

Blue Mountain Audubon Society

The Magpiper

December, 2009

December Calendar

December 10

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

December 19

Christmas Bird Count
7:30 a.m. HJT
Wrap up—5:30 p.m.

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:

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

Walla Walla Christmas Bird Count

Saturday, December 19 - 7:30 a.m.

Harper Joy Parking Lot

From December 14, 2009 through January 5, 2010, tens of thousands of volunteers throughout the Americas will take part in an 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".

Here in Walla Walla we will congregate at 7:30 a.m. in the Harper Joy parking lot on the Whitman College campus where Mike and MerryLynn Denny, leaders of our Christmas Count, will assign us an area to cover. We are to identify and 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. If you are not able to participate, you can count birds in your own yard and call in your findings to the Dennys at the end of the day. (529-0080)

At 5:30 we will reconvene at the home of Cory and Shirley Muse (219 Newell) for soup and desserts. After supper, each group will go over the list of birds they have seen during the day. From these lists an official 2009 Walla Walla Christmas Bird Count list will be compiled. This is a really fun event - don't miss it!

Call Mike or MerryLynn Denny at 529-0080 if you plan to participate.



Tom and George getting ready to brave the cold—2008 CBC



President's Corner

ON BEING DON DAVIS' DOG (Part One)

*By Nora the Schnauzer as told to BMAS
President Tom Scribner*

As the object of considerable media attention, I think it only fair that I be able to present my side of the story. I am thankful to the editor of the *Magpiper* for giving me an opportunity to let you know, from my perspective, what it means and feels like to be Don Davis' dog.

It ain't all that it is cracked up to be. Oh, sure, Don is a loving guy and I get to go to lots of neat places and meet lots of people. But still, being Don Davis' dog is not always a bed of roses. First, you get absolutely no privacy. If I want to roll around in the rotting carcass of a dead animal or eat deer manure (don't knock it if you haven't tried it), there it is in the pages of the U-B. To hear Don tell it, you'd think I was sick or weird or who knows what, when all I wanna do is act like any other dog. But no, Nora the Schnauzer is apparently held to a higher standard, and everybody's gotta know everything I do.

Second, a little exercise is okay, but this man's go-go-go obsession is really, really, really tiring. If there is a hill, we gotta climb it; a trail, we gotta hike it; a stream, we gotta wade it. And we aren't talking here about good weather climbs, or hikes, or whatever. Oh, no, not good ol' Donny boy. Rain, cold, gale winds, the worse the weather the more he wants to be out there doing his thing.

Except his thing is never solo. Everywhere he goes, yep, I go. Do you have any idea how small I am relative to long-legged Don? Granted, he ain't the biggest guy on the block, but my legs ain't nothing compared to his. Ever see a picture of me in the U-B when I was just striding along, setting my own pace, taking time to smell the roses? You never have, and you never will. Cuz that idiot is all fast twitch muscle and an inability to take it easy. The pictures you see of me are Nora the Blur, or Nora with her ears flopping because she is running hard to keep up, at least when I'm not crashed trailside overcome with fatigue. I gotta run all-out to keep up with Don, even when he's carrying a loaded pack. Just once, I'd like to pick the route and set the pace. Ain't happened yet, and it probably never will.

Then, number three, there is his obsession with gear. Don the techie cannot just sleep in a tent in a sleeping bag. Oh no, it's gotta be an REI 4.5 lb rip stop nylon,

external pole, mountaineer tent, and a Cabela's down-filled, high loft, modified mummy bag, with two-way $\frac{3}{4}$ zipper. Not to mention his whisper-light Everest polar camp stove and his L.L. Bean hi-low all-weather constant indoor/outdoor thermometer. The man drives me crazy. All I wanna do, after a day worn to a frazzle, is crash on the ground and sleep. But, no, Don's gotta go through his gear naming ritual, extolling the virtues of this or that ad nauseum. Enough, already, with the gear thing.

