



# The Magpiper

February, 2009

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## February Calendar

February 3, 10, 17, 24  
9:00 a.m.  
Bennington Lake Walk  
(weather permitting)

February 7  
9:00 a.m. HJT Parking Lot  
Field Trip: Waterfowl and  
Gulls

February 12  
7:00 p.m.  
Board Meeting  
219 Newell Street

February 19  
7:30 p.m.  
Membership meeting  
Gaiser Auditorium

## 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>

Have questions? Contact Ginger  
Shoemake at 525-2963 or  
[housewren@blumtn.org](mailto:housewren@blumtn.org)

## Meetings

### **Membership Meeting: February 19, 7:30 p.m.**

*Gaiser Auditorium, Hall of Science, Whitman College*

### **SNAKES IN THE CONGO**

The speaker for our February meeting will be Kate Jackson. Kate is an Assistant Professor of Biology at Whitman College, where she teaches herpetology, comparative vertebrate anatomy, and animal diversity. She holds a Ph.D. in Biology from Harvard University. Obsessed with amphibians and reptiles since early childhood, she became especially attracted to the poorly-known snakes of Central Africa.

Kate will give a slide presentation about her fieldwork with snakes in the Congo. She has led four expeditions to conduct herpetofaunal biodiversity surveys in areas of the Congo never studied before. She has published many scientific articles and has authored a field memoir about her experiences collecting snakes in the swamp forest of northern Congo.

This program was scheduled for October, but had to be postponed because of unexpected circumstances.

After the meeting, her recent book "*Mean and Lowly Thing: Snakes, Science and Survival in the Congo*" will be available for sale and book signing.

## Field Trips

### **Saturday, February 7 — 9:00 a.m. ALL DAY**

#### **WATERFOWL AND GULLS**

February is a great time to visit the Columbia and Snake rivers to look at the wide variety of waterfowl that winter in Walla Walla County. We will be searching for waterfowl such as canvasbacks, common mergansers, common and Barrow's goldeneyes, redheads, grebes, loons, geese, and more. This will also be an opportunity to see a variety of gulls and learn how to recognize different species. Who better to lead us on this outing than Mike and MerryLynn Denny! They have spent many years learning how to identify waterfowl and gulls and will share their expertise with us so some day we can say more than "oh, it's a duck", or, "there goes a gull." A spotting scope will be a great help on this trip, so if you have one bring it along. Pack a lunch, your binoculars, a bird book, and dress for the winter weather. This is going to be a fun day - don't miss it. Call the Dennys if you plan to attend 529-0808.



## President's Corner

### THE RAINBOW BIRD

In the January Magpiper, George Jameson reported on his presentation at Rogers School. George is, as many of you know, a multi-talented guy. A photographer, a crack birder, a computer pro, a gardener with a very green thumb, and lots of other impressive things. He was a hit at Rogers School. So much so that word quickly spread about his presentation. Requests came in for other presentations. And here is where our story takes a dark turn.

One school wanted George on a day he was not available. So George contacted me and asked if I would do the presentation. This was mistake one in our story of what many came to call the rainbow bird. Mistake two was me agreeing to do the presentation. Who knew, certainly not me, that 70+ fourth graders could drive me round the bend and that I could do the same to the, in my opinion, uptight school staff.

My plan was to show a series of bird photos to the students, ask if they could identify them, and then to explain how some birds have names based on their coloration or other notable markings. Piece of cake, right? I will not name the school in question, and in my defense I don't think I was as insensitive or age-inappropriate as the principal claimed, but maybe the best way to let you know what happened is simply to print, in its entirety, the letter I received from the principal.

