



The Magpiper

April, 2012

Page 1

April Calendar

Thursday, April 12

Board Meeting
7:00 p.m.

Thursday, April 19

Membership Meeting
7:30 p.m.
Whitman College

Saturday, April 21

Field Trip: Spring Birds
8:00 a.m.
Harper Joy Theatre Parking lot

President: Tom Scribner
Vice President: Mike Denny
Secretary: Paul and Judy Treman
Treasurer: MerryLynn Denny
Conservation: Mike Denny
Education: Priscilla Dauble
Membership: Melissa Webster and Holly Howard
Programs: Tom Scribner
Publicity: Jonathan Webster
Natural Area: Linda Sutor
Important Bird Areas: Mike Denny
Adopt a Highway: Carolyn Corvino
Webmaster: Ginger Shoemake
Field Trips: Ginger Shoemake
Magpiper Editor: Ginger Shoemake
Member at Large: Shirley Muse
Bird Sightings: Ginger Shoemake

Website:

<http://www.blumtn.org>

Bird sightings:

house_wren@charter.net or
525-2963

Contact BMAS:

house_wren@charter.net or
PO Box 1106
Walla Walla, WA 99362

Meetings

Membership Meeting: April 19—7:30 p.m.

Gaiser Auditorium, Hall of Science, Whitman College

PROGRAM: BURROWING OWLS - GLOBAL OWL PROJECT

Our speaker for the evening will be David H. Johnson from the Global Owl Project, headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia. David began working on a project at the Umatilla Chemical Depot to install artificial burrowing owl nests in 2008. At that time there were only four pairs of nesting owls at the Depot. By 2011 that number had increased to 61 pairs. He will talk about burrow design, banding, geolocators, satellite transmitters and ecological aspects of the owls during the breeding season. He will also talk about the Global Owl Project's coordinated activities in the region.

David has 34 years of experience in the natural resources field and holds a M.S. degree in Wildlife Science. He was deeply involved in the early years of the Spotted Owl issue and was the first Spotted Owl Coordinator for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. In 2002, he started the Global Owl Project, an international program involving researchers, scientists, geneticists, volunteers and students working in 65 countries. This should be a program you won't want to miss.

We will also hear from Stefan Wheat, this year's Rempel Scholarship recipient. He will give a short presentation about his work with red-eyed tree frogs in Panama.

Field Trip

SPRING MIGRANTS

Saturday, April 21, 2012—8:00 a.m.

It's time for many of the summer birds to return including the osprey and the Swainson's hawk. The list of expected April arrivals can be found on Page 3 in this issue of the *Magpiper*. Join Rodger and Ginger Shoemake for a fun day of birding in the county as they see how many of the birds on the list can be found. Bring a lunch and plan on doing some walking. If you plan to attend, call the Shoemakes at 525-2963 or email house_wren@charter.net



Tom's Tales

COMMON RARITIES

Recently six BMASers traveled to the Oregon coast to (and this should come as no surprise) look for birds. By all reports they had a successful trip; each of them added at least two birds to their life lists: tufted duck and yellow-billed loon. Both birds are not that common along the Oregon coast. One might even say they were rare. Except, and here is where things get interesting, and confusing. The tufted duck, I was told, is really a "common rarity." Yellow-billed loons, I guess, are the real deal: "rare rarities."

Which distinction got me thinking: Is this really what birding has come to? Do we now have to worry about not only identifying that dark blob that is out there, 100 yards or so away, riding a foaming and undulating sea, as a tufted duck, but also know whether it is a "true" rarity or only a "common" rarity? And are our bragging rights for spotting the darn thing lessened if the rare bird we have found is only a "common" rarity rather than a "rare" rarity? And, please tell me, who gets to decide these things?

