



The Magpiper

March, 2009

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March Calendar

- March 3,10,17,24,31
9:00 a.m.
Bennington Lake Walk
(weather permitting)
- March 12
7:00 p.m.
Board Meeting
219 Newell Street
- March 15
9:00 a.m. HJT Parking Lot
Field Trip: Work Party
- March 19
7:30 p.m.
Membership Meeting
Whitman College

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

Meetings

Membership Meeting: March 19, 7:30 p.m.

Gaiser Auditorium, Hall of Science, Whitman College

WILDLIFE AND THE WILD

Paul Clement is an aerospace engineer in the Puget Sound area who grew up in Richland, WA in the 1960's. During his early years he lived on the edge of the lower Columbia Basin desert where he cared for and studied behavioral patterns for hundreds of wild birds and animals. At the same time, Paul became interested in photography and soon combined the two interests. He is an avid hiker who has been photographing animals in the wild since those early years. In recent years his emphasis has been on motion and behavior. He will share many of these photos with us in what promises to be a very interesting photo essay of wildlife behavior.

Some of Paul's photographs were recently published in the book "Where the Great River Bends" that Bob Carson and Mike Denny reviewed at the November Blue Mountain Audubon meeting.

Field Trip

Sunday, March 15—9:00 a.m.

BLUEBIRD BOX WORK PARTY

Blue Mountain Audubon maintains two bluebird trails—one on the west side of Jasper Mountain Road and one south of Pomeroy. In March we will be cleaning out and repairing the boxes along Jasper Mountain Road. Bring a hammer and your work gloves if you want to help. Of course we will also do some birding while we are in the area so pack a lunch and dress warm because there may be snow. It will be important to carpool on this trip.

Call the Shoemakes if you plan to attend 525-2963.

OTHELLO SANDHILL CRANE FESTIVAL

March 20, 21, 22, 2009

The Othello Sandhill Crane Festival is a three day event that has many tours for crane viewing along with specialty tours including the Columbia National Wildlife Refuge and Lower Crab Creek birding tours. In addition, on Saturday, for a small admission price you may attend free lectures at Othello High School which serves as the festival headquarters on Saturday and Sunday. I encourage you to attend this fun event. More information is available at <http://www.othellosandhillcranefestival.org>



President's Corner

OWL PROWL(ER)

January 22, 6:30 p.m. It's dark and I'm on my way home from work. White shirt, tie, sport jacket, dark slacks and a top coat. I am walking in a residential area about two blocks from Whitman College when I hear it, the deep, rhythmic muffled hooting of a great horned owl. An unmistakable sound, and although I know great horns are in town, it's still a surprise and a treat to hear one.

This guy, I figure, is in a tall conifer in the backyard of a typical Walla Walla middle class house. I stop on the sidewalk in front of the house to listen for his next call. It's cold and I can see my breath, a gray-white cloud, in the light from the street lamp down the block. Pretty soon he calls again, letting the ladies in the neighborhood know he is available and ready for business.

I won't say that great horned owls are my favorite bird, but ya gotta like a bird that is big enough and mean enough and ruthless enough to pick off the neighbor's cat and eat it. That and the fact that they are found everywhere. Look at the distribution map for great horns in your Sibley. They reside, year round, in almost all of North America. Even starlings and rock doves (aka pigeons) are not as widely distributed. And starlings and pigeons don't eat cats. And when you see a great horn you know what you're looking at. None of this confusing a Swainson's hawk for a red tail or a Ferruginous or a rough-legged. (Okay, so maybe talented birders can tell them apart at a quick glance. But I'm not a talented birder.) Give me a big kick-ass bird with nobody close in size or silhouette, a bird that I can positively identify, and I'm happy. Yeah, I really like great horned owls.

So when I heard this guy calling while I trudged home from work, I had to get a look at him. Listening to his hoo hoo hoo hoo was not enough. I wanted to see this urban avian doomsday machine. Trouble is, the folks who own the house in whose backyard this owl was perched were home. The lights were on and through the front window I could see their large screen TV, its blue light flickering out culture for Mr. and Mrs. Middle-America.

