

Blue Mountain Audubon Society

The Magpiper

May 2011

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May and June Calendar

Thursday, May 12

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

Thursday, May 19

Membership Meeting—7:30 p.m.
Whitman College

Saturday, May 7—8:00 a.m.

Field Trip—Bluebirds
Meet at HJT Parking Lot

Saturday, May 28—7:00 a.m.

Field Trip—Coppei Creek
Meet at Coppei Creek

Saturday, June 18—8:00 a.m.

Field Trip—Wildflowers
Meet at HJT Parking Lot

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Vice President: Mike Denny

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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: May 19, 2011—7:30 p.m.

Gaiser Auditorium, Hall of Science, Whitman College

PROGRAM: BIRDS OF THE COLUMBIA BASIN

Back by popular demand, Mike Denny will be the speaker for our last meeting of the year. Given the popularity of bird watching and the wide array of habitat and birds in the Columbia Basin, it is little wonder that the people in this area enjoy seeing and learning about local birds. Who better to acquaint us with the birds we are likely to encounter than Mike. He has been a dedicated birder for most of his life, and he and his wife MerryLynn know our local birds better than anyone.

Mike's power point presentation will feature photographs taken by MerryLynn. Most of the birds he will talk about can be found in Walla Walla County. If you've ever wondered "what was that bird", here is your chance to find out. He will tell us what the bird is, where it can be found, when it can be found, how common it is, and much more.

Field Trips

Saturday, May 7—8:00 a.m.

BLUEBIRDS AND MORE

Tom Scribner will lead a trip to look for bluebirds and clean out nest boxes south and west of Pomeroy. Depending on weather conditions, he will also explore areas in the Blue Mountains east of Dayton. This trip is a chance to see a variety of mountain birds not normally seen here in Walla Walla—mountain and western bluebirds, turkey vulture, vesper sparrow, Cassin's finch and more. Bring a lunch and dress for unpredictable weather on this all-day trip. Call [529-8628](tel:529-8628) if you plan to attend.

Saturday, May 28—7:00 a.m.

COPPEI CREEK—SUMMER BIRDS

Join Joe Corvino for a leisurely early morning stroll along South Fork Coppei Creek looking and listening for summer birds. Most of the summer migrants can be found along this little stretch of road. Some birds that could be seen are yellow warbler, fox sparrow, gray catbird, black-headed grosbeak, western tanager, western wood peewee and Bullock's oriole. Plan to meet at the corner of Walker Road and S. Fork Coppei Creek Road. If you need directions call [525-2963](tel:525-2963).

Saturday, June 18—8:00 a.m.

WILDFLOWERS OF THE BLUES

Priscilla Dauble's trip into the Blue Mountains in search of wildflowers has become a traditional way to end the field trip season. It is an opportunity to see the mountains in bloom. Penstemons, bluebells, lady slippers, balsamroots, and wild onion are just a few of the many species that could be found. A trip to the mountains is always good for the soul, so plan on this all-day trip. Call [529-7939](tel:529-7939) if you plan to attend.



Tom's Tales (by Tom Scribner)

AMBUSHED!

I don't know if all birders have a favorite bird, but I do. And my favorite bird has nothing to do - - okay, very little to do - - with what species it is, and most everything with the fact that I lived to report having seen it. As in I genuinely thought I had seen my last bird. This is what happened.

We lived in Arizona at the time. In Tucson, in married student housing. Which house was one-half of a WW II metal Quonset hut. 400 square feet and all the cockroaches you could eat. Or maybe it was: so many cockroaches they could eat you. At one point we had three kids, but one night when I got up for the 2 a.m. feeding, our youngest was gone! Carried off, I assume, by some of the biggest, meanest cockroaches imaginable. But that is a different story. And it does not involve birds.

I was just getting into birding, having attended a few Tucson Audubon monthly meetings and gone on a few field trips. So I bought "Lane's Guide to Birding in Southeastern Arizona" and decided to find some rare birds on my own. "Rare" being a relative term. And relative to my novice birding skill a vermillion flycatcher, quite common in southeastern Arizona, was a rare bird. But I was after even more exotic fare: olive warblers and rose-throated becards. The latter, my favorite bird, was found, according to Lane, in only several locations in our part of the state. One of them was on Sonita Creek, upstream a few miles from Patagonia Lake.