My being perplexed by this added level of identification is not limited, you must understand, only to the Oregon coast. Oh, no! We have a Walla Walla County Checklist of Birds that includes a "Relative Abundance" classification scheme. In addition to an "a" for abundant; "c" for common; "u" for uncommon; and "o" for occasional, there is an "r" for rare. Really, who decides these things and on what basis? Is a bird "common" if nine days out of ten I should see it in my backyard, or is it "common" if nine days out of ten I will see it at Bennington Lake, or if, nine days out of ten, I could find it somewhere in Walla Walla County? And what makes a bird "rare" in our county? Does a birder with my limited (as in very limited) skills have to spend 100 hours in the field to see a bird to make that critter rare? What about someone with the birding skills of Mike, or MerryLynn, or Ginger? How many hours do they need to spend in the field to spot a bird before it is a rarity? (And remember, however many hours it may take them, it is going to take me at least ten times as long and I will still, most of the time, probably never find the darn thing - - certainly not identify it even if I do find it.)

And it gets worse. The relative abundance ranking of the birds in Walla Walla County is provided not for the year, but for each season: spring, summer, fall and winter. Which means you need to keep in mind the ups and downs of a particular species' seasonal abundance before you get excited on seeing one. Townsend's

solitaires, for example, appear occasionally in Walla Walla County in the spring but are uncommon the rest of the year. So if, in May, I spy a solitaire, I should probably get more excited than if I see one on the Christmas count.

Ain't no yellow-billed loons listed among the Walla Walla County regulars, even as a rarity (not even a "rare" rarity). But tufted ducks are listed as an "accidental," albeit with an asterisk. Not only do we have to worry about rarities, now we also have to worry about accidentals. And if that isn't enough, we also have accidentals with an asterisk. The asterisk, according to my Checklist, means that tufted ducks in Walla Walla County, even as accidentals, have not yet been accepted by the Washington Rare Bird Committee. (Who are these people? Do they have a life?)

My head is now spinning. Should all our Walla Walla County bird sightings be reported as to their abundance? And how thinly sliced should our abundance classification be? Should a golden-crowned kinglet, for example, listed as common in the spring, fall and winter but uncommon in summer, be a "rare" common or a "common" uncommon? And how should we decide and who should make the decision?

At one time, birding was fun, relaxing and an activity fit for amateurs like me. Now? Now you gotta be able to identify the bugger and provide its abundance rating. And whereas there are not quite as many abundance ratings available as there are species to be found in Walla Walla County, those ratings can be sliced pretty fine. There are, we now know, "common" rarities and, I assume, "rare" rarities. There are, if the pattern holds, "common" accidentals and "rare" accidentals. And, since we are concerned about our scientific rigor, there should be, if there are not, "common" and "rare" commons, "common" and "rare" occasionals, and "common" and "rare" uncommons.

I don't know about you, but I think I will stick with simply identifying the little feathered thing that is flitting from branch to branch in the trees across the stream, up the hillside and in the shadows. As for whether or not, once I identify what the darn thing is, it is a common or uncommon or occasional or rare or accidental bird, I will leave that to the Sibleys of the world. Trust me on this, anytime I can positively identify a bird, regardless of the time of the year or its relative abundance, it is a rare occurrence and I am one excited dude. I suspect that there are more folks in my camp than who want to so admit.

Birding News

MIGRATION CONTINUES

April brings more migrants into our county. Birds to look for this month include:

Cinnamon teal
 Osprey
 Swainson's hawk
 Greater yellowlegs—M
 Evening grosbeak
 Barn swallow
 Vaux's swift
 Orange-crowned warbler
 Yellow warbler
 Nashville warbler
 Townsend's warbler
 House wren
 Calliope hummingbird
 Rufous hummingbird
 Black-chinned hummingbird
 Western kingbird
 Hammond's flycatcher
 Cassin's vireo
 Brewer's sparrow
 Grasshopper sparrow

M = migrates through county

All of the others on the list nest somewhere in the county, either here in the valley or higher up in the Blue Mountains.