Fourth is ticks. I have had it with serving as Don's official tick-o-meter. Every year come April it's "Let's make Nora run through the brush to see how many ticks she can pick up." Which takes me back to complaint number one and my lack of privacy. How would you like it if the ticks in your ear, or under your leg, or on your stomach, had to be the topic of a U-B story? Worse, he and she-who-must-be-obeyed get giggly stupid every time they hold me down and do their tick counting and extraction exercise on poor little me. "Oh, look," giggle, giggle, "there's another one way inside Nora's ear." Giggle, giggle. "Give me the tweezers and hold Nora down." Giggle, giggle. I tell ya, one more spring like last spring, and somebody (and it ain't gonna be me) will be wearing teeth marks on his arm.

Fifth, granted I am cute, and people find me adorable, but what's with all the pictures? Enough is enough. If he told me he was going to snap another photo and gave me time to get ready or present my best side, maybe I could handle it. But we have hundreds, no, thousands, of candid-camera pictures of me, tired, wet, cold, looking cross-eyed, sleeping with my mouth hanging open, rolling around in the rotting carcass of a dead animal, all kinds of less-than-flattering photos. And I do not get to say which ones appear in the U-B. Maybe I should get an agent.

Just once I'd like to take a picture of what Natty Bumpo Davis looks like when he crawls out of his tent in the morning. Let's see how he'd like to be scrutinized by thousands of U-B reader eyes when he doesn't look his best. Morning hair is one thing, but Mrs. Davis' son is a thing to behold after spending a night on the ground in the wilderness. And the noises he makes. There are more, many more, trust me on this, reasons why being Don Davis' dog is not the best gig in town. Next month I will tell you more. Then you can decide if being Don's dog is worth it.

[Where to Find Raptors in Walla Walla County](#)

During the winter months the Walla Walla Valley has a variety of raptors. Many are residents nesting birds, but many are here only during the cold months and nest further north. Below is a guide to where some of the birds of prey can be found.

Red-tailed hawk: Since this species' primary food source is rodents, a good place to look for them is near alfalfa fields. Southwest of Lowden along Frog Hollow Road has proven to be a good place to search. Also, the loop south of Frog Hollow along McDonald Road, across the top of the Williams feedlot, and down Short Road is another reliable area. There can be a large number of birds in a relatively small area along these roads so you have a chance to study the varieties in their plumage.

Rough-legged hawk: This species also relies on rodents as it's food source, but they seem to prefer more open terrain, perhaps more closely resembling the tundra where they nest. They are fairly easy to find northwest of Prescott on Ayer's Road which goes north from Highway 124 to Clyde, Lower Monumental Dam or Ayer's boat basin.

Prairie Falcon: Not as easy to find, but if you are persistent you will find one on Byrnes Road, southwest of Touchet. Byrnes Road is the road that goes left just west of Touchet. Take the McDole Road loop off Byrnes Road also for more chances to see the falcon. Red-tailed hawks and rough-legged hawks can also be found on these two roads. A scope is handy because there are many utility poles not accessible by vehicle where birds perch.

Bald Eagle: Look for them along the Columbia River. There is often one sitting in the trees along Highway 12 at Casey Pond as well as in trees along the river between Wallula and Casey Pond. They can also be found flying over the "poop piles" north of Boise Cascade and roosting along the Columbia River at Two Rivers HMU.

Sharp-shinned hawk and Cooper's hawk: Since these species rely on small birds as their primary food source, the best place to find them is in your backyard, especially if you feed birds. Look for them hiding in the trees and shrubs waiting to ambush a bird at the feeder, or sitting on a brush pile waiting for an unsuspecting sparrow to pop up.

I hope you will all get out there and enjoy the wide variety of birds of prey we have in the valley.

[Bird of the Month](#)

RED-TAILED HAWK *Buteo jamaicensis*



Size: 19 inches

Wing span: 49 inches

Description: Extremely variable in color. A "typical" bird has a dark head, white chest with a dark belly band, a reddish upper tail, and dark patches on the leading edge of the underwing. Sexes are similar.