Don't be fooled by the name. In southeastern Arizona (heck, anywhere in Arizona), a body of water of, say, 100 acres or more is a lake. Patagonia Lake was, I don't know, maybe 200 acres of warm, brown, algae infused water. And an absolute mecca for motorboats pulling water skiers. There was not much open water, the parking lot (graveled and pot-holed) was filled with pickups and boat trailers, and music blared from far too many boom boxes. Not a place for quiet, contemplative birding. But I was not interested in Patagonia Lake. I only needed to park my car and, following the directions in Lane, hike two or three or four miles upstream along Sonita Creek, which emptied into this impressive hell-hole of motorboat crazed sun worshippers.

Within not too long the noise of their engines was behind me and I started seeing birds. And cows. And cow patties. And what was left of the native (and not so native) vegetation thanks to too many cows. Napalm couldn't have done a better job. Still, there were birds - - at least a few.

After I don't know how far I crossed an old barbed-wire fence and found less bovine destruction. And more birds.

According to Lane, I was getting close to becard country. And he was right. In not quite a canyon, but a place where the walls of the flood plain pinched the creek and the vegetation tight, I saw, up ahead, what had to be a becard. Raising my glasses to my glasses, I scanned the brushy creek side and, yes!, there he was, an unmistakable rose-throated becard, perched for all the world to see - - right above a group of five or six young, haggard, frightened and, to my Anglo-Saxon middle class, alone in the wilderness paranoia, dangerous Hispanic males. They were all squatted down, crowded together, carrying plastic jugs (of water, I assume) and parcels of clothing. And they were all, as in every single one, staring straight at me. Me, skinny, unarmed, all alone, nowhere to run - nowhere to hide, Tom Scribner.

I carried a backpack, had binoculars around my neck, and on my hip I carried my sidearm. Okay, it wasn't a sidearm; it was my bird book, in the black cloth carrying pouch that Margo made for me and that I wore on my belt. But when you are illegally crossing the border and afraid of being apprehended and deported, a guy who discovers your hiding place and who starts looking you over with binoculars is probably packing. And probably not interested in your well-being. They were, I was sure, not happy to have been discovered. And they had me outnumbered.

Now this was lots of years ago. And Arizona, which even then was noted for its far, far right wingnuts, was not yet the home of vindictive anti-immigrant crazies that it is now. At that time the Arizona state legislature was still a few years away from wanting to pass a law requiring presidential candidates to file proof they were born in the good ol' USA before they can have their names on the ballot, or making it legal to carry firearms on college campuses and into the classroom. ("What you mean this paper only deserves a B? Take that . . ." Bam! Bam! Bam!) Still, the guys I discovered were probably convinced I was looking for them (I was certainly looking at them), not some stupid bird with a rosy throat. I suppose I could have walked up to them and explained that they had nothing to fear, that I was only looking for a becard . . . in Spanish (which I do not speak). And I suppose they might have been members of the Nogales Country Club out looking for a new location for a PGA tournament-worthy course location.

And I suppose that I might not have set a new record for the mile - - with hiking boots, daypack, binoculars and several creek crossings, not to mention the aforementioned barbed-wire fence. But if I didn't, I came pretty damned close.

Continued on Page 5.....

Spotlight on Nature

WHEN IS A BLUEBIRD NOT BLUE

by Jeff Gillson, *Pacific Northwest Birder*

<http://nwbackyardbirder.blogspot.com/>

The hint to this riddle is in the sky. What color is the sky? Why does the sky appear blue in the day and black at night?

Just as there is no blue pigment floating around in the sky, there is no blue pigment in a bird's feathers. The gasses and dust in the atmosphere affect the sunlight--absorbing red and scattering blue--making it *appear* that the sky is blue. Likewise, a layer of cells within the feather barbs reflects back the blue color frequency to our eyes.

The primary pigments (biochromes) that color bird feathers are melanins and carotenoids. Melanins produce dark colors--black, browns, and rust. Carotenoids produce red, orange and yellow. There are some birds (turacos of Africa, and bustards of the Old World) that have additional pigments that create those species' green, pink, and red plumage colors.

What about green birds? For the most part, the green color we see from a bird's feather is blue light reflected back at us through yellow-pigmented feather cells.

Iridescence produces the brilliant metallic reflections that turn a hummingbird's black gorget feathers a startling red, or catches the sunlight just right to make a drake Mallard's head a brilliant metallic green or purple.

Like a rainbow produced by light striking a prism, sunlight reflects off the structure of barbules (smaller feather structures that act as a zipper to hold the barbs together making the feather vanes).

Thus, the blue iridescent highlights on the head of a Brewer's Blackbird are produced slightly differently than the blue on the Mountain Bluebird. But in neither case are there any blue pigments involved.