A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK

Birdscope, Winter 2012

Excerpts from an article by Taza Schaming

Out West, when you climb up past the treeline, you're treated to a view of rugged peaks and expansive skies, with just a few wizened pines or firs clinging to the rocky earth. If you stop and listen, you'll soon hear the loud kraak of a Clark's nutcracker. Before long, one of these curious, intelligent birds is likely to land on a nearby whitebark pine, completing a scene that's thousands of years old.

Clark's nutcrackers and whitebark pines have a fascinating relationship: the trees provide rich fatty seeds (with more calories per pound than chocolate) and the birds plant them—a single bird may bury 98,000 seeds in a year. The food caches help the birds get through the winter, and the leftovers grow into new trees. Squirrels hoard pine seeds too, but they store them in big heaps where few ever germinate. So virtually all whitebark pines grow from seeds nutcrackers planted.

Continued on Page 5.....

Bird of the Month

BURROWING OWL *Athene cunicularia*



Size: 9.5 inches

Description: Small, long legged brown and white owl with boldly spotted and barred body, yellow eyes, no ear tufts and a white throat.

Photo by Rodger Shoemake

At our April meeting we will learn about efforts to install artificial burrows at the Umatilla Chemical Depot. Here is a little background information about these feisty little owls.

Burrowing owls are birds of open country, prairies, grasslands, deserts, airports, golf courses, etc. They are most active in the morning and evening, but hunt all day; catching mostly insects during the day and small mammals at night. During the heat of the day they can be found at their burrow entrance or on a low post making them an easy owl to see.

They nest in abandoned animal burrows or artificial holes in the ground. Their nest chamber is lined with cow chips, horse dung, food debris, dry grass, weeds and feathers. The mammal dung attracts dung beetles, which the owl then captures and eats. They usually nest in small colonies. The female lays an egg every 1 or 2 days until she has completed a clutch, which is usually 7-9 eggs. She incubates the eggs for 3-4 weeks while the male brings her food. After the eggs hatch, both parents feed the chicks. After four weeks the chicks begin leaving the nest burrow for short flights. Parents continue to help feed the chicks for another 1-3 months.

Burrowing owls are endangered in Canada, threatened in Mexico and a species of special concern in Florida and most of the western United States. The major reasons for declining populations in North America are control programs for prairie dogs and loss of habitat.

There have been no reports of burrowing owls nesting in Walla Walla County for three years, but they can be seen north of Pasco on the east side of Highway 395 at a sight where Lower Columbia Audubon Society has created man-made burrows, and near Othello where they can be found nesting in burrows along the irrigation ditches.

Conservation

William A. Grant Water & Environmental Center

The mission of the William A. Grant Water & Environmental Center is to provide a welcoming and supportive place where people with diverse interests and values can learn, share knowledge and work together to create a healthy and sustainable natural environment that enhances the economic well-being of our region.

Faced with the challenges of restoring the watershed, recovering fish runs, and better managing limited water re-sources, organizations in the Walla Walla Valley came together in a spirit of collaboration and cooperation to create the Walla Walla Community College William A. Grant Water & Environmental Center (WEC), which opened on October 12, 2007.

WEC staff recognizes the intrinsic relationship between healthy, sustainable ecosystems and prosperous communities, and dedicate themselves to supporting the environmental protection and restoration work of others through education and community outreach programs. WEC staff is committed to contributing to the well-being of our regional community by:

- Providing a place for collaborative dialogue
- Fostering and modeling the use of innovative practices
- Promoting and practicing the use of effective partnerships
- Offering educational programs that address 21st Century water and environmental challenges
- Achieving heightened awareness and use of environmentally sustainable practices
- Supporting environmental protection and restoration efforts throughout the region

The WEC was established with a goal of helping the communities in our region develop and maintain:

- Thriving natural ecosystems and vibrant local economies
- Respect and recognition of diverse cultural values in rural, urban and tribal communities
- Use of collaborative dialogue to address pressing public policy issues and build pathways for problem solving and partnerships in public institutions, nonprofit organizations, agricultural and business communities

The WWCC Water & Environmental Center focuses on collaboration and education for environmental and economic sustainability. WEC facilitates regional and local partnership programs, provides

community and K-12 education opportunities, and coordinates the WWCC Watershed Ecology degree program, campus sustainability and “Go Green Club” activities.