*Dear Mr. Scribner,*

*Thank you for your presentation at our school last Wednesday. I hope you will understand why we do not want you ever again to make a presentation at our school. These were fourth graders, Mr. Scribner. Yes, there were three classes, not one as you were initially told, and yes the students were, as you put it, "pretty active," but that does not excuse or justify your language or your behavior.*

*In the first place, body image is important, even to fourth graders. You do not refer to a plus-sized boy wearing a patterned sweater as "Chubby Checker." And a reed-thin girl is not "Bulimia Betty."*

*Do you have children, Mr. Scribner? If so, I assume you remember, when they were of fourth grade age, that they do not always stay focused, and that sometimes when called on to answer a question they may respond with something totally unrelated. So when you showed a picture of a bluebird and the student you called upon to name the bird said he was going on a trip to Disneyland this summer, it was not appropriate for you to ask him, "Did you understand my question, you little twit?"*

*And it was completely uncalled for, when a student*

*reported that he had a new baby sister but his mother said he was not going to get any more baby brothers or sisters because his father was going to get "fixed," to tell the student, "It's about time."*

*As for the bird pictures, the students enjoyed naming the yellow-headed blackbird. It is, as you explained, a blackbird with a yellow head. And once you told the students it was a kinglet, it made sense to call it a golden-crowned kinglet. The white ibis was certainly white, the snowy owl was the color of snow, and the long-tailed duck does have a very long tail. Although for you to tell the students that the long-tailed duck used to be called an oldsquaw, say "ugh," and then do an Indian war dance was unnecessary, don't you think? Not to mention rather juvenile. It was at this point that the students became much more animated and active than any of us wanted. One could say, as you did, that they were on the warpath. It was here, I think, that you lost control of the situation.*

*Did you have to yell and tell the students to "shut up, you little vermin"? I think not.*

*But the worse, I think you will agree, Mr. Scribner, was when you told the students you were sick and tired of their juvenile behavior (these are fourth grade students we are talking about here), put a new bird picture on the screen, shouted, "If you're so smart, name this one," and bolted from the room. That was very bad form.*

*But not as bad as the bird picture you left us with. Do you have any idea of the chaos this one bird caused, of the multiple names the students came up with, each one trying to be more elaborate, or funny, or possibly correct, than the last one? "Crayon bird," is what one student said. "Red, blue, green bird," was another name. "Rainbow bird" would have won the election were we to have decided the outcome with a ballot. Or how about "red bird with blue head," or "blue headed red bird with green yellow back"? It wasn't until much later that day, after the chaos of 70+ fourth graders shouting and arguing and pushing and shoving and even fighting over what name to give the bird that one of our teachers called a friend, who knew a birder, who had a bird book, that we were able to identify the bird as a painted bunting.*

*That was a mean trick you played on us, Mr. Scribner. Not to mention your other numerous violations of school etiquette, your use of uncalled for sarcasm, and your inappropriate name calling. You were supposed to give a presentation to fourth graders, not be one. I trust you understand why we don't want you back. Next time it will be Mr. Jameson, or there will not be a next time.*

*Sincerely,*

He/she (I don't want to help you identify the school by stating the gender of the principal) got it pretty much right. It was not my best outing. But I thought the painted bunting was a nice closing number. Next time (okay, if there is a next time) I'll leave 'em with a picture of a pyrrhuloxia, or a phainopepla, or a dickcissel. Let's see those little buggers properly name those birds. Chubby Checker will be seeing spots.

## **Birding Walla Walla County**

February is a great month to look for wintering waterfowl in Walla Walla County and the best place to find them is along the Columbia River. Three spots come to mind that are easily accessible by car. Although a scope is always useful when looking at waterfowl, birds can be seen with binoculars at these three locations.

### **Wallula Walla Walla Grain Growers Elevators**

Less than a mile southwest of Wallula Junction along Highway 730 turn right onto a short road that leads to the elevators. Park on the left near the river (making sure to not block grain trucks) and walk along the trail leading to the mouth of the Walla Walla River. Waterfowl you can expect to see at this location include American coot, canvasback, lesser scaup, western grebe, ring-necked duck and common goldeneye. Careful searching can also produce horned grebe, pied-billed grebe and redhead. With a scope you may find a common loon.