VISIT BLUE MOUNTAIN AUDUBON

ONLINE

www.blumtn.org

Bird of the Month

WESTERN BLUEBIRD *Sialia mexicana*



Size: 7 inches

Description: Male is blue on the head, wings, tail and throat. Its chest and a patch on the back are chestnut. Female is a dull blue with a grey throat and brownish wash on breast.

Photo by George Jameson

The western bluebird prefers forest edges, orchards, and park like wooded areas of coniferous and deciduous trees, catching insects near the ground from a low perch.

MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD *Sialia currucoides*



Size: 7.25 inches

Description: Male is bright sky blue above and paler blue below. Female is a dull blue above with pale gray under parts and an eye ring.

Photo by George Jameson

Mountain bluebirds prefer open mountain meadows, usually above 5,000 feet, often hovering while foraging from the ground or hawking from a low perch.

Both species of bluebirds build their nests in woodpecker excavated cavities, or use artificial nest boxes, often competing with house wrens and tree swallows for nest sights. Birds reared in nest boxes tend to imprint to it and prefer that type of box for breeding. In both species, the female incubates the eggs, but both sexes tend the young. The average clutch size of the western bluebird is 4-6, while the mountain bluebird may have a slightly larger clutch.

Tom Scribner and his father put bluebird houses up all over the Blue Mountains. Jasper Mountain is a good place to look for western bluebirds. Mountain bluebirds have been seen on the open areas on top of Biscuit Ridge, and the Scribners placed boxes along many roads in the open areas south of Pomeroy. A field trip in May will visit this area.

Of Local Interest....

NATURAL AREA WORK PARTY

Linda Sutor organized a Blue Mountain Audubon work party on April 17 at the Natural Area to do some much needed repairs and clean-up. Under the direction of Audubon members, students from Walla Walla University, Whitman College and Walla Walla Community College spent several hours clearing trails, planting native shrubs and trees and repairing bridges.



By the parking lot, missing railings were replaced and secured to the posts. At the entrance, an area around the sign was cleaned out so plants that will tolerate sun and heat could be planted



By the barn a tree house had been built by unknown persons. It was dismantled and the wood was removed and used to repair a bridge.

Trails were cleared and blackberry bushes were trimmed throughout the area. Thistle and other invasive weeds were removed near the new plantings.



A make-shift dam along the creek was removed and plants were placed on the north side of the area near the remains of the record alder tree.



At the barn, shrubs were put in where previously there had been a variety of native plants. Willows and river birch were planted near the north pond.



The bridge along the cut-off trail was repaired with lumber from the tree house.

MANY THANKS TO ALL THE STUDENTS WHO HELPED WITH THIS PROJECT. A special thanks to Linda Sutor, Mike and MerryLynn Denny, Priscilla Dauble, Darcy Dauble, Morgan Lenihan and Nancy Mitchell for their direction and assistance in the project.

Miscellaneous

NOAH STRYKER TO SPEAK IN PENDLETON

Nationally known birder Noah Stryker will be the guest speaker at the May meeting of the Pendleton Bird Club. He is Associate Editor of *Birding* magazine, former columnist known as "BirdBoy" in *WildBird* magazine, and frequent contributor to other bird-related publications. Noah most recently spent field seasons in Antarctica, the Australian Outback, the Farallon Islands, and Costa Rica. His first book, *Among Penguins*, was released in February, and will be the topic of his presentation.

The meeting will be held **May 12, 7:00 p.m.** at the Pendleton Presbyterian Church, 201 SW Dorion Street., Pendleton, Oregon. A book signing for *Among Penguins* will be held prior to the meeting at 6:30 p.m.

For more information about Noah Stryker visit his website <http://noahstryker.com>

LADD MARSH BIRDATHON May 13-15, LaGrande, Oregon

The Ladd Marsh Birdathon is held at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area located about 7 miles south of La Grande, Oregon. The event is scheduled at the height of spring migration and nesting in the Grande Ronde Valley and to commemorate International Migratory Bird Day.