A “Watershed Stewards “ program is slated to begin in 2011. Community members are encouraged to take part in our free in-depth stewardship training which will cover a broad range of water and environmental topics. Participants will gain the knowledge base to understand the critical issues in our region, as well as the skills to implement steward-ship activities. After completing the course, participants will serve as watershed stewards working on educational and hands-on projects of their choice.

Completed Projects:

- Return to the River Salmon Festival
- Titus Creek Restoration
- Make a Splash 2009 and 2010
- Natural Resource Job Fair held February 23, 2011

Current Projects:

- Return to the River Salmon Festival to be held June 11, 2011
- The 3rd Annual Make A Splash Educational Event in April 2011
- Community Education Events including an Exempt Well Community Forum, Eco-Art Night, Environmental Movie Nights, and Natural Resource Teacher Workshop
- Watershed Ecology Degree Program
- Campus sustainability initiatives
- Establishing cooperative programs and projects between local organizations and individuals

For more information contact:

Email: melissa.holecek@wwcc.edu;

Phone: 509.524.5208

Website: www.watreducationcenter.org

WATER TRIVIA

People need about 2.5 quarts of water a day (from drinking or eating) to maintain good health. A person can live without water for approximately one week, depending upon the conditions.

Miscellaneous

BIRDING FESTIVALS

John Scharff Migratory Bird Festival Burns, OR

April 12-15, 2012

Spend an amazing weekend witnessing the spectacular spring migration in the Harney Basin of Southeast Oregon. View thousands of migratory birds as they rest and feed in the wide open spaces of Oregon's high desert. From waterfowl to shorebirds, cranes to raptors, wading birds to songbirds, you'll see them all! The festival offers non-stop birding activities as well as historical and cultural information sure to entertain you and your family. So whether you're a beginner or a life-long wildlife enthusiast, the festival has something for everyone. Don't miss this extraordinary weekend.

For more information go to:

www.migratorybirdfestival.com

Gray's Harbor Shorebird Festival Hoquiam, WA

May 4-6, 2012

Each spring hundreds of thousands of shorebirds stop to rest and feed in Grays Harbor estuary on their migration northward. Coming from as far south as Argentina, these Arctic-bound shorebirds are among the world's greatest migrants. Some birds travel over 15,000 miles round trip! Tens of thousands of shorebirds feed on the open mudflats in the estuary. This concentration of birds offers people a great chance to view a number of shorebird species, and with luck, to see the birds fly together in beautiful formations while trying to escape the fastest creature on earth, the Peregrine Falcon.

Festival events include:

- Field trips
- Lectures
- Nature fun fair
- Shorebird viewing and more

For more information go to:

www.shorebirdfestival.com

ADOPT A HIGHWAY PICKUP **April 29, 2012—1:30 p.m.**

It's time to do a spring clean-up of Blue Mountain Audubon's section of Highway 12 just west of town. If you'd like to help, call Carolyn Corvino at [529-8567](tel:529-8567)

Continued from Page 3....

In fact, nutcrackers likely carried the ancestors of whitebark pines with them when they came to North America across the Bering land bridge, more than 1.8 million years ago.

But now whitebark pines are dying off, a result of attacks by mountain pine beetles and white pine blister rust. More than a decade ago, the trees started to disappear in Montana and Washington.

This summer, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service classified whitebark pine as a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Though Clark's nutcrackers eat many kinds of seeds across their range, whitebark pine is an important food. Sighting in Montana and Washington seem to have declined already. The fear is that this could become a vicious cycle: if fewer whitebark pines lead to fewer nutcrackers, and those birds cache fewer pine seed, we could wind up with even fewer whitebark pines.