Red-tailed hawks breed throughout North America, and are the most common raptor in the Walla Walla area. However, they can also be the most confusing because there are so many variations in color. Immature birds are much paler and lack the reddish tail. Instead, their tail is finely barred blackish to grey/brown. All ages have a dark leading edge on the underwing so this is one of the most reliable characteristics to look for. To make it more confusing, there are northern birds that winter here, most of which are darker in color. The dark morph red-tail appears to be almost black with a brick red tail. In contrast, a Harlan's red-tailed hawk has blackish body plumage with a white streaks across the breast and a pale, finely barred tail.



Dark-morph red-tailed hawk

Red-tailed hawks prey on rodents. They are commonly seen soaring or perched overlooking an open area. Their scream is often featured in the background of adventure movies to give a sense of

wilderness, and is often inaccurately used for the bald eagle, which has a much less robust cry. They reach sexual maturity at two year of age and are monogamous. Their life span is 12-20 years. The same nesting territory may be defended by the pair for years. (on our raptor route this month, we noticed several pairs already defending their nest, probably from great horned owls who nest earlier and frequently use red-tailed hawk nests). Clutch size of 1-3 eggs is laid in late March or early April at two day intervals. Incubation is primarily by the female and lasts from 28-35 days. The female broods the nestlings while the male provides most of the food. After 42-26 days the young birds begin to leave the nest on short flights. Fledging last up to 10 weeks, during which the young learn to fly and hunt.

Conservation

SOME WIND DRIVEN WATER THOUGHTS

By Mike Denny, BMAS Conservation Chair

Sunday: November 22, 2009

After sitting here feeling, listening to and watching this day's howling wind storm and observing that little to no precipitation fell, my thoughts turned once again to water, fresh water and how very valuable it is.

Fresh clean water and its use are going to become the most important issue for mankind in the very near future. With 6.2 billion people on earth and only 0.6% of the 3% of this world's fresh water available to mankind for daily use, one must consider where and how we use water. Many questions come to mind such as can we allow the constant pollution of a large percentage of this fresh water any longer? Are we going to have to become very picky about where certain crops are raised? Such as raising rice, corn, fruit and alfalfa in a desert where 5X the water is needed than would be in more temperate zones. Will we be forced to limit human populations in some areas due to the limited water available? Will those that have water rights decide where and when fresh water is used and at what price? Or will governments simply nullify water rights in favor of urban water needs? How will our personal freedoms be impacted due to water shortages?

So this causes each of us to assess how we use water right now and what we can do to conserve and protect this extremely valuable resource. Things like washing your car pollutes clean fresh water with all kinds of chemicals from your car along with all the soap applied. In Walla Walla, College Place and all the other communities in this valley this run off car wash water goes directly into a stream or river. With hundreds of cars washed on any warm summer day that adds up. So consider an automated car wash as all the water from these facilities goes into and through the town's sewage waste water treatment plant. Consider washing your autos only a few times a summer and less in the winter.

Water conservation must become an ethic, a way of life if we and future generations are to have enough clean water. Water is finite and once polluted it is lost. Is allowing the Boise Corporation to pump millions of gallons of polluted Columbia River water into our deep aquifer a good idea? How will this Columbia River water mix and pollute our deep aquifer for the future?

So as I watched this mighty wind storm blow through today I thought about water and how very little we were

getting with this passing storm front and that there are no real water rights in the natural world. Water is where it is and there are no guarantees that there will even be precipitation from year to year, but there is a guarantee that the need for fresh water will only grow as the human population keeps growing. So please do your best to live by an ethic of fresh clean water conservation. **Water is life.**

HOW THE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT HELPS BIRDS

From www.audubon.org

The data collected by observers over the past century allow researchers, conservation biologists, and other interested individuals to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America. When combined with other surveys such as the Breeding Bird Survey, it provides a picture of how the continent's bird populations have changed in time and space over the past 100 years.

The long term perspective made possible by the Christmas Bird Counts is vital for conservationists. It informs strategies to protect birds and their habitat—and helps identify environmental issues with implications for people as well. For example, local trends in bird populations can indicate habitat fragmentation or signal an immediate environmental threat, such as groundwater contamination or poisoning from improper use of pesticides.