A complete schedule of 2011 Bird-a-thon events is posted at: http://www.dfw.state.or.us/odfw_outdoors/workshops/ladd_marsh_birdathon.asp

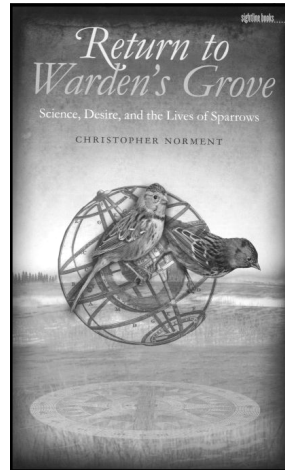
Tom's Tales Continued

I hope the guys I saw made it to wherever and that they are now legal members of our great polyglot melting pot of a country. And I hope that other birders, using the directions in Lane to find a rose-throated becard to add to their life list, will choose one of the other suggested locations. Hiking alone, not far from the Mexican border, miles from anyone who could provide assistance (and them probably drunk on too much beer and too much sun, dizzy from going around and around in a big motor boat on a small muddy "lake"), is not the safest way to add a bird to your life list.

But I did see a becard. Not for very long, and not very well. But given the circumstances, it is my favorite bird. I trust you understand why.

Books

Return to Warden's Grove by Christopher Norment



For three summers, field biologist Chris Norment studied the breeding biology of the Harris's sparrow in the Canadian Northwest Territories as part of his Ph.D project. This book is the result of his research and his experiences in the remote wilderness of the far north.

I will admit I was dubious about reading this book. I had visions of pages of dry scientific data, unpronounceable Latin names, and scientific jargon. However, early in the book I learned that Norment's intent with this book was not to write an academic research paper, but to recount his experiences during his three summers of field work at Warden's Grove. And he did it well.

The book conveys the clarity of his scientific methods and findings while taking the reader to the wild landscape where his research takes place in a very personal way. He is clearly beguiled and enchanted by his wild landscape and he relates these feelings to the reader in a poetic style that emotes emotion and understanding for place. Norment believes that scientific research can contribute as much to an emotional, subjective relationship with the natural world as do art, literature, music and poetry. He eloquently affirms that biological fieldwork is a vital way to pay attention to the world and be connected with something outside the self.

What comes about clearly above all in *Warden's Grove* is the "goodness" of natural history fieldwork. I learned a great deal about Harris's sparrows while also finding it a very enjoyable book to read.

WDFW WILDLIFE CAMS

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife has several wildlife cameras set up to capture real-time images of nesting birds. It is a chance to watch young animals grow and mature. The cameras are not adjusted during the nesting season so the viewer gets to learn about the life and death struggles that occur in the natural world.

Right now there are active cams on nests sites for bald eagle, osprey, burrowing owl and great blue heron. To learn more about the site and look in on the nesting birds go to the WDFW website:

<http://wdfw.wa.gov/wildwatch/>

In the Field...by Ginger Shoemake

MerryLynn Denny and her mom Shirley Messinger both saw large flocks of **bohemian waxwings** in their respective neighborhoods on March 30.

On March 31 we spotted the first **osprey** of the season at Bennington Lake. It was looking out over a lake that was once again filled with water. **Tree swallows** also were enjoying the return of the water and the insects. A **northern shrike** and four **Townsend's solitaires** reminded us that some winter birds are still around, but not for long.

Doug Boedigheimer has had a **white-throated sparrow** at his feeders in Milton-Freewater since mid-December.



Paul and Judy Treman saw a **great horned owl** in one of their pine trees on April 1. It stayed around for several days.

Judy took this photo through the window.

Rodger and I went out to enjoy the 70 degree weather on April 1. We saw 8 **long-billed curlews** on Lambdin Road and two **ospreys** along Highway 12 on the platform just east of Lowden. We noted both a **barn owl** and a **great horned owl** in holes on the cliffs on Byrnes Road. Later in the month there were barn owl chicks there and also on Dodd Road.

MerryLynn watched a **turkey vulture** fly over her house on April 2. It was having a hard time bucking the strong winds. Later in the day she braved the high winds and went to McNary NWR and a few other spots. She saw four new year birds—**Swainson's hawk**, **black-necked stilt**, **northern rough-winged swallow**, and **cliff swallow**.

Also on April 2, Bob Derting saw a **cinnamon teal** in a muddy pond just past the cliffs where the barn owls nest on Dodd Road.

Carolyn Corvino watched **Cooper's hawks** building a nest in the tree outside her window on April 3.

Nancy Mitchell spotted a **western screech owl** at the Whitman College Alumni House on April 5.

The wind was howling as we walked Bennington Lake on April 5. The little birds were all hunkered down, but

we saw lots of **violet-green swallows** and a few **tree swallows** over the lake. The **osprey** was checking out the fishing prospects and an adult **bald eagle** soared above. In the canal Carolyn spotted a **wild turkey** and a pair of **northern harriers** entertained us with their aerobatics. White caps on the lake kept the waterfowl numbers down, but we did see four **mallards** and a pair of **lesser scaup**.