### **Casey Pond**

You may know about this spot that lies just west of Highway 12 a mile or so north of Dodd Road. There used to be a small parking lot along the highway, but now you can access the area by turning left on Hanson Loop Road north of Casey Pond. Proceed on Hanson Loop Road past a residential area on the left to a gravel road that leads back into the pond. Turn left at this unmarked gravel road and proceed south on it until you reach a large parking lot and boat ramp. Waterfowl are plentiful here in the winter. Hundreds of northern pintail, American wigeon, mallard, and coot are regulars. Tundra swans can often be found here too, as well as hooded mergansers, bufflehead, white-fronted geese, canada geese, and a variety of gulls. Great blue herons and double crested cormorants can be seen along the shoreline near the highway and on the small island. It's not unusual to find a bald eagle or two in the trees.

### **McNary National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters**

At the first stoplight on Highway 12 near Burbank turn right onto Humorist Road. Turn left at the next road and drive north to the refuge. Parking is on the right hand side of the road. All of the waterfowl mentioned above are a possibility at the refuge. In addition you may see ruddy duck, wood duck and common merganser. There is a blind where you can sit and enjoy the birds at your leisure. Bald eagles often flush the birds on the ponds, but they soon settle back down on the water.

## **Bird of the Month**

### **GREAT HORNED OWL** *Bubo virginianus*



The great horned owl is a large owl found throughout North America. It's average size is 22 inches, with a wingspan of 44 inches. Adults have large ear tufts, yellow eyes, finely barred and streaked brown, gray and white plumage as well as a conspicuous white throat collar. Females of the species are somewhat larger than males.

*Photo by George Jameson*

A great horned owl's eyes are nearly as large as those of humans and are immobile. Instead of turning its eyes, it turns its head. Therefore, its neck must be able to turn about 270 degrees in order to see in other directions without moving. It's hearing is as good, or better, than it's vision. Its ears are not placed in the same position on either side of its head; the right ear is typically set higher in the skull and at a slightly different angle. By tilting or turning its head until the sound is the same in each ear, an owl can pinpoint both the horizontal and vertical direction of a sound.

Great horned owls hunt at night by waiting on a high perch and swooping down on prey. Small to medium sized mammals are the predominant food source, but birds also comprise a large portion of their diet ranging in size from kinglets to great blue herons. No bird is safe when the great horned owl is hungry!

Breeding is early—late January or early February. A mate is chosen by December and they can be heard calling earlier. The call is low-pitched and usually has five syllables. The female's call is higher in pitch. Owls do not build their own nests but use a large nest of another bird or sometimes a large hole in the side of a bank. There are usually 2 eggs per clutch. Incubation is about 33 days. Young owls move onto nearby branches by 6 weeks and start flying about a week later. However, they still beg for food for as long as five months.

Great horned owls are common residents of low to mid-elevation areas in almost all habitats in our area, even residential areas with parks and woodlots.. Now is a great time to look for them while the trees are bare and they are nesting. Look for ears on a nest and another owl perched nearby. Later in the spring you may even see the young owls in the nest or on a nearby limb.

## Conservation

### GREAT CONSERVATION IDEAS

*By Mike Denny, BMAS Conservation Chair*

This week has been loaded with historic, amazing firsts not seen in this country on such a large scale before. There are many new realities and directions for the people of this nation to seriously consider. A new President with new executive orders, new mandates, new hopes and expectations. A new openness and a whole new concept of transparency in government. The idea of personal responsibility, personal awareness and concern for your neighbors and community. A urged commitment to get involved with your local government and lend a hand in providing direction. Making choices about natural resources with sustainability upper most in our minds. Pushing for clean air, clean water, clean fuels and the idea that we are always responsible for the future of the next two generations. Teach compassion for all living things and systems that bring life to all of our futures. Stop torture, remove our troops from battlefields and use smart diplomacy to settle conflicts.

Are all of these great concepts presented to the citizens of this nation and the rest of the folks on this planet new ideas? No, they are not. They in fact are the old foundations that were meant to guide and build many of this world's religions, civilized peoples and countries. All of these ideas have been around for many thousands of years, but they tend to get ignored, covered up and pushed out of sight by many that love greed, power and the notion that entitlements reign supreme.