In the 1980's CBC data documented the decline of wintering populations of the American Black Duck, after which conservation measures were put into effect to reduce hunting pressure on this species. More recently, in 2009, the data were instrumental in [Audubon's Birds & Climate Change](#) analysis which documented range shifts of bird species over time. In 2007, the data were instrumental in the development of two Audubon State of the Birds Reports—[Common Birds in Decline](#) which revealed that some of America's most beloved and familiar birds have taken a nosedive over the past forty years, and [Watch List 2007](#) which identified 178 rarer species in the continental U.S. and 39 in Hawaii that are imperiled. These three reports helped scientists and policy-makers to both identify threats to birds and habitat, and promote broad awareness of the need to address them.

Miscellaneous

GYRFALCON NEST MORE THAN 2500 YEARS OLD

From Birdwatchers Digest Nov/Dec 2009

Gyrfalcons and many other raptors are known to return to the same nest sites over long periods and many generations, but until recently nobody knew how long this activity could persist. As part of a study of 13 gyrfalcon nests in Greenland, scientists have discovered a gyrfalcon nesting site that is at least 2500 years old.

Researchers used radiocarbon dating of guano and nest debris to determine that one nest in Kangerlussuaq (in central-west Greenland) is surely more than 2500 year old. Three other nest in the area are more than 1000 years old.

PROJECT FEEDER WATCH

Sponsored by Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Bird Studies Canada

Project Feeder Watch is a winter-long survey of birds that visit feeders and backyards, nature centers, community areas, and other locales in North America. Feeder watchers periodically count the birds they see at their feeders from November through early April and send their counts to Project Feeder Watch. Feeder Watch data help scientists track broad scale movements of winter bird populations and long-term trends in bird distribution and abundance. Anyone interested in birds can participate. Feeder Watch is conducted by people of all skill levels and backgrounds.

To participate, select an area of your yard where you can count birds that come into your yard to feed. Next, select your own bird-count days—two consecutive days, preferably every two weeks. Count for as long as you like during the two days. There is a \$15 annual participation fee, which covers materials, staff support, web design, data analysis and a year-end report. Participants receive a research kit containing instructions, a resource guide to bird feeding, a tally sheet and more. U.S. participants also receive a subscription to the Lab of Ornithology's newsletter, *Bird Source*.

The season starts the second Saturday of November and runs through the first Friday of April. You may join at any time during the season. Sightings are reported to scientists at the Lab of Ornithology either over their website or on paper data forms. For more information contact Project Feeder Watch www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw

This is a great way to get to know the birds at your feeders while helping to contribute to the science and conservation of North American birds.

Books

Shadow Country by Peter Matthiessen

At home writing both fiction and non-fiction, Peter Matthiessen has reworked his three volume fictional epic about the Everglade's sugar planter and notorious outlaw E.J. Watson on the wild Florida frontier at the turn of the twentieth century. In this one volume work, Matthiessen offers a rare glimpse of the raw, untamed Everglades of the late 19th century while trying to understand the costs that accompanied the conquering of the frontier. The book is divided into three parts that recount the life of E.J. Watson from three perspectives. The first is the myth, the second a son's view, and the third Watson's own account of his life. Matthiessen is a gifted storyteller; but in addition he gives the reader a realistic view of the wildness of southwest Florida at the turn of the 20th century and touches on such topics as plume hunting, destruction of wilderness and harsh human conditions in a part of the country where survival was dependent on nature, luck and perseverance. Critics describe the book as a masterpiece—one you will surely want to add to your winter reading list.

Steller's Island by Dean Littlepage

Georg Steller, sailed to the north coast of North America on Vitus Bering's second expedition to eastern Siberia and the eastern Arctic and introduced its biological wonders to the world. While on the voyage, he was allowed to spend a few hours on Kayak Island where he catalogued more than 100 previously unknown plants. He was the only European naturalist to see the spectacled cormorant alive, and his is our one and only account of the now extinct Steller's sea cow. In accounts of the Chugach and Aleut people, Steller was the first scientist to hypothesize an Asian origin for Native Americans.

