

# Pendleton Bird Club

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NEWSLETTER Volume 1, No. 6 Pendleton, Oregon August 2003

## **August Focus: Local Shorebirds**

August 16<sup>th</sup> marked the fourth official meeting of the Pendleton Bird Club. Aaron Skirvin, collaborating with Dave Herr, gave a slide presentation of Identification of Local Shorebirds. To reinforce all that was learned, an impromptu field trip was held on Saturday morning to McKay Reservoir. Dave Herr has the findings of this field trip written in the July – August Bird Sightings section of this newsletter.

Aaron prepared an excellent handout entitled Getting Started with Shorebird Identification: Fall Shorebirding near Pendleton & McKay Reservoir. This handout will be available again at the October meeting for those who missed the August meeting.

Aaron explained that shorebirds that stop over at McKay are using tremendous amounts of energy to migrate, therefore they are focused on eating to rebuild their energy reserves before continuing on their long journey; if approached quietly they can be observed from a close distance. In the fall, the birds are migrating towards Middle and South America from their springtime breeding grounds in the Arctic.

Business at the August meeting included the need for more funds to continue mailing the newsletter. Money was raised by raffling a cassette tape of bird songs and calls, narrated by Eleanor Pugh, entitled Similar Sounding Birds – East Side[of the Cascade Mountains]. This tape was donated to the Pendleton Bird Club by

Karen Kronner and Bob Gritski of Northwest Wildlife Consultants. Thank you Bob and Karen!

A report was given of the progress being made on the **Bluebird Trail Project**. The materials needed for each bluebird box will cost approximately four dollars. Bob Gristski voiced his willingness to purchase materials for the first box that evening; Jeanne Jenson purchased five boxes. Thank you to everyone who donated to get this project going; the club now has the funds to build the first ten boxes. Jack Simons will purchase the lumber and cut out the pieces for the boxes. Dave Herr has contributed ten additional new nest boxes to the project. When even these first available boxes are put up in the Ukiah / Albee area, which features some good bluebird habitat, there should be some happy Western and Mountain Bluebirds. They compete for nesting sites with European Starlings, Tree Swallows, House Sparrows, and even Nuthatches. Volunteers will be needed to install the boxes and to monitor them next spring and summer. To volunteer, please contact June Whitten at 276-6492.

## **Calendar of Events**

**17<sup>th</sup> Annual Oregon Shorebird Festival**  
Begins September 10th in the Coos Bay area.  
Contact: The Oregon Shorebird Festival, 1691 Grant St. S.E., North Bend, OR 97459.

### **Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Trip planned for September**

September 11 – 14 (Pendleton Round-Up week) Pendleton Bird Club members need to commit if they are planning to attend this field trip. The Field Station is available to the club if at least ten people participate. If fewer members go on this trip, the Field Station will not be available and motels in Burns will become the necessary lodging.

Fall migration is in full swing at this time of year plus a great trip into Steens Mountain is planned. We hope to see Black Rosy-Finches and many migrating birds. Please contact June Whitten (276-6492) by August 27 if you plan to attend.

### **North American Fall Migration Count**

September 20, 2003 – We need your help again to count migrating birds. Last May 10, we had a very successful spring migration count. Now, we are preparing for the fall migration count, which will be held on September 20. The goal is to find and count as many birds as possible in Umatilla County in one 24-hour period. Participants can have fun counting for a half day or full day. For more information on how you can help on September 20, please contact Aaron Skirvin (276-1948 or [skirvins@uci.net](mailto:skirvins@uci.net)).

#### **Pendleton Bird Club Meeting**

Thursday, October 9, 2003 7:30 p.m.

First Christian Church  
Pendleton, Oregon  
(Across from the Pendleton Arts Center)

Program to be announced.

### **Birding Terminology**

**Passerine:** another name for songbird.

**Scapulars:** (in anatomy the scapula is the shoulder blade.) In the feathers of a bird, the mantle and the scapulars are together referred to as the back.

According to the Sibley Guide to Birds: “the typical *shorebird* differs significantly from *passerines* in wing structure and in its two distinguishable groups of scapulars, which are much more prominent than the scapulars on passerines.”

### **Mission Ponds – Oasis in the Desert**

Beauty really does lay in the eye of the beholder – take the “gravel pit pond” off Mission Road east of Pendleton, for example. What many people may perceive as an eyesore others see as a spectacular home to a wide array of wildlife including fox, otter, white-tailed deer, osprey, eagles, numerous songbirds, and water birds. Mission Ponds (so-named by local birders) is one of only a few bodies of water near Pendleton and is thus a magnet for wildlife, especially a diverse year-round bird community.

Mission Ponds is actually two separate ponds — one a small, approximate 5-acre site to the east and a larger 10- to 12-acre pond to the west. Both ponds are on private property, thus are off limits to the general public; however, two access points allow birders an opportunity to observe resident and migratory birds anytime during the year from the perimeter of the site.