Sure, I could knock on their door, introduce myself, dressed as I was, in the dark of night, and ask if I could traipse around in their backyard looking for an owl. I don't think so. Better to quietly slink around

the house, locate Mr. Big, then make a dignified exit. Except it didn't happen this way.

First, they had a motion sensor light on their side door. Second, they had a schiz-o yappy dog who, although inside, went into full-bark attack mode when he heard, or saw, or sensed someone or something in their side yard. Third, Mr. Middle-America was a Clint Eastwood make-my-day kind of guy who wasn't content to just look out the window and find out what set off his motion light and his dog.

No, of all the houses on all the streets in Walla Walla, I had to pick one owned, occupied and protected by a stalwart of the NRA. By this time I'm in the backyard, out of the glare of the motion light, hidden in the dark. Mr. Middle-America is on the side porch, his right hand shading his eyes, the better to see what or who had invaded his turf. Yappy dog is on the porch, barking his damned head off. "Who's there?" yells the guy. "I've got a gun," he warns. Yappy dog is still in full throat attack mode.

I'm quickly, but quietly, heading for the far back corner of the lawn, trying to learn if there is a fence and, if so, can I jump or climb over it. In the dark. Wearing a tie and a top coat. Not to mention wing-tipped shoes. (Question: what's the difference between a vulture and a lawyer? Removal wing tips.)

At this moment the owl lets out a particularly loud call. And maybe it sounded so because I was, at this point, pretty much right below him. But Mr. Middle-America was apparently not a birder or not familiar with the call of a great horned owl coming from his backyard. "Alice," he yelled, turning back into the house. "Did you hear that? There's something big in our backyard, sounds like it's up in the pine tree. Get my gun, I'm gonna call the cops."

Which is the last thing I heard before I pushed through the arborvitae hedge that paralleled the alley behind the house and walked, very rapidly, toward Isaacs and then home. For the next week or so I altered my usual route home. But still, the pull of a great horned owl is pretty strong, so it wasn't too long before I was back on the same street, dressed pretty much the same, standing in front of the same house at about the same time, waiting. And waiting. And waiting. But no deep, rhythmic muffled hooting. The cat killer had moved on. His reaction to the dog and the gun and the cops was, I guess, pretty much the same as mine.

All considered, it was, I have concluded, a memorable encounter. I didn't get shot or arrested. And the tear in the corner of my top coat has been repaired. But I didn't get to see the owl. Too busy looking at other stuff, I guess. But I know they are out there. Big kick-ass birds just waiting to pick off unsuspecting cats. No wonder I so like great horned owls.

Highlight on Education

BIRD BOOKS FOR SCIENCE EDUCATION

Blue Mountain Audubon, along with other eastern Washington Audubon chapters, is donating several hundred copies of the recently published "*Birds of the Inland Northwest and Northern Rockies*" by Mike Denny, Harry Nehls and Dave Trochlell to fourth and fifth grade classrooms in eastern Washington. Publisher R. W. Morse of Olympia generously made these books available to Audubon chapters for just the shipping cost.

We are donating the books for use in the classrooms of local schools in Walla Walla, Columbia and Asotin Counties. The school districts receiving the books will be Touchet, Dixie, Waitsburg, Dayton, Prescott, Pomeroy, Star, Starbuck, Clarkston, and Walla Walla.

In the Walla Walla Public Schools, the books will become part of the fourth grade science curriculum on habitat. In this unit they look at how a habitat meets the survival needs of birds and other organisms, how physical and behavioral characteristics help an organism survive in its habitat, and the difference between biomes and habitats. The books will be one of the tools used in the habitat unit.