The book is an interesting account of Steller's explorations, juxtaposed with a modern journey by the author to the places Steller visited. It contains information on Pacific Northwest wildlife, but also on native people, shipwrecks, stupid explorer mistakes and more. It makes the reader realize how many species either barely survived the advent of Europeans, or didn't survive at all and reminds us how many of them are in danger again today. Steller was also an extraordinary physician whose scientific background ultimately saved the crew of the St. Peter, Bering's ship, in the face of disaster. A fascinating account of the life and contributions of the first naturalist to write an account of the Northwestern Pacific Coast. Science, natural history and Arctic exploration all in one book—one everyone should enjoy.

In the Field

On October 21, Mike Denny saw the first snow goose of the fall—off Myra Road near Ft. Walla Walla.

Several people saw tundra swans on Casey Pond on October 24. Mike and MerryLynn also saw some good birds at Two River HMU along the Columbia River including two Eurasian wigeons, a Bonaparte's gull and a Clark's grebe. They watched 40 sandhill cranes fly over while they were at McNary NWR.

There were two northern shrikes, and a Lincoln's sparrow at Bennington Lake on October 27, along with a merlin hunting the sunflower patch and all the usuals.

Halloween weekend Mike and MerryLynn traveled 1,020 miles round trip to the Coos Bay, Oregon area to see a brown booby! Now that's what I call "over the top birding". Congratulations to them—it was Mike's 400th species in Oregon and MerryLynn's 399th.

Jon Lundak took some nice photos of a downy woodpecker and a couple great horned owls at Bennington Lake on November 1. You can see them on his blog wallawallabirding.blogspot.com

On November 3, Pam Fisher took a video of an American dipper on Mill Creek near Rooks Park. Also on the creek were three common mergansers, one hooded merganser, two greater yellowlegs, wigeons, mallards and two great blue herons.

We saw a great egret at Bennington Lake on our Tuesday walk on November 3. There were also nine buffleheads, five common mergansers, a common goldeneye and three great blue herons.

Mike and MerryLynn scoured the county looking for birds with their friend John Gatchet the weekend of November 7-8. They found many birds, the most notable being three Lapland longspurs, two snow buntings, a golden eagle and a gray-crowned rosy finch north of Walla Walla.



Gray crowned rosy finch
Photo by MerryLynn Denny

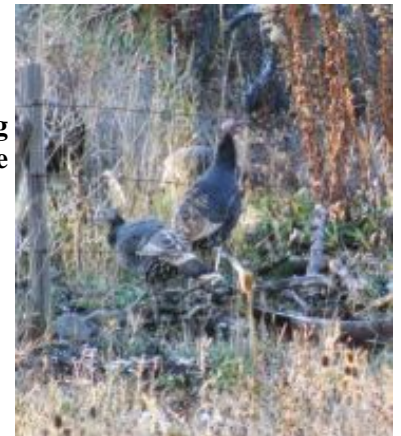
At Two Rivers HMU they saw three red-breasted mergansers and at the Wallula Grain Terminal they observed over 200 wood ducks. In addition, there were over 70 tundra swans at Casey Pond

A cedar waxwing hit Shirley Muse's window on November 9. She was able to put it in a box and keep it warm until it recovered and released.

On November 11, the Dennys and the Shoemakes did our northern Umatilla County raptor route. We found 286 raptors (mostly red-tailed hawks and American kestrels) as well as some other nice birds too including a rusty blackbird, three tundra swans, a northern shrike, and 42 Eurasian collared doves (all in two trees just north of Umapine). The red-tails were every imaginable plumage including Harlan's and dark morph.

