the more than 30 species of mammals that have been documented, many are on conservation concern lists, including the pygmy rabbit, which is considered to be endangered. Reptiles and amphibians, insects, aquatic invertebrates and fish also make up the animal habitat of the ecosystem, and their numbers are decreasing in alarming numbers.

I urge you all to visit a shrub-steppe environment. For more information on the Columbia Basin shrub-steppe, I recommend reading *Northwest Arid Lands*, by Georganne O'Connor and Karen Wieda. This book strives to increase our understanding of shrub-steppe, which will in turn lead to care and conservation of the region for future generations.

Bird of the Month

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK

Buteo lagopus



Someone called out "It's a beautiful roughie!" on a recent field trip. We all got our binoculars on the bird and were excited to watch this winter visitor to the Walla Walla Valley.

Photo by Rodger Shoemake

The rough-legged hawk is a large, long-winged buteo that breeds on the Arctic tundra and winters in southern Canada and northern United States. They arrive in Walla Walla County the latter part of October, and remain until the first part of April.

There are several things to look for when trying to identify a "roughie".

1. The light juvenile and adult light morph female normally have a very pale head and an upper breast that appears to be a light colored bib.
2. Light morph males have a more heavily barred belly and darker breast. This makes them harder to sort out from young red-tailed hawks.
3. Dark carpal "elbow" patches can be seen on the underwing coverts.
4. They show a whitish undertail with distinct black banding at the base of the tail.
5. Wingbeats are shallow and smooth with a slight dihedral (upward tilt)
6. Hunting behavior includes kiting (hovering) over prey).

Most of the rough-legged hawks in our area are light morphed, although we do have an occasional dark-morphed bird. The easiest way to differentiate it from a dark morph red-tailed hawk (which also can be found here in the winter) is by the black and white tail and the flight behavior.

Like other wintering raptors, rough-legged hawks favor alfalfa fields where the supply of rodents is abundant. The number of raptors in these areas this year is high, so it promises to be a good winter for "raptor watching".

Conservation

A WORD ON CONSERVATION FOR TODAY

By Mike Denny, Conservation Chair BMAS

Recently I have been thinking a lot about conservation and what has changed and improved over time and what needs more work.

There are many giants in the world of conservation such as Issak Walton, John Muir, Ernest Thompson Seaton, Theodor Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, Peter Matthiessen and Brain Gains to name a few. All of these folks have understood the big issues and realized that education of neighbors, friends, politicians and landowners was the key to successful conservation.

It is now huge international corporations that need education. As corporations are now facing a public concerned about environmental issues and sustainability of natural resources many are attempting to change for the better, while others are “green washing” their products and actions to appear as if they are doing their best. The current administration has received many requests to eliminate or reduce environmental rules and laws so that companies can return to profitability without the “hindrance” of protecting sustainability of natural resources, our water or air. So please vote with your feet and discover which companies really care about the future of this planet and then patronize their products. Be an educated consumer and know what it is you are buying and how that company and their products impact our planet. Use the internet to educate yourself.

WOLVES RETURN HOME TO NORTHEAST OREGON

Excerpts from the Journal of the Hells Canyon Preservation Council, October 2008

After years of howling at the moon, ODFW wildlife biologist Russ Morgan finally got the answer he was looking for. On July 18, his calls into the Umatilla National Forest were answered by two adult **grey wolves** and at least two pups. This is the first official confirmation that a family of wolves has resettled in their historical habitat of Eastern Oregon. Their presence helps to highlight the critical importance of the Hells Canyon-Wallowa-Blue Mountain ecosystem

as a “linchpin” wildlife connectivity corridor between the Rockies and the Cascades.

Wolves wandered into Oregon through Hells Canyon as early as 1999. But up until the adoption of the Oregon Wolf Plan in 2005, they were captured and removed from the state. Now, not only are they allowed to stay, there is also a strict conservation policy to protect them.

The Wolf Plan was a remarkable collaborative effort between groups of individuals that represented Native Americans, environmentalists, ranchers, economists, rural Oregonians, biologists, hunters, educators and others.

