



The Magpiper

February 2010

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February Calendar

February 11

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

February 18

Membership meeting
7:30 p.m.
Whitman College

February 20

Field trip—Waterfowl
9:00 a.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 Shoemaker at 525-2963 or housewren@blumtn.org

Meetings

Membership Meeting: February 18—7:30 p.m.

Gaiser Auditorium, Hall of Science, Whitman College

PROGRAM: PATAGONIA and ACONCAGUA

Bob Carson, Whitman College Professor of Geology and Environmental Studies, will once again take us on a geological travelogue—this time to South America.

In January, 2009 Bob traveled with thirteen Whitman College students to Punta Arenas and Santiago to study the natural history of the southern Andes while backpacking and mountaineering. They hiked in Torres del Paine National Park, visited the Puerto Moreno and Torre Glaciers, half circled Monte Fitz Roy and Cerro Torre, and spent six days ascending Cerro Bonete (elevation 16,430 feet).

Fitz Roy massif, lake and students



Field Trips

WATERFOWL

Saturday, February 20—9:00 a.m.

February is a good month to go out looking for waterfowl that winter along the Columbia and Snake Rivers. Canvasback, merganser, grebe, goldeneye, scaup, swans and geese are some of the species that could be seen. There is also a good possibility of seeing bald eagles that winter along Highway 12 north of Boise Cascade. George Jameson will lead this fun trip, so put it on your calendar and join him for a rewarding day of birding in the western part of Walla Walla County. Bring a lunch, your binoculars and a scope if you have one. Call George if you plan to attend 526-4609.



President's Corner

BIRDING OLYMPICS

By *BMAS President, Tom Scribner*

I don't know about you, but I am getting pre-Winter Olympics goose bumps. In a matter of weeks, I am going to be able to get my much needed fill of televised winter sports. Just think of it, 24/7 curling, cross-country skiing, short track oval speed skating. I live for this stuff. Ski jumping, biathlon, snowboard slalom racing. Bring it on. I've got an extra case of brewski cooling in the fridge and at least six big bags of potato chips just begging to be devoured. There is only one thing that detracts from my enjoyment of this quadrennial athletic extravaganza. After two weeks of flat screen, high definition color and excitement, it'll all be over. Gone. Finished. Off the air and out of my life. Then what? How ya gonna keep me stuck to my couch after the closing ceremonies?

Which got me thinking. There must be other sporting events that lend themselves to Olympic-hype stature. I mean, if pushing a polished round stone across the ice while guys with brooms sweep a path for it can hold the attention of millions, surely there must be other sports worthy of corporate sponsors and national xenophobia. Then it hit me. Birding! Why not a Birding Olympics? Think about it. Millions of people, all over the world, look at birds. And don't tell me it ain't competitive. Big days. Life lists. Yearly totals. We don't keep track of that stuff for our health. Hell no. We wanna see more birds than the other guy, or gal. So, let's acknowledge the obvious and get it on. Let's have a Birding Olympics. We could do it annually, alternating from continent to continent. And this would not be a one event competition. Oh no. Birding has multiple dimensions, each of which could be a stand-alone event.

We start with the obvious. How many **different species** can you see/ identify in a given period of time. Teams from competing countries would be limited to a specific geographical area for a set amount of time and would record all the different species seen. No subjective judge scoring here. No, sir. Just a flat out objective counting up of who saw what. Granted, the honor system would apply, cuz who is going to know or be able to verify if a certain team saw a certain bird? But this is Olympic competition. Nobody is gonna cheat, right?

And how about **birdsong birding**? Put blindfolds on the participants and plunk them down wherever to

listen for and identify as many different species as possible. For added excitement, let the competitors, blindfolded mind you, wander wherever within a given area. Think of the suspense, watching blindfolded birders walk into trees, or over cliffs, or into the path of a hungry predator - - or speeding vehicle.

My favorite would be the **phishing competition**. See who could call in the most birds by puckering-up and sounding like a drunk trying to whistle. I have been birding with Mike Denney who would be a gold medal contender in this competition for sure. I have seen birds, lots of birds, fly in from far distances to drop at his feet, begging to be identified. On the other end of the phishing continuum is me. I phish and the birds hunker down or sneak away, never to be seen. Except once, a spotted towhee (a species that is probably more favorably disposed to respond to phishing than any other) comes shooting out of a brushy copse, land on an exposed branch, and jerk his head from side to side repeatedly, looking for whatever it was that made that horrible sound. Granted, he didn't speak, but the expression on his little towhee face just had to mean, "What the hell is that noise?"