Wild turkeys along the north fork of the Touchet River

*Photo by
Rodger Shoemake*



On November 14, Tom Scribner once again led an enthusiastic group of birders on the annual Turkey Trot Field Trip. As usual, most of the 216 wild turkeys seen were in Columbia County south of Dayton. On the way home we saw a small flock just inside the Walla Walla County line along Highway 12. Other interesting species seen were two great horned owls, several flocks of cedar waxwings, two northern shrikes, a Townsend's solitaire, a Cooper's hawk, a Harlan's red-tailed hawk and a varied thrush.

While we were searching for turkeys on November 14, Mike and MerryLynn were leading a WOS field trip "in the footsteps of Townsend". At Wallula HMU they found a very late house wren and several Wilson's snipe. A red-necked grebe was seen at the Delta and six red-breasted mergansers were on the river at Two Rivers HMU. They found a swamp sparrow at Patterson, in Benton County.

Jon Lundak was out at Bennington Lake and Rooks Park on November 14 with his camera. He saw a pileated woodpecker at Rooks Park but wasn't able to get a photo. However, he did get a nice photo of a ring-necked duck and a cedar waxwing eating a berry. Check his blog to see the photos.

Rodger and I watched a skirmish between four **magpies**, two **flickers** and an immature **sharp-shinned hawk** in our back yard on November 15. Sharpie tried to chase away the other birds, but they persisted to harass it until it finally grew tired and settled down on the brush pile in hopes of catching an unsuspecting house sparrow.

Mary Patton called me on November 15 to let me know that she had three **wild turkeys** in her yard. (wonder if they followed her home from the Turkey Trot?)

Mike and MerryLynn spotted the first **bald eagle** of the winter season at Two Rivers HMU on November 15.

We had a **bohemian waxwing** in our backyard with a small flock of **cedar waxwings** on November 21. It was nice to be able to see the differences between these two species.

Mike and MerryLynn found several **hermit thrushes** on their walk along Mill Creek on November 21. There were also large flocks of **cedar waxwings** and **robins**.

On November 25 while scraping her car window in the early morning, Sharon Cline heard rustling in the trees and looked up to see a **western screech owl**.

George Jameson watched and photographed a **Cooper's hawk** in his yard on November 25.

On November 25 Jon Lundak went out to Bennington Lake with his camera. Among the birds he photographed was this **ring-necked pheasant** that followed him down the trail for some time after getting its picture taken.



I saw a **winter wren** on a walk along Mill Creek on November 28. As I was leaving Rooks Park, the **great egret** circled and landed in the pond.

Mike and MerryLynn drove down to John Day Dam on November 29. They saw two **lesser black-backed gulls** and a **black-legged kittiwake** -- both rare birds for this area. They also saw a **peregrine falcon** on the dam.

Rodger and I drove up to Little Goose Dam to look for **gray-crowned rosy finches** on November 29. We found 20 of them on the cliffs along the river. We also saw a **canyon wren** and a **great-horned owl** in the same general area. Let me know what you are seeing in December. [525-2963](tel:525-2963) or housewren@blumtn.org.

FEEDING BIRDS IN THE WINTER

A bird feeder and a source of fresh water can bring hours of enjoyment to your yard in the winter months while providing birds food they may not be able to find during the cold months.

What to buy? If you want only one feeder, my recommendation is to get a tube feeder and fill it with black-oiled sunflower seeds. Also, thistle seed and feeders, platform feeders and ground feeders using a mixture of **white** millet, corn and sunflower seeds, and suet feeders all work well. Avoid inexpensive bird seed because it is mostly **red** millet that most birds don't like. Hulled sunflower seeds also works well but tends to be more expensive. Northwest Feed and Seed and L&G Ranch Supply have a wide variety of seed and suet feeders.

Maintenance

Keep feeders and birdbaths clean.

Rake and discard seed debris and bird droppings from under feeders.

Move feeders around to avoid debris buildup.

Temporarily remove feeders if you find sick birds at your feeders.

WATER CONSERVATION TIP

Capture tap water. While you wait for hot water to come down the pipes, catch the flow in a watering can to use later on house plants or your garden. Saves 200 to 300 gallons per month.

Board of Directors

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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: _____

Address: _____

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