So with this new start for our country I urge YOU to get involved with YOUR county, state and city governments. Push for sustainability and share the law of "Carrying Capacity"\* to all you know and meet. Perform continual well thought-out acts of conservation. So shut off the TV and lets just get out there and do what is right for our future generations.

\*For a definition of "Carrying Capacity" go to the Blue Mountain Audubon webpage [www.blumtn.org](http://www.blumtn.org)

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin were born on the same day—February 12, 1809.

### ENVIRONMENT BLAMED IN WESTERN TREE DEATHS

*Excerpts from article in New York Times 1/23/09*

Rising temperatures and the resulting drought are causing trees in the Western United States to die off at more than twice the pace they did a few decades ago, a new study by the United States Geological Survey has found.

The combination of a warmer climate and diminished water supply have impaired the ability of the forests to absorb greenhouse gases and made them sparser and more susceptible to fires and pests. The scientists who analyzed tree census data collected in 1955 and in later years, found that the mortality of trees increased in 87% of the 76 forest plots studied.

The scientists analyzed the effects of higher temperatures on old-growth temperate forests in three regions in the west. The average temperature in those regions rose by more than one degree Fahrenheit from the mid-1970-s to 2006. Precipitation and snowpack runoff decreased over the same period.

The higher mortality rates held regardless of tree elevation, size or type. The fact that birth rates remained unchanged among the nearly 60,000 pines, firs, hemlocks and other trees in the study indicates that forests are losing trees faster than they are replacing them.

It remains unclear how much of the regional warming is a result of a natural climate cycle and how much results from a global trend toward higher temperatures.

The study focused on forests more than 200 years old where rapid changes in demographic rates would more likely be caused by environmental changes rather by internal processes more common in young forests, like self thinning. The spike in mortality in otherwise healthy forests cannot be attributed to aging, fires and other events, the researchers said. Warmer weather means that trees become more vulnerable to attacks by insects and pathogens that thrive in warmer conditions.

Steve Pyne, an environmental historian, said that how bad things became depends on what comes back to replace the vegetation being lost. It's like the financial meltdown. It's the uncertainty. What's going to replace it? It may make no difference, it may make a huge difference.

## Miscellaneous

### GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT

**February 13-16, 2009**

*Hosted by National Audubon Society and Cornell Lab of Ornithology*

Looking for a free, educational activity that makes a difference? This February, join tens of thousands of people throughout the U.S. and Canada in the 12th annual Great Backyard Bird Count. You can count birds you see in your backyard, off your balcony, at your local park, or from your window—anywhere you can spot birds.

People of all ages and all levels of bird-watching experience are invited to take part. It's a great way to learn more about the birds in your backyard and neighborhood. It's also a fun activity for kids - and an opportunity to get outside and connect with nature. You can count by yourself, or with your family, community group, school, or friends.

Information from the count provides valuable information for science and conservation. Your list, long or short, helps scientists understand more about how the distribution and abundance of birds are changing through time.

#### How to Participate

1. **Visit [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org)** for easy-to-follow instructions, including tips for identifying bird species. Download a checklist for your area.
2. **Count the birds** you see wherever you choose to count. Write down the highest number of individuals you see at one time—that way you will avoid counting any bird twice.
3. **After at least 15 minutes of watching** in one place, report your results online at [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org). (You can spend more time observing in you wish).
4. **You can repeat your count** at the same place on each day or you can visit other locations and submit separate tallies for those areas as well.

Online maps and lists are updated throughout the count, making it easy to see how your birds fit into the big picture.

Join the fun and be part of the Great Backyard Bird Count!

## Books

### PRISCILLA'S PICKS

**The Snoring Bird** by Bernd Heinrich

A portrait of the future scientist as a footloose nature boy. In this extraordinary memoir, Bernd Heinrich shares the ways in which his relationship with his father, combined with his unique childhood, molded him into the scientist and man he is today. From his father's days as a soldier in Europe and the family's daring escape from the Red Army in 1945 to the rustic Maine farm they came to call home, Heinrich relates it all in his trademark style, making science accessible and awe-inspiring. He is as brilliant at depicting the highs and lows of scientific research as he is in sharing the ways and wonders of the natural world.