Sure, competitors from countries without a lot of birds (Greenland and Iceland, maybe) would be at a competitive disadvantage. Sorta like the Jamaican bobsled team. But that would only serve to give us an appealing underdog to root for. The team from China, where they have eaten all their wild birds, maybe wouldn't have a bunch of people pulling for them (outside of China, of course), but for the sake of national pride they would want to win as many medals as possible.

Since not all countries have the same common names for various species, Latin names would have to be used. Which would add a certain educational cache to the whole undertaking. Latin, as a subject to be taught in school, would make a comeback. And the comedy aspect of the Latin thing should not be overlooked. Some Latin names, ya gotta admit, are kinda funny. And sometimes dead-on correct at capturing the character and reputation of a bird. My favorite Latin name is *sturnus vulgaris*. Think about it. What bird is both stern and vulgar (emphasis on the latter)? You got it: the European Starling. The Olympic champ of the bird world for being pushy, overbearing, destructive, disliked and, in a word, vulgar.

Birding Olympics. I like it. I can't wait. The brewski is cooling in the fridge.

Spotlight on Nature

ALTRUISM IN BIRDS

Excerpts from The Birders Handbook

Some kinds of bird behavior can be interpreted as altruistic— that is, one bird seems to put itself at risk to help another. A classic example is the bird in a flock that spots a predator and gives an alarm call, alerting the rest of the group. Another is the bird that joins in *mobbing* a predator. What evolutionary explanation could there be for a bird spending its time and energy (and perhaps getting injured or killed) to teach others about the danger of a predator? After all, the rule in natural selection is to leave as many offspring as possible and self-sacrifice rarely seems a route to reproductive success. Intuitively, one would think that there would be strong selection **against** altruistic behavior.

How, then does behavior that appears altruistic evolve? There are two ways. One is when the so-called altruistic behavior actually turns out to be selfish. For instance, the alarm call could be ventriloquial, preventing the predator from locating the caller. By scaring the rest of the flock into flight, the caller may be manipulating the other birds into rising from the cover, thereby calling themselves to the attention of the predator. The caller, presumably having seen the predator first, may be improving its chances to get away—at the expense of the others.

Similarly a small bird *mobbing* a larger predator may be protecting itself. Perhaps it is safer to keep the enemy close and in view and try to drive it away than to wonder where it is and what it is doing.

The second way such behavior could evolve works even if the actions are truly altruistic from the viewpoint of immediate individual survival. Altruism of that sort can be favored by natural selection if the individual helped are relatives of the altruist. The most obvious case is when a parent sacrifices its life to help its offspring, in the process assuring the parent's genes are well represented in the breeders of the next generation. The act is directly altruistic, but evolutionarily selfish. Altruism toward more distant relatives can also be favored through a form of natural selection called "kin selection". In this case, the altruist is helping to pass on, not its own genes (as it does when aiding its offspring), but genes that are identical with its own but carried by its kin.

Bird of the Month

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE

Poecile atricapillus



Size: 5 inches

Description: Small bird with a black cap and bib, white cheeks, buffy flanks, short dark bill, pale gray underparts.

Sexes are similar.

These active, acrobatic, curious, social little birds are found in mixed deciduous-coniferous forests, riparian areas and residential areas. They readily come to black-oiled sunflower feeders in the winter, but their primary food source is insects.

During fall and winter, black-capped chickadees often flock together with nuthatches, kinglets and other woodland species. Mixed flocks stay together because the chickadees call out whenever they find a good source of food. These mixed flocks also give warning calls when a predator such as a pygmy owl is near and can be seen mobbing the owl or other predator. (Listening for mobbing calls is a good way to find a pygmy owl in the woods).

The song of the black-capped chickadee is a simple, clear two-note whistle, identical in rhythm with the first not roughly a third above the second. It sounds like *bee bay*. The males sing the song only in relative isolation from other chickadees. Both sexes sometimes make a faint version of the song while feeding young. The most familiar call is the *chick-a-dee-dee-dee* which gave this bird its name. Recent studies show that the number of *dees* indicates the level of threat from nearby predators. In one case, a warning call about a pygmy owl contained 23 *dees*!