Peggy Willcuts will distribute the remaining books at science workshops she facilitates for teachers. Peggy helped develop the current curriculum used in teaching science at the elementary and middle school level in the Walla Walla Public Schools. She now works with LASER (Science Education Reform) to assist school districts with science programs. The books will hopefully be used by the other districts mentioned in their science curriculums.

GREEN HOUR

The National Wildlife Federation

As a society, we are raising the first generation of Americans to grow up disconnected from nature. That's the bad news. The good news is that the steps that got us here are easily traced, and the way to work toward reversing them is clear. National Wildlife Federation recommends that children get at least one hour of unstructured play time each day in green spaces to explore, imagine and discover nature. NWF's innovative program, Green Hour, will show you how to help a special child in your life do just that. Visit www.GreenHour.org to get started!

Bird of the Month

GREAT BLUE HERON *Ardea herodias*



Size: 46 inches

Wingspan: 72 inches

Photo by Rodger Shoemaker

The largest and most widespread heron in North America, the great blue heron can be found from ocean shorelines to the edge of small inland ponds and streams. Great blue herons are a large, blue-gray bird with long legs, a "S" shaped neck, and a long thick bill. Adults have a whitish face, pale crown, and long black head plumes. Juveniles have a dark crown and considerable streaking on fore neck and breast. Their call is a deep hoarse croak. Their primary food is small fish, but they also eat amphibians, reptiles, birds and small mammals. Great blue herons forage by walking slowly and stabbing their prey with quick lunges of the bill. They locate their prey by sight, generally swallow it whole, and have even been known to choke on prey that is too large to swallow.

They usually nest in colonies, high in the treetops close to rivers, lakes or other wetlands. The nest is a bulky stick platform and may be reused from year to year. The female lays 3-6 eggs and only one brood is raised each year. However, if a nest is abandoned or destroyed, the female may lay a replacement clutch. Reproduction is negatively affected by human disturbance, especially during the beginning of nesting so it is important to observe a nesting colony from a distance. Both parents feed the young at the nest. Eggs are incubated approximately 38 days and hatch over a period of several days.

Great blue herons are common in the Walla Walla Valley and are year-round residents of the county. They can be found spearing fish in Mill Creek, foraging in fields for rodents in winter, and occasionally raiding neighborhood fish ponds. There are several small nesting colonies along rivers and streams in the county. If you see a large bird flying overhead with a deep wingbeat, take time to observe this fascinating bird, or spend a few minutes watching it hunt the next time you are out birding.

Conservation

GREAT CONSERVATION IDEAS MADE REAL

By Mike Denny, BMAS Conservation Chair

Just some thoughts on the future and what will be coming to a road near you. There are so many exciting things coming with time that we cannot even imagine. There is the doctor (PhD) at MIT that has figured out how to follow through on Mr. Teslas' idea of moving electricity through the air. WOW what a breakthrough!

- That means that the need for electrical transmission would greatly change.
- That means that all the electrical lines that currently string across and obstruct our views and lives would be gone.
- That means that electrical cars would have constant power and would never need to plug in to charge up.
- That means that bird deaths from power line strikes would greatly diminish.
- That means that electricity production would change and that electricity would be available for all folks at lower rates.

Shocking as this seems the chances are very good that in the next little while we will see this come to pass. I hope each of you is ready for this and many other changes that will be here very soon. The country of the earth will be amazed by the future.

CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS BIRDS

Excerpts from Audubon Washington, Feb. 10, 2009

Like canaries in coal mines, birds across America are giving early warning signs of what climate change portends for our landscapes and, ultimately, ourselves, according to new reports issued today by the National Audubon Society and Audubon Washington.

The overall study by Audubon scientists examines 40 years of avian data and shows that nearly 60% of species that winter in North America have moved northward or inland (sometimes by hundreds of miles) most likely in response to climate change.

The most direct effects of climate change are changes in precipitation and temperature, which in turn drive alterations of entire ecosystems. Birds shift their ranges to find food, shelter, nesting areas, and other conditions necessary for survival. Birds most at risk from habitat loss are those specialized in habitat needs (those restricted to islands, alpine zones or coastal beaches for critical parts of their life cycles.)