Wolves are a highly adaptive species, and have historically inhabited the entire western half of the United States. When settlers moved into the west they decimated the bison population-often leaving carcasses for wolves to scavenge. This abundance of food led to a sharp increase in population. So when the bison began to disappear the wolves went from their traditional diet of bison to domesticated farm animals. We all know what happened next. In 1915 the Division of Predator and Rodent Control was established, Bounties were paid and by the late 1930's wolves had all but disappeared from the lower forty-eight states.

Tides began to turn in 1973 with the passage of the Endangered Species Act, but it wasn't until January, 1995 when 14 grey wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park, that change began. About the same time 15 wolves were released in central Idaho's Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. This is more than likely the source of Oregon's newest residents.

Of course there are many concerns that go along with the introduction of wolves to northeast Oregon. Ranchers have legitimate concerns about this new predator. As long as the wolf is federally listed, compensation for predations will be paid. The two most likely scenarios for predation come when livestock are grazing on public land, and during winter when elk tend to live in close proximity to ranches. The Hells Canyon Preservation Council is working with ranchers to provide information on how to co-exist with wolves and steps they can take to safeguard their livestock from predation.

Some hunters are concerned about wolves' impact on elk population. Elk numbers will likely drop a bit, but the manner in which wolves hunt promotes healthier herds and helps to ensure a steady population, even in years where forage is sparse.

Miscellaneous

OLD TREES TRAP CARBON, TOO

From National Wildlife, December/January 2009

Based on one study from the 1960's, many scientists have long believed that old-growth forest may do little to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Young, rapidly growing forest were considered more effective carbon sinks and thus more valuable in the fight against global warming. But a new analysis of 519 different forest plot studies disproves the conventional wisdom: in nearly all forests between 15 and 800 years old, more carbon dioxide is absorbed than released. "The current data now makes it clear that carbon accumulation can continue in forests that are centuries old," says Oregon State University forest scientist Beverly Law.

BIRDS AND WINDOWS

Millions of birds are killed by window collisions in the United States each year. The December *Birder's World* and the Nov/Dec issue of *Audubon* both offer good information on helping with this problem. New York City Audubon published a manual recently for developers, architects, engineers and other professionals who want to construct bird-safe buildings. Also, the American Bird Conservancy has an excellent summary and suggested actions in an article on the internet titled "Mortality threat to birds: Collisions with buildings"

Collisions with glass are the single greatest threat to the birds visiting our yards. Large plate-glass windows are harder on birds than windows divided into smaller panes. But even small panes can deceive birds that are accustomed to flying through dense foliage. There are ways we can help reduce these collisions. One solution we have found effective is to make sure our feeders are placed at least 30 feet from windows. This gives flushed birds enough distance to build momentum and avoid a fatal crash.

In the long term, perhaps bird-safe glass or exterior window screens will be used for all new construction. In the short term, inexpensive, easy, and nearly invisible solutions are needed—something we can all use and recommend to friends and neighbors. Let me know if you have found a good solution at your home and I will pass it on for others to try.

Books

PRISCILLA'S PICKS

The River of Doubt: by Candice Millard

November 1912. Theodore Roosevelt, one of the most popular presidents in American history, is crushed at the polls by Woodrow Wilson after two terms in office. Roosevelt is 54 years of age, 5'5" tall, weighs more than 200 pounds and when speaking sounds "as if he had just taken a sip of helium." He's shunned by his high-society Republican friends for having run as a third-party candidate, and is generally lampooned by everyone else for losing by such a wide margin. What does he do? He sets off into the Brazilian jungle to venture up an uncharted tributary of the Amazon, known as "The River of Doubt". For Roosevelt the adventure was a form of self-imposed therapy. Whenever hit by despair, he collected himself and embarked on what he termed "the strenuous life." The journey was filled with an endless succession of calamities, setbacks, disease and fatigue. It is a truly gripping tale of an expedition into the unknown.