Chickadees are cavity nesters, but will use small bird boxes if natural cavities are not available. The nest is cup shaped with a foundation of moss or other coarse material lined with softer material such as animal fur and feathers. Incubation is 11-13 days and is shared by both sexes. Young leave the nest after 14-18 days after being tended by both parents.

Cool Fact: The black-capped chickadee hides seeds and other food items to eat later. Each item is placed in a different spot and the chickadee can remember the hiding places.

Conservation

LOCAL CONSERVATION ACTION

By Mike Denny, BMAS Conservation Chair

This afternoon I was thinking how very fortunate we are to live in the Walla Walla Valley. Yes there are many challenges that currently confront us and many more coming down the road. However in light of the earthquake in Haiti we are extremely fortunate. So I am going to ask each reader of this column to do something for conservation's sake this coming month. And then I am going to ask for a show of hands at the next Audubon meeting.

Blue Mountain Audubon has, as one of its reasons for being, a mission statement that contains several lines about education and outreach. The officers of BMAS sometimes feel that we are it. So this is your chance to step up and put your personal philosophy of conservation into action. We, you and I must participate in educating our friends and neighbors about the challenges we face and then work for solutions. We can do this. BMAS really needs you as each of us bring unique talents and gifts to an organization like BMAS. I refuse to believe that the membership of BMAS would rather sit back and watch when you are needed to participate. So consider yourself invited to join in and really invest your time and interest in BMAS. You can do what you set out to get done.

At the next meeting there will be a post program get together to form a BMAS outreach and conservation action group. The issues and concerns this group will deal with will not be about "them" and "us", but rather about how all of us can survive in the valley and country. I hope you will join me in establishing this group. We will not complain and moan about others and their actions. We will approach conservation as a positive opportunity and only on a basis of working in conjunction with those that are facing challenges. Along the way you may get dirty and meet folks that think along a narrow perspective. So this will be a great adventure.

Come join me!

RECYCLING TIDBITS

from Washington State Recycling Association

Glass recycled at home is sent to local and global manufacturing plants where it is transformed into useful everyday products.

Fifty-nine percent of #1 plastic bottles recycled in the U.S. are made into polyester fiber, for use in t-shirts, fill for sleeping bags and carpet.

Creating paper products from recycled materials produces less water pollution than making those products from virgin materials. Every ton of paper made from recycled materials saves about 7,000 gallons of water.

Paper can endure the recycling process approximately seven times before the fibers become too short.

Recycling a one-foot high stack of newspapers saves 71.3 kilowatt hours of electricity—enough to heat a home for 17 hours.

Consumers could purchase portions of the same recycled aluminum can from a grocer's shelf four times a year because it is possible for a new can to be made from a recycled one in as little as 90 days.

ADOPT A HIGHWAY COORDINATOR NEEDED

Blue Mountain Audubon Society participates in Washington State Department of Transportation's Adopt a Highway litter control program. We are responsible for a two mile section of Highway 12 from Wallula Junction east. The coordinator is responsible for recruiting BMAS members to take part in litter pick-up two times a year. WSDOT provides all the required supplies and signs. The coordinator is a member of the BMAS Board of Directors, so this is an opportunity to get more involved in the chapter in addition to doing something for conservation.

Miscellaneous

GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT

February 12-15, 2010

Take a mid-winter nature break with the 13th annual Great Backyard Bird Count the second weekend of February. It is a great way to get outside with family and friends, have fun, and help birds—all at the same time. Participants in this free event will join thousands of volunteers of **all levels of birding experience** to count birds in their own backyards, local parks or wildlife refuges.

Anyone can take part in the GBBC, from novice bird watchers to experts. **Participants count birds for as little as 15 minutes (or as long as they wish) on one or more days of the event and report their sightings online at www.birdcount.org.** On the GBBC website, participants can explore real-time maps and charts that show what others are reporting during the count. The site has tips to help identify birds and special materials for educators. Participants may also enter the GBBC photo contest by uploading images taken during the count. Many images will be featured in the GBBC website's photo gallery. All participants are entered in a drawing for prizes that include bird feeders, binoculars, books, CDs and many other great birding products.