GOBBLING GOATS HELP RESTORATION PROJECT ON THE SKAGIT RIVER

Excerpts from Washington Wildlands

The Nature Conservancy is employing a unique workforce to help restore a cottonwood forest along the lower Skagit River. When it comes to removing invasive blackberry plants on rough terrain, an industrious goat will outperform bulky mowing equipment any day.

The Conservancy is relying on a group of 30 goats from a local farm to gobble their way through five acres of blackberries, bramble and thorns in an effort to restore the landscape to its natural habitat.

When faced with an impenetrable eight foot wall of invasive blackberries, Conservancy personnel weren't sure how to proceed. The invasive Himalayan blackberries had overrun 10 of the forest's 40 acres on a piece of land the Conservancy purchased in 2006.

Using goats to remove weeds is becoming an increasingly popular technique in the Northwest. Goats are highly skilled in their craft:

- They can quickly chomp through invasive leafy plants like blackberries
- Their mouths are particularly hard and aren't bothered by prickly thorns
- Their four-chambered stomachs digest seeds well enough to prevent future growth

Goats are also prized for their agility. They can squiggle into small areas that mowers and trucks can't reach and they don't require the same kinds of permits as large construction vehicles. The method is also becoming popular with "green" developers. Goats don't require gasoline, are chemical-free, and because they are eating the product there is minimal clean-up involved.

Once the goats successfully clear the area, a team of volunteers will restore the land to its natural habitat. This fall they will replace the blackberries with 3-year old spruce and western red cedar trees. The spruce and cedar will mature beneath the canopy of cottonwood trees and will eventually replace them as the dominant species. Cottonwood trees will flourish along the river's edge, where they naturally thrive. Over the next few years, balance between cottonwood and conifer trees will be restored. Native shrubs will re-seed and create natural ground cover. The new trees and brush will provide shade and safe cover for migrating songbirds, mammals passing through, and fish in the nearby river.

Miscellaneous

BIRD MIGRATION

Excerpts from Birder's World Field of View

Migratory songbirds wearing tiny “backpacks” consisting of a data chip encased in clear plastic recently revealed new information about their seasonal voyages between North and South America. Researchers from Canada and the United Kingdom knew that birds fly faster on their northward journey, but they were very surprised at just how fast some of them made the trip. One purple martin flew 4,650 miles from its wintering grounds in Brazil to its breeding site in Pennsylvania in 13 days. This same bird took 43 days to reach Brazil during fall migration. Overall, migration rates were two to six times more rapid in spring than in fall. Prolonged stopovers were also common during fall migration.

Electronic geolocators were fitted on fourteen wood thrushes and twenty purple martins in the spring of 2007. During the summer of 2008, the scientists recaptured five thrushes and two martins and retrieved their geolocators. Then they reconstructed the individual migration routes and wintering locations. The study also uncovered information that the thrushes all wintered in a narrow band in eastern Honduras or Nicaragua; whereas the martins used multiple roosts in winter. In 2008 more data transmitters were attached to thirty-five wood thrushes and twenty purple martins. That data should be available for review in the spring.

While scientists have been able to monitor large birds in the past, that equipment has been too large for songbirds. New, smaller devices are being developed that soon will be available to help track more species. The importance of the research is not only to protect the at-risk species but also to gauge environmental concerns. In the past, researchers didn't know where the songbirds were going in the winter—they would just disappear and then come back in the spring. Now they will have access to their wintering areas so they can predict the impact of tropical habitat loss and climate change.