Such a cycle could have a huge impact on the Western landscape. In years when whitebark pinecones are scarce, grizzlies move down into valleys in search of food. This inevitably causes more human-grizzly conflicts. Fewer pines offer less shade for the snowpack, causing spring floods and lower river levels in summer. Those changes in runoff affect cutthroat trout and human drinking water, too.

Federal agencies are working hard to restore whitebark pine ecosystems, but to protect nutcrackers more needs to be learned about their lives. As part of her Ph.D work at Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Taza Schaming is studying Clark's nutcrackers in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, where white-bark pines have begun to decline but the birds are still common. She is learning where the nutcrackers forage and breed, where they harvest and cache seeds, and what else they eat other than whitebark pine. By figuring out what these birds need to survive, she hopes to be able to make recommendations on ways to conserve them.



Clark's Nutcracker

Photo by National Park Service

In the Field...by Ginger Shoemake

On January 27, we saw an immature **northern goshawk** at Bennington Lake while on our weekly walk. Carolyn Corvino saw a **fox** on the Bennington Lake Road

Priscilla Dauble's backyard was busy on January 28. She saw a **spotted towhee**, two **ruby-crowned kinglets**, a **black-capped chickadee**, a **downy woodpecker**, a **flicker**, **goldfinches** and **house finches**.

Carolyn Corvino's **Cooper's hawk** returned on March 2. Hopefully it will nest again in her neighborhood. She also had a pair of **song sparrows**.

Pam Fisher saw the **American dipper** and the **spotted sandpiper** on Mill Creek near the diversion dam on March 2. They hadn't been spotted for some time, so it's nice to hear they are both still around.

The Dennys and the Shoemakes drove our last raptor route of the winter season on March 4. Our numbers were down from earlier in the year, but we still saw 207 total raptors. 128 **red-tailed hawks** (7 were on nests), 40 **American kestrels**, 10 **northern harriers**, 2 **bald eagles** (both adults), 7 **rough-legged hawks**, 1 **prairie falcon**, 3 **Cooper's hawks** and 14 **great horned owls** (5 on nests).

Sue and Jim Parrish saw a **western bluebird** near Rooks Park on March 9. I also had a call from Sonia Schmitt the same day to let me know she had a pair of **mountain bluebirds** in her yard.

Mike and MerryLynn birded western Walla Walla County on March 10. They found this **northern saw-whet owl** in Hood Park.



Some other interesting birds they saw were **white-fronted geese**, **snow geese**, a **red-breasted sapsucker**,

an **orange-crowned warbler**, several **violet-green swallows** and two **Say's phoebes**. In Wallula Gap they saw a pair of **peregrine falcons** and a pair of **prairie falcons**. Both have nested there the past few years.

On March 13, a birder from the Tri-Cities reported seeing a **gyrfalcon** chasing ducks on McNary NWR land east of Casey Pond.

MerryLynn had a **spotted towhee** visiting her yard the week of March 12. It was there for several days. She also heard **bluebirds** flying overhead. Both a **Cooper's hawk** and a **sharp-shinned hawk** keep her yard birds on the move.

At the membership meeting on March 15, Jeff Fredsen reported seeing **evening grosbeaks** at his place on Weston Mountain. He also said **western bluebirds** were checking nest boxes he has on his property, but he hadn't seen them since the new snow arrived that week.



Searching for wildflowers in Wallula Gap

Mike and MerryLynn led the March Field Trip to the west side of the county on March 17 in search of early migrants and wildflowers. The wind was howling but that didn't stop the group from walking around Hood Park where we found many **yellow-rumped warblers**, an **orange-crowned warbler** and a pair of **black-capped chickadees** setting up house in a nest box along the water. We saw a **glaucous gull** on the Walla Walla River Delta and set up scopes at Wallula Grain Terminal to get a lesson in how to tell the difference between **lesser and greater scaup**. The highlight was hiking the rocks in Wallula Gap where we found **desert buttercups**, **shooting stars** and **prairie stars**, **lichens** and several other plants emerging from winter's cold. **Robins** were everywhere, there were still around 200 **snow-geese** and several hundred **white-fronted geese** on McNary NWR, and three **great horned owls** on nests. All in all, it was a great trip.