Winter is such a vulnerable period for birds, so winter bird distributions are likely to be very sensitive to change. There is only one way (citizen science) to gather data on private lands where people live across the continent over many years. GBBC has enormous potential both as an early warning system and in capturing and engaging people in more intensive sampling of birds across the landscape.

Mark your calendar—February 12-15, 2010 and join the fun!

SPRING ACOW March 19-21, 2010

Your Backyard—It's Habitat

Audubon Washington will hold its Spring Conference March 19-21 in Kent, Washington. It is sponsored by Rainier Audubon and includes state meetings, field trips and more. Registration is due by February 15, so if you are interested in attending these informative meetings, contact Blue Mountain Audubon President, Tom Scribner as soon as possible.

Books

The Collector by Jack Nisbet

Jack Nisbet has once again written a remarkable biography, this time about the Scottish naturalist David Douglas. Douglas was one of the brave and talented breed of naturalist-gardener-explorers who, in the decades before Darwin, laid the foundations of modern botany. Nisbet's thrilling account allows us to walk, ride and paddle along with David Douglas on the naturalist's tour of a largely untamed, unnamed, and unknown Pacific Northwest.

Today we attach David Douglas' name to the Douglas fir, iconic tree of the Northwest, as well as to many other familiar plants and animals. Along the way, he forged relationships with fur trade agents, mixed-blood voyageurs, and a succession of native tribes who understood the species that he sought. He watched native families dig and bake roots, gather fibers to weave into the products of everyday life, and manage diverse habitats in subtle and effective ways. His detailed field notebooks and narrative sketches, along with extensive flora and fauna collections (still housed in England) provide baseline information about the Pacific Northwest landscape and culture during the period of initial European contact. Nisbet captures this all plus the personality of a very unique man in his latest biography.

Jack Nisbet is a writer, teacher and naturalist who lives in Spokane.

Crow Planet by Lyanda Lynn Haupt

Haupt uses her fondness for crows to show how these misunderstood birds are intertwined with larger concepts such as conservation, the environment, and learning to live more thoughtfully. Her observations of crows are done through a naturalist's eye and help us discover how smart, social, and like us they really are.

The book is part ornithology, part mythology, part philosophy and part advice on how to engage with nature in an urban setting. It is the author's attempt to make the reader expand his or her awareness of the natural world. She urges her reader to learn more about home ecosystems by getting out and doing some birding watching right outside our homes. The neighborhood will be much more interesting after reading this book. If you love or hate or are mystified by crows, this is the book for you.

The author, a former raptor rehabilitator and seabird researcher, lives in West Seattle and has directed educational programs for Seattle Audubon.

In the Field

Susan Swayne emailed me on December 28 to let me know that she had a Harris's sparrow in her yard. They can occasionally be found in the winter months with the other ground feeding sparrows.

On December 30, Peggy Bragg watched 24 Eurasian collared doves lined up on a telephone line in her back yard in Pomeroy.

Mike and MerryLynn ventured out in the ice and fog on New Years Day morning to look for new Walla Walla County birds for 2010. The total birds seen in the county for 2009 was 251. They found 65 species including a common loon, four gray-crowned rosy finches and a wide variety of waterfowl on the Columbia and Snake Rivers. Priscilla Dauble and I were able to add 6 more species to the list, making a total of 71 birds reported on January 1.

Mike and MerryLynn drove up Jasper Mountain Road on January 3 and found some nice additions to the year list—pileated woodpecker, mountain chickadee, chestnut-backed chickadee, white-breasted nuthatch, winter wren, golden-crowned kinglet, and TWO northern pygmy owls.

On January 3, Sheila Zangar and Denis Buet hiked up a ridge by their place on Wolf Fork south of Dayton. They found many birds, the most notable being red-crossbills, brown creepers, a black-backed woodpecker, and hairy woodpeckers.

While working outside on January 6, MerryLynn spotted 20 bohemian waxwings in the neighbor's tree.

On our Tuesday walk of Bennington Lake on January 7 we watched an adult bald eagle soaring low over the fields.