Joe Corvino saw two **Swainson's hawks** and **Caspian terns** on his way to work near Umatilla on April 5.

MerryLynn looked out her window on April 7 to see a bright male **Cassin's finch** at the feeder.

April 9 was the Palouse Falls Field Trip led by Joe Corvino. The water at the falls was full and muddy. We found the **peregrine falcon** sitting on the cliff face across from the picnic area. There were also numerous **white-throated swifts** and **violet-green swallows**.



Birding our way to and from the falls we saw many **red-tailed hawks**, a **Swainson's hawk**, two **rough-legged hawks**, and several **northern harriers** and **American kestrels**. **Western meadowlarks** were abundant and we also came across several loose flocks of **horned larks**. The **osprey** pair were at their nest atop the Lyons Ferry Bridge. We saw **great horned owls** on nests in three locations east of Dayton.

On April 8, Paul Treman saw a flock of **wild turkeys** in a field near the freeway turnoff at Wilbur Street.

Mike and MerryLynn were out looking for year birds on April 9. At McNary NWR they found a single **bank swallow**. At Burbank HMU a sub-adult **northern goshawk** flew over their heads and screamed at Mike from the treetops.

Mike Denny saw the first **western kingbird** of the season on April 15 between Walla Walla and Dixie.



Pam Fisher put up a screech owl box in her front yard several years, but only starlings and house sparrows nested in it. On April 16, she was very excited to find this screech

owl peeking out the hole at her.

On April 16, Mike and MerryLynn found American avocets and black-necked stilts at the kiosk pond on Northshore Road.

The Bennington Lake walkers were treated to great horned owl chicks at two nest sites on April 19. We also saw a new bird for the lake—a pair of Eurasian collared doves. They are common now in the Walla Walla area, but this is the first time we've seen them at the lake.

On April 20, MerryLynn and I went out looking for new spring arrivals. We didn't find any new year birds, but I saw several recent arrivals—American avocets, black-necked stilts, fox sparrow, eared and horned grebes in breeding plumage, a Clark's grebe, savannah sparrow and cinnamon teal. It was a fun day and nice to see birds coming back.



For two weeks or so we had been seeing Cassin's finches in the yard. However, on April 21 there were 19 of them! Also, several evening grosbeaks visited the feeders.

Kim Hallett-Jones watched six turkey vultures fly over Tieton Street on April 21.

Jeff Fredsen found a great gray owl sitting on one of his bluebird boxes as he was driving out his driveway to come to the Audubon meeting on April 21. Jeff lives on Weston Mountain.

On April 22, Nancy Mitchell reported the return of the bank swallows on Cottonwood Road.

Matt Beatty saw a common loon in breeding plumage on Bennington Lake on April 23.

Laura Maier and a group from the Native Plant Society hiked in the Wallula Gap area on April 23. They saw horned larks, and then came across a horned lark nest on an abandoned farm road.

The common loon was still at Bennington Lake on April 26 when the Tuesday walkers made their trek around the lake. We found it in the canal.

Photo by Judy Treman



We also saw four western kingbirds, but most of the birds were hunkered down because of the wind. The lake was covered with hundreds of swallows, mostly violet-green swallows and cliff swallows, with a few tree swallows mixed in.

If you haven't put out your hummingbird feeders, now is the time! As of April 26, none had been reported, but they should be here any day.

This is the last issue of the *Magpiper* until September. To keep updated on what is being seen in the Walla Walla Valley during the summer, visit the **Birding Blog** on our website <http://www.blumtn.org>.

Have a good summer, and don't forget to let me know all the great birds you are seeing. You can reach me by email house_wren@charter.net or by phone 525-2963 Ginger

WATCHLIST FOR MAY

May 1-15

Blue-winged teal

Long-billed dowitcher

Wilson's phalarope

Franklin's gull

Forster's tern

Lewis's woodpecker

Western wood-peewee

Dusky flycatcher

Warbling vireo

MacGillivray's warbler

Wilson's warbler

Yellow-breasted chat

Western tanager

Lark sparrow

Black-headed grosbeak

Lazuli bunting

Bullock's oriole

May 16-31

Common nighthawk

Olive-sided flycatcher

Willow flycatcher

Eastern kingbird

Veery

Swainson's thrush

Gray catbird

Green-tailed towhee

BLUE MOUNTAIN AUDUBON
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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 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

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City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____