In March every year the **American goldfinches** become the most common backyard bird. This year was no exception. On March 18, we had more a hundred of them visiting our feeders, making our seed supply disappear rapidly. They were joined by over thirty **house finches**, and a dozen or so **pine siskins**.

Pam Fisher saw a pair of **lesser goldfinches** at Rooks Park on March 18. This species used to be rare in Walla Walla County but has been seen more often in recent years. There is even speculation that they could be nesting on Biscuit Ridge Road.

Aletha Werner saw three **swans** on Bennington Lake on March 20. No doubt they were heading north since it was the first day of Spring.

On March 22, we woke up to a blanket of white. The birds in our yard were very happy when I filled all the feeders for them. I guess some birds didn't mind the snow however, because Chris Howard saw three **western bluebirds** near the diversion dam by Rooks Park.



*Photo by
George Jameson*

On March 24, Pam Fisher and Aletha Werner birded around Walla Walla. Some of their interesting finds were five **Wilson's snipe** in the wetlands area by Big 5, three **ring-necked ducks** on the pond along Taumarson Road and a pair of **wood ducks** behind the diversion dam at Rooks Park. Three **great blue herons** were at the rookery at Rooks Park.

Joe and Carolyn Corvino hiked Juniper Canyon on March 24. Besides enjoying the hike, they saw or heard 13 species of birds including both **western mountain bluebird**, **Say's phoebe**, **Wilson's snipe** and **Virginia rail**. As they were leaving the parking area, they saw a **bald eagle** fly toward the basalt cliffs carrying a **mallard**.

The **long-billed curlews** have returned to their nesting area just east of Wallula Gap. Several of us saw them

on March 25.

On March 25, Mike and MerryLynn stopped by the river on their way home from another successful Sandhill Crane Festival. They spotted a **Caspian tern** near the Port Kelly.

I hope many of you had a chance to go up to Othello and see the **sandhill cranes**.



They put on quite a show this year. The sights and sounds of several thousand of them all around us was certainly a rewarding experience for Paul and Judy Treman and Rodger and me on March 25.

Photo by

Rodger Shoemake

MerryLynn had a **common redpoll** at her feeder the morning of March 27. I guess a few of them are still around.

Five of us put on our rain gear and walked Bennington Lake on March 27. We weren't disappointed with the birds we saw. There was a **Caspian tern** cruising the lake. We saw it catch a fish only to lose it again as it tried to fly off. We were excited to see that the swallows are back. We saw 27 **violet-green swallows** and two **tree swallows**. Each week there should be more returning. There is still very little water in the lake, but we did see five **mallards** and two **double-crested cormorants**. A **great horned owl** in the canal was hooting, and we could hear a chick crying. Great horned owls are most protective of their young at this time of year. If you see a nest with young owls in it, it is best to view it from a distance.

Joe Corvino saw an **osprey** along the Columbia River on his way home from work in the Umatilla area on March 27. It's the first osprey sighting of the spring.

Slowly, the birds are beginning to return. April should be a good month to seriously start looking for migrants so let me know what you are seeing. Call **525-2963** or email house_wren@charter.net.

BLUE MOUNTAIN AUDUBON
Ginger Shoemake, Editor, **The Magpiper**
PO BOX 1106-0022
Walla Walla, WA 99362

Non-Profit Organization
US Postage Paid
Permit 44
College Place, WA 99324

Address Service Requested

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 June and is free to members. Non-member subscription fees are \$25 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 \$25 for your first year's membership to: Blue Mountain Audubon PO Box 1106, Walla Walla, WA 99362

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____