In *The Snoring Bird* the reader will discover the unique personalities of both the author—famous biologist, writer, and untramarathon champion Bernd Heinrich—and of Papa—an old-style insect collector who survived jungles and two world wars. The book succeeds on many levels: as a splendid nature writing, as a readable history of modern biology, and as a fascinating glimpse of the growth of one scientist's mind.

**Stormy Weather** by Paulette Jiles

A stirring story about four women (a mother and her three daughters) toughing out the Great Depression in the Texas dust bowl. The story begins in 1927 and depicts their unstable, transitory life in the oil fields of Texas. After their father's death in 1937, the women move back to the homeplace on the Brazos River in Central Texas. Details of a rancher's life in the 1930's and the harsh setting add authenticity to the story.

Although this book is not as profound as Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, Jiles conveys the women's sense of self and of home in language as stark as the Texas landscape.

#### NEW BOOK

**Swift's Big Flight** by Lee Jackson

A delightful children's book about a young Vaux's swift as he begins his first journey south for the winter in a fictional family-oriented narrative. It is a fun story for children and one that also will teach them about swift behavior and migration. The black and white illustrations by Ryan Alexander-Tanner add whimsy to a story children of all ages will enjoy.

Lee Jackson lives in Portland, Oregon and has been watching Vaux's swifts from her porch for five years. Proceeds from the book benefit the Audubon Society of Portland's Swift Watch program. For more information on the book go to [www.flyingswift.blogspot.com](http://www.flyingswift.blogspot.com)

## *In the Field*

The rain on New Year's Day didn't stop folks from getting out and seeing some birds. At the end of the day 71 species were tallied for the new 2009 Walla Walla County Bird List. Nothing rare showed up that first day, but Mike and MerryLynn were pleased to see the **Harris's sparrow** back in their yard the morning of January 2. The new snow brought many birds back into feeders for a quick meal.

On January 3 Sheila Zanger watched two juvenile **golden eagles** and an adult **bald eagle** munching down on a deer carcass along Highway 12 between Waitsburg and Dayton.

While participating in Lower Columbia's Christmas Bird Count on January 3, Mike and MerryLynn found an adult **gyrfalcon** in Franklin County.

Sheila called me again on January 7 - this time to tell me about a **red-breasted sapsucker** in her yard. This is the first recorded sighting of the species in Columbia County. How exciting! Red-breasted sapsuckers are normally found west of the Cascade Mountains so this bird was a long way from home.

Rodger and I went out to check on the flooding conditions of the creeks and rivers on January 8 (and of course to do a little birding). The wind was howling so the raptors were mostly on the ground. On McDole Road (which is off Byrnes Road) we found a **ferruginous hawk**. It was sitting very still watching for some critter to move. Finally one did and the hawk pounced. Patience certainly has its rewards. We also saw five **rough-legged hawks** on Byrnes Road.



*Rough-legged hawk photo by Rodger Shoemake*

January 10 was the Raptor Field Trip led by George Jameson. After a short lesson on red-tailed hawk identification, 17 of us headed west to test our skills. We saw 123 **red-tailed hawks**, 13 **American kestrels**, 8 **northern harriers**, 4 **rough legged hawks**, a **bald eagle** and 2 **prairie falcons**. One group also saw a **sharp shinned hawk**. Five **great**

**horned owls** were spotted as well as one **northern shrike**. As an additional treat, while driving through Touchet we saw several **Eurasian collared doves**. We saw red-tailed



hawks of every color, shape and size including a **Harlan's**. All of the rough-legged hawks looked different and one was a dark morph bird. It was a great trip and we all learned more about the raptors of our valley.

Nat Drumheller found 17 **red-breasted mergansers** on the Columbia River near the pulp mill on January 12. On McNary Refuge he saw a **snow goose**, a **white-fronted goose** and several **tundra swans**.