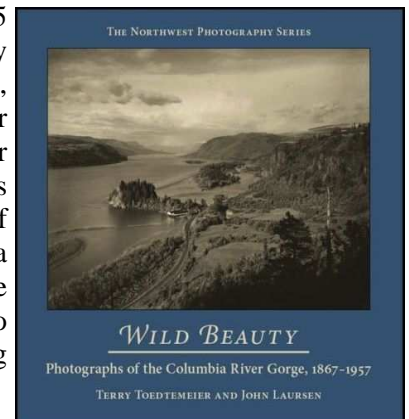
The Heart of Horses: by Molly Gloss

The year is 1917, the twilight of the Old West when that way of life was already legendary. The main character is Martha Lessen, a 19-year old wandering tomboy who finds her place as a bronco-buster in rural northeastern Oregon while the men are away at war. Although a strong feminist impulse runs through the story, it has been expertly "gentled." The subtle rhythm of the story with touches of warmth, humor and compassion is deeply satisfying. A good read for the holiday season.

NEW BOOK

Wild Beauty: Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1857-1857 Terry Toedtemeier & John Laursen

A large-format book of 135 historic images by numerous photographers, many of which have never before been published or exhibited. This photographic chronicle of the history of the Columbia River Gorge will be welcomed by readers who love the Gorge's stunning beauty and grandeur.



In the Field

The Tuesday morning walkers found five female surf scoters on Bennington Lake October 28. That is a new species for the lake bringing the total to 206.

On November 1, Paul Treman saw a single snow goose among the canada geese on Mill Creek behind K-mart. There were hooded mergansers as well as the usual wigeons and ring-billed gulls.

Mike and MerryLynn headed for the Blues south of Dayton on November 1 where they found a huge flock of gray-crowned rosy finches. Other notable birds seen were varied thrush, rough-legged hawks, ruffed grouse, golden-crowned kinglets, and a black backed woodpecker.

On our way home from a birding trip to the coast on November 1, Rodger and I saw three great egrets and a large number of tundra swans on Casey Pond.

Around the first of November, Mary Patton watched an Eastern blue jay in her yard—eating seed from her feeder and being generally raucous.

Mike and MerryLynn found flooded fields on Detour Road on November 2, but the only interesting birds they saw were a killdeer, a greater yellowlegs and 4 Wilson's snipe. They had better luck at the overlook at Wallula Junction where they added, 17 dunlin, a Bonaparte's gull and a herring gull. They checked the waterfowl at Two Rivers HMU and were able to locate an Eurasian wigeon. Finally, Ice Harbor had some nice birds including a Barrow's goldeneye, common goldeneyes, common mergansers and two red-breasted mergansers.

From her office window, Sharon Cline watched a red-tailed hawk on a pole at the corner of Second and Main on November 6. Perhaps it is the same bird that frequented the top of the Marcus Whitman Hotel last winter.

On November 9, Mike and MerryLynn once again found a rare visitor to our area. They were looking for gulls below McNary Dam and found two black-legged kittiwakes. This is a Umatilla County first for the species. Although this bird has been seen in Walla Walla County, there is only one previous record - on the Walla Walla River Delta.

MerryLynn walked Stone Creek on November 10 and found a very bright orange-crowned warbler.

Tim Greenlaw called the Dennys on November 10 to report a northern saw-whet owl outside their window. MerryLynn, Rodger and I went out and found the owl sitting in a young four foot pine tree right next to the house. Certainly not the type of sparse cover where you might expect to see a saw-whet owl! There were some junipers nearby but no large conifers.



Photo by Rodger Shoemake

Bennington Lake had a nice assortment of waterfowl on November 13 including tundra swans, buffleheads, common goldeneyes and greater scaup.

Also on November 13, Melissa Webster watched a very active American dipper on Mill Creek near the Rooks Park bridge. Other interesting birds she saw on the creek were hooded mergansers and common mergansers.

On November 14 at Whitman Mission, Mike Denny reported seeing the first bohemian waxwings of the winter. Then November 20, the Tuesday morning walkers found several at Bennington Lake. If you see a flock of waxwings, take a closer look to see if there are both cedar and bohemian in the group.