Beavers and Migratory Songbirds

Some people consider beavers pests, but for several species of migratory songbirds, particularly those in the semi-arid West, beavers are important allies creating ponds and encouraging growth of streamside vegetation—all vital to the survival of migratory birds. *Wildlife Conservation Society*

Books

PRISCILLA'S PICKS

One Day on Beetle Rock by Sally Carrighar

The place is Beetle Rock in Sequoia National Park. The time is a day in June, the high tide of the animal year. The characters are a weasel, a sierra grouse, a chickaree, a black bear, a lizard, a coyote, a deer mouse, a Steller's jay and a mule deer. The day begins with the weasel's furious pre-dawn hunt and closes with the tiny song of the deer mouse. Combining a novelist's power with a naturalist's knowledge, the author unfolds a drama of adventure and survival, life and death.

These are stories of the adventures of animals, but with a difference—the stories are of actual animals in an actual place, as the author has observed them. She has watched carefully and reported truthfully. The tales are fiction, but fiction closely parallel with fact. The book was written in 1944, but it continues to endure. It is a book of rare distinction, a record of objective facts, of deep feeling without sentimentality, and intense and subtle perception expressed in beauty. It has a quality of enchantment and is sure to be a book you will want to read and share with others for years to come.

Flights of Fancy by Peter Tate

This book is a beautifully illustrated guide to the fascinating myths, legends and bizarre superstitions that surround the world's best-loved birds. There is an astonishingly large and varied body of folklore that has grown up around birds. Some of the stories that have been handed down through the generations are quite straightforward, others are amazingly elaborate or bizarre. They can be found in all parts of the world, but what they all show is just how fascinated mankind has always been by birds. On the one hand birds are very familiar, but on the other hand they also inhabit a completely different realm from our own—one that we land-bound creatures can only imagine and wonder at. Therefore it is not surprising that they have provided such a rich source of speculation and myth-making.

What the author has tried to do in this book is not to attempt an exhaustive survey of traditional beliefs about birds but to select the stories that most intrigued him in the course of a lifetime's study. Many of the stories in the book were almost certainly told just for fun originally. Some, no doubt, were old people's desperate desire to control the present or foretell the future through natural signs, and at least one can lay good claim to having a footnote in history.

In the Field

Both Sharon Cline and Shirley Muse saw **varied thrushes** the end of January. Shirley had two in her back yard and Sharon saw them from her office downtown in the trees.



Jon Lundak and Mary-Eileen Gallaher found a **great grey owl** at Bennington Lake on February 1. Jon was able to get this fantastic photo. The owl was last seen February 11.

Pine grosbeaks continued to be around in February. Joe and Carolyn Corvino and I saw eight of them perched in some trees along South Fork Coppei Creek Road on February 1.

While searching for the great grey owl on February 2, MerryLynn Denny saw a **bald eagle** flying over Bennington Lake. I had several other people report seeing it at the lake throughout the month.

Hank and Judy Koepfle enjoyed watching many **robins** eating fruits from the persimmon tree in their yard on February 4.

February 7 was the **Waterfowl and Gulls Field Trip** led by Mike and MerryLynn Denny. The Photo Club joined us on the trip to the Columbia and Snake Rivers



where we found 30 species of waterfowl and six species of gulls. Highlights of the trip were **red-breasted mergansers**, **cackling geese**, **tundra swans**,

hooded mergansers, **Pacific loon**, **Barrow's goldeneyes** and a **glaucous gull**. We also saw numerous **bald eagles** and a **merlin**.

“Chasing” is a term used when a rare bird is found and birders drive long distances to see the bird. Mike and MerryLynn do this frequently, but most of us stay at home and admire photos on the internet instead. However, on February 8, Mike and MerryLynn, Joe and Carolyn Corvino, Priscilla Dauble, George Jameson and I drove up to the Waterville Plateau to “chase” a **northern hawk owl** that was there. We were rewarded with wonderful views of this magnificent bird. It was a long day, but certainly worth the drive, both for the bird and the beautiful scenery we encountered on the trip.



Photo by George Jameson

The spring birds are returning: Tim Parker found two **mountain bluebirds** and a **Say's phoebe** along Hatch Grade on February 8.