MerryLynn, Priscilla Dauble and I walked up North Fork Coppei on January 14 and found 9 **pine grosbeaks** that MerryLynn had seen there on January 12. We also saw a **pygmy owl**, a **ruffed grouse**, and four **chestnut-backed chickadees**. On the 12th MerryLynn also saw a pair of **pileated woodpeckers** along the road.

Several of you reported hearing **western screech owls** in January. Listen for them calling in the evenings.

George Jameson watched a large mixed flock of **robins**, **starlings**, **cedar and Bohemian waxwings** devour the berries on his mountain ash on January 15. The huge flocks of migrating robins that we see here in late January/early February have returned a little earlier than usual.

On Jan. 15th a **ruffed grouse** spent most of the morning in Alice Greethurst's back yard. It was pecking among the

dead leaves that are piled under the arborvitae hedge that borders the back fence.

Rodger and I saw 3 more pine grosbeaks on Scenic Loop on January 16. They were twittering in the tops of the conifers.

On January 17, Mike and MerryLynn, Jim Nestler and I drove up to Lyons Ferry Park to see 15 white-winged crossbills that were feasting on the cones of two spruce trees. They were busy devouring the cones and hardly noticed our presence. I was able to get this photo of a beautiful male.



The Dennys and the Shoemakes drove the Milton-Freewater area raptor route on January 18. We saw a pygmy owl on Couse Creek Road. Raptors included: 189 red-tailed hawks, 27 American kestrels, 1 adult bald eagle, 2 rough-legged hawks, 3 ferruginous hawks, 1 prairie falcon, 2 Cooper's hawks, and only 1 northern harrier.

On January 18, Sheila reported seeing 14 rough-legged hawks and 8 red-tailed hawks on Eckler Mountain road. On the 21st she had 15 varied thrushes in her yard south of Dayton plus a couple Clark's nutcrackers and red crossbills.

MerryLynn and her mom Shirley drove up Lewis Peak Road on January 20 in search of sunshine. They found it—plus 7 rough-legged hawks, 2 Steller's jays, a northern shrike and lots of wild turkeys. In Dixie they watched a merlin eating a house finch, and at Sunset Villa in College Place they saw close to 200 bohemian waxwings.

Tori Kaufmann called on January 21 to let me know she had a partial albino house finch coming to her feeder. In addition, the trees around her apartment were full of robins and there was a cedar waxwing and a Bohemian waxwing in the mix.

Shirley Muse also called on January 21 to report a merlin in her yard. She has seen it off and on for over a month. It's presence has sure put a damper on watching birds from inside the warm house because nothing is coming to the feeders.

In the middle of the snowstorm on January 24, George Jameson watched a bald eagle fly over his house. Rodger and I missed the eagle, but we did find five wood ducks on South Wilbur ponds, just a short distance from George's house.

A little snowstorm didn't keep Mike and MerryLynn from venturing north on January 24 looking for birds. At Fish Hook Park they located a northern saw-whet owl. Along Lyons Ferry Road they found four American tree sparrows, and in Prescott they saw an Eurasian collared dove and a merlin. Wild turkeys were plentiful around Prescott and they saw rough-legged hawks along Lyons Ferry Road. They saw four great horned owls—two at Fish Hook Park, one at Ivy Cemetery west of Prescott, and one along Highway 261.

Every winter there are birds that come into Eastern Washington that aren't normally found here. In recent years we have had snowy owls, Eastern bluejays and great gray owls. This year white-winged crossbills and pine grosbeaks are popping up all over - Moscow, Spokane, Tri-Cities, and even Othello. White-winged crossbills love spruce cones and although none have been spotted yet in Walla Walla, they could be here. So be on the lookout for them in your neighborhood trees - and let me know if you see them.

I'm looking forward to hearing from you in February about the birds you are seeing. Please call me at 525-2963 or email me at [housewren@blumtn.org](mailto:housewren@blumtn.org).

*Ginger Shoemake*

#### **Board of Directors**

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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

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