November 16 was the annual Turkey Trot Field Trip. The weather was beautiful, the group enthusiastic, but the wild turkeys were very hard to find. None were seen in Walla Walla County. It wasn't until we got to the Wolf Fork and the South Fork of the Touchet River that we were able to locate any turkeys. We were able to tally 69 birds in several places. It would be nice to think that their numbers are decreasing, but more than likely they moved out of the places we usually see them, either permanently or just for that particular day. Actually, there was a

general lack of birds seen and we didn't find any of the uncommon species that have been seen in past years. It reinforces the notion that birding is different every time you go. We did see some very nice birds including an American dipper, rough-legged hawks, a variety of red-tailed hawks, great horned owls and a hermit thrush. Mike and MerryLynn got a quick glimpse of a golden eagle on S. Fork Coppei Creek Road, but it disappeared over the ridge before the rest of the group could see it.



We all enjoyed lunch along South Fork Coppei Creek.

Rodger and George went out looking for raptors to photograph on November 18. On Byrnes Road they found a wide variety of red-tailed hawks, two prairie falcons, two rough-legged hawks, several northern harriers and kestrels. They also saw a northern shrike. On McDonald Road, in addition to more raptors, they saw a Say's phoebe.

Mike and MerryLynn had four Ross's geese fly over their house the evening of November 19. It's that time of year when snow geese and occasionally Ross's geese come through. Look for them in with flocks of canada geese on the rivers and ponds in the area.

Mike and MerryLynn took some birding friends from Spokane to the west side of the county on November 22. Gulls were the highlight. They saw lesser black-backed, glaucous, mew, western, herring, glaucous-winged and California at the Walla Walla River Delta and below Ice Harbor Dam. Also at Ice Harbor they saw common mergansers, common goldeneyes, common loons, barrow's goldeneyes, spotted sandpipers, lesser scaup, western grebes, and American white pelican. Casey Pond was good

also—cackling geese, white-fronted geese, and hooded merganser. There were two merlin in Burbank Heights and 6 bald eagles along the Columbia River. At the Walla Walla River Delta they also found dunlin and a northern shrike.

While watching our yard on November 22, I was very excited to see three tundra swans fly over. I ran out in time to hear their pretty call and the sound of their wings.

November 23, Mike and MerryLynn walked the Jasper Mountain Road from the "T" up to Lewis Peak. They found four flocks of bohemian waxwings, mountain chickadees, hairy woodpeckers, a downy woodpecker, northern flickers, Steller's jays, a rough-legged hawk, red tailed hawks, two golden eagles, two northern shrikes and five western bluebirds (still in the area where the boxes are.)

I know many of you watch birds in your yards. Let me know what yard birds you are seeing - or not seeing. Pam Fisher recently told me that birds in her yard seems to be scarce. This is something we need to know too. It doesn't have to be a rare bird (we let Mike and MerryLynn find those!) I want to hear about what birds you are seeing. Our yard seems very quiet to me, but when I think about what I see on a regular basis, it really isn't that quiet. For instance, yesterday we had pine siskins, house finches, house sparrows, goldfinches, a downy woodpecker, magpies, a flicker, a pheasant and a sharp-shinned hawk. So, what's in your yard? Let me know!!

Ginger

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BLUE MOUNTAIN AUDUBON SOCIETY
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Mission Statement:

Blue Mountain Audubon Society (BMAS) was organized in 1971 and chartered by National Audubon Society in 1972. The Chapter's objectives are to serve its membership and the larger communities of Southeastern Washington and Northeastern Oregon with the goals to appreciate, preserve and enjoy birds, wildlife, and the natural environment of the area. Education is a primary objective of Chapter activities. Through volunteer efforts BMAS provides educational opportunities, conservation activities and enjoyment of wildlife and wildlife habitat opportunities to members and to the public. The Chapter meets the third Thursday, (September through May) at 7:30 in Gaiser Auditorium, Whitman College Science Building. A newsletter, **The Magpiper** is published September through May and is free to members. Non-member subscription fees are \$20 annually. BMAS is a non-profit 501c(3) organization. Find us on the internet at <http://www.blumtn.org>

Join Blue Mountain Audubon Society – Complete the following information and mail along with a check in the amount of \$20 for your first year's membership to: Blue Mountain Audubon Society, PO Box 1106, Walla Walla, WA 99362

Name: _____

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