While doing field work on February 9, Mike Denny ran across a flock of **evening grosbeaks** on Smith Springs Road.

Our walking group found two **killdeer** at Bennington Lake on February 10. We also saw an immature **bald eagle** sitting in the cottonwoods. Both the **black-capped chickadees** and the **Bewick's wren** were singing their spring song.

On February 12, Shirley was treated to a rare visit by a **common redpoll**. It found a seed cake she had hanging in her trumpet vine on her front porch. On February 21 she had two **golden-crowned kinglets** in her yard.

Mike and MerryLynn reported the first **white-fronted geese** of the spring on February 14. There were about 35 of them at mile post 300 along Highway 12. In the next month their numbers should increase as they stop over on their way north to their nesting grounds. A good place to see them is at Casey Pond. Other birds of note seen along the Columbia River were 4 **red-breasted mergansers**, 2 **mew gulls**, a **glaucous gull**, 52 **bald eagles**, and 13 **tundra swans**.

At McNary NWR headquarters in Burbank there were about 3000 **cackling geese** in with approximately 5000 **canada geese**. This is a good opportunity to see the difference in the two species.

It was time again for the Dennys and the Shoemakes to drive our raptor route on February 15. The day began ominously with snow and howling winds along Couse Creek Road. Birds were generally scarce east of Milton-Freewater, but once we drove west of town things picked up. At the feed lot on Hudson's Bay Road, we watched a **sub-adult bald eagle** in the top of a conifer that was scrutinizing a flock of chickens in the road. Our total counts this year have been consistent at a little over 200 birds, with the majority of those being **red-tailed hawks**. Of the four **great horned owls** we saw, three of them were on nests. Interestingly, many of the red-tailed hawks were also on or near nests.



Photo by
George Jameson

Priscilla Dauble had four **varied thrushes** in her yard on February 17. She also has had two **downy woodpeckers** and a **red-breasted nuthatch** visiting her feeders.

February is over, and hopefully spring is just around the corner. I enjoy watching the juncos, pine siskins and finches in my yard, but I'm ready to see something new! March begins migration and the return of our summer nesting birds. The first of these to arrive are the swallows—tree swallows, violet green swallows and cliff swallows come in March. Barn swallows arrive in early April and finally the bank swallows appear. March is also the time to be on the lookout for birds flying through our area on their way to their nesting grounds - turkey vultures, sandhill cranes and bluebirds - to mention a few. For more information on arrival dates of our summer birds go to the "Local Birding Information" link on the Blue Mountain Audubon website www.blumtn.org

Let me know what new birds you are seeing in your yard and in the field. Call me at [525-2963](tel:525-2963) or email your sightings to housewren@blumtn.org.

Ginger Shoemake

ADVICE FOR GOOD BIRDING

Courtesy of Black Hills Audubon Society

1. There are two good times to study birds. One is at home before a trip, reading the books and working out identification schemes, so you'll know what to look for. The second time is in the field, looking at the bird while someone else looks at the book and tells you what to look for.
2. Walk and talk softly. Bird walks are good time for camaraderie—but not for socializing.
3. Stop a lot. Wait, Watch and listen. Let the birds come to you or pish them out.
4. Don't suddenly loom into a new space. When approaching a point where you'll be exposed in a new space, stop, then move into it slowly, watching carefully before you're actually in it.
5. Know where your binoculars are focused. Keep them focused at the right distance for the birds you're likely to be seeing.
6. Look at a place first with your eyes, then raise the binoculars into your line of sight.
7. Pick out a landmark by the bird before you look through your binoculars.
8. If you can't find a rapidly moving bird in your binoculars, lower your binoculars a little and look again.
9. When watching small birds or skittish ones, keep your binoculars high, near your eyes, so you won't have to make sudden big moves.
10. If you are fooled by a "leaf bird" don't spend more time looking at it.
11. A swinging branch is more like to be a spot that a bird has just left than a spot where it has landed.
12. Listen. Use your ears to locate birds.

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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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