I joined Mike and MerryLynn on January 10 for a trip to the west side of the county. Waterfowl were plentiful both in variety of species and numbers, although you needed a scope to see them. We saw five common loons at Port Kelly and four red-breasted mergansers at Two Rivers HMU. At the "poop piles" along Highway 12 near Boise Cascade we found three tri-colored blackbirds and at least 80 yellow-headed blackbirds in with hundreds of red-winged and Brewer's blackbirds. Below Ice Harbor Dam we found three pair of Barrow's goldeneyes along with common goldeneyes, common mergansers and American white pelicans. There were thousands of

canada geese with a few cackling geese mixed in. South of Touchet raptors were plentiful, including four rough-legged hawks. Two great horned owls and two northern shrikes added to a fun day.

Bennington Lake finally had some open water for our walk on January 12. There were 24 common mergansers and over 50 canada geese enjoying the chance to take a swim. Three great horned owls were seen—two on the east side and one in the canal. Other species of interest were northern shrike, Townsend's solitaire, ruby-crowned kinglet and American pipit.

Pam Fisher walked Rooks Park/Mill Creek January 16 and saw some nice birds including cedar waxwings, hooded mergansers, a spotted towhee, a downy woodpecker and a black-crowned night heron.

Scott Stone saw a great gray owl on January 12 on Lewis Peak Road.

On January 14, MerryLynn and I drove up Lewis Peak to look for the owl. We didn't find it, but we saw many red-breasted nuthatches, a hairy woodpecker, several chestnut-backed chickadees, mountain chickadees, and at least four very noisy Steller's jays.

*Photo by
Nat Drumheller*



Nat Drumheller was able to relocate the owl on January 17, and Sue and Jim Parrish saw two great gray owls in the same vicinity of Lewis Peak on January 18.

On January 15, Mike Denny saw six black-crowned night herons on Mill Creek by the 13th Street Bridge.



Jon Lundak was excited to see three **long-eared owls** at Bennington Lake on January 18.

*Photo by
Jon Lundak*

The Dennys and the Shoemakes conducted our monthly raptor survey of the northern part of Umatilla County on January 18. The weather was warm and sunny, but our 205 total count was down considerably from previous surveys. We saw fewer **red-tailed hawks** than the previous month although our count was still high—135. We have one of the highest concentrations of red-tailed hawks in the state of Oregon along our route that extends from the South Fork of the Walla Walla River to Stateline Road south to the Oregon Hills southwest of Milton-Freewater. We saw four **prairie falcons** this month, and both a **bald eagle** and a **golden eagle**.

Nat Drumheller birded along the Columbia River on January 18 and found some interesting birds including an **orange-crowned warbler** and a fly-over of about 120 **snow geese** at the Walla Walla River Delta. He also saw a **short-eared owl** and **barn owls** on Dodd Road.

Nat was out again along the Columbia River on January 20, adding new species to the county year list—**Eurasian wigeon**, **white-fronted goose** and **least sandpiper**. On January 22, he saw a small flock of **evening grosbeaks** in his yard, and a **ruffed grouse** and **hermit thrush** on Scenic Loop.



A rainy start to the field trip on January 23

Even the rain didn't keep 15 people from turning out for the Raptor Field Trip, led by Joe Corvino January 23. Six different species of raptors were seen by the group—**red-tailed hawk** (61), **American kestrel** (17), **northern harrier** (9), **sharp-shinned hawk** (1), **prairie falcon** (1), **rough-legged hawk** (1). We also saw two **great horned owls**, two **great blue herons**, and a nice variety of common winter birds. The prairie falcon was flying low, hunting the fields along Byrnes Road. We saw it on three different occasions. We also watched a kestrel eating a small rodent while trying to perch on a wire.



*Photo by
Adam Innocent*

Rodger and I took a drive north of Walla Walla on January 24. We saw a **merlin**, lots of **horned larks**, a **rough-legged hawk** and several **red tails** and **kestrels**.

Mike and MerryLynn found a **rusty blackbird** on the "poop piles" on January 24. They also saw 10 **swans** on Casey Pond.

Winter storms can bring in some interesting birds, so watch your feeders for winter specialties such as common redpoll, golden-crowned sparrow, Harris' sparrow, etc. There are snowy owls not too far north of us, so keep an out for them too. Don't forget to let me know what you are seeing—housewren@blumtn.org or 525-2963. *Ginger*

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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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