The 38-acre site was originally used by Pendleton Ready Mix Co. (PRM) to extract subsurface rock for their gravel operations. Terry and Jane Clarke, owners of PRM, conceived of a wildlife preserve using the pond as a focal point long before the final load of rock was excavated from the site in 2001.

As with most mining operations today, a Reclamation Plan was submitted as part of the permitting process before excavation began. Because the site is on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, PRM obtained approval from both the Tribe and the State. The Clarkes took personal responsibility in helping to design the Reclamation Plan, something they are very proud of.

And, they have reason to be proud! In 1998 the Oregon Department of Geology, Mined Land Reclamation awarded the prestigious “Outstanding Reclamation” award to PRM for their efforts to reclaim and upgrade the site.

Aerial photos show details of Terry and Jane's efforts, including the addition of willow-lined levees and "loafing islands" which are used by nesting waterfowl and other birds vulnerable to mainland predators. Terry plans to spread native grass seed along the recently reclaimed west / north shores to complete the restoration process.

Water levels in the ponds vary greatly during the year. Spring runoff can push the water level to 10 feet or more in depth, while summer's heat can lower water levels to only a few feet. Both conditions are necessary to sustain the diversity of birds during the year.

The drop in water level during summer is not necessarily detrimental for wildlife. As the water level drops, food concentrates and new shoreline is exposed for shorebird feeding. Recently, wading birds have been using the west pond for feeding and loafing and use continues to go up. For instance, on Aug. 10, Jack Simons counted 13 Great Blue Herons (GBH); Aug. 13, 18 GBH and 2 Black-crowned Night Herons; and on Aug. 15, 27 GBH! These are phenomenal numbers given the size of the ponds. It certainly looks like we have a healthy local heron population.

A diverse number of shorebirds also use the ponds. Some of the shorebirds observed include Wilson's Snipe, Long-Billed Dowitcher, Solitary Sandpiper, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, and Western Sandpiper. In all, a total of 94 bird species have been recorded using the ponds.

As you might expect, birds of prey notice these populations too. On August 12, while observing shorebirds at the southwest corner of the pond, Aaron Skirvin's attention was distracted by the sudden appearance of a Prairie Falcon seizing a small bird (probably a shorebird). All of the other shorebirds stood (or crouched) motionless while the nearby ducks ignored the falcon. Neat stuff!

Two immediate Bird Club goals regarding the Ponds are: (1) to compile a bird checklist of all species that visit the pond throughout the year; and (2) to update Bird Club members via the *Newsletter* on recent sightings and attempt to forecast which species are expected to appear at

the Ponds in the near future. Ultimately, birders will use this information to enrich their birding experiences.

Thanks to the vision and foresight of Pendleton Ready Mix owners Terry and Jane Clarke, Pendleton now has a unique setting that provides home and respite to numerous winged travelers as well as furry critters. From eagles to buntings, Mission Ponds is truly an oasis in the desert.

See you next month with another update!

*Contributed by Jack Simons and Aaron Skirvin*

### **Heron Artistry to Benefit S.U.R.E.**

Stewards of the Umatilla River Environment (S.U.R.E.), has been actively improving habitat for wildlife along the 2 ½ mile reach of the Umatilla River in Pendleton, since its inception in the spring of 2001.

The organization has an attractive logo which features the Great Blue Heron, one of Umatilla County's most distinctive and easily recognized birds. Laura Winters, owner of Winter's Creations, casts the logo in concrete to create a plaque, available for purchase, that will add to any birdwatcher's home or yard decor. Laura donates time, materials, and 100 percent of proceeds of all sales to the Umatilla Basin Watershed Foundation to help fund activities of S.U.R.E. The plaques are available in several colors and can be purchased at Winter's Creations at 814 S.W. Dorion Avenue in Pendleton. Cost of the plaque is only \$10. (No credit cards please as that will reduce the amount of your donation.)

We encourage you to buy a plaque with the logo of the Stewards of the Umatilla River Environment and support the work they do to maintain the river corridor through Pendleton and to help educate adults and children about the river ecosystem. Proceeds will be used to fund river cleanups, new plantings, and purchase of tools and materials.

Be sure to say thank you to Laura for the generous contribution of her time, materials, and labor!

## **The Pendleton Bird Club Field Trip to McKay Reservoir and Mission Ponds**

On August 16, Aaron Skirvin led a group of 14 birders on a field trip that included both McKay Reservoir and the Mission Ponds. The trip focused on finding shorebirds and was a follow-up to the informative lecture Aaron presented at the Thursday evening meeting on shorebird identification. Although there were not a great number of shorebirds at McKay, the group found Western, Least and Spotted Sandpipers, Killdeer, one Semipalmated Plover, and a Greater Yellowlegs.

The Mission Ponds proved more productive. Nine species of shorebirds were identified including: Least Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Solitary Sandpiper, both Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Killdeer, Long-billed Dowitcher and Wilson's Snipe. Aaron's identification tips were a great help for those of us just learning (or in my case re-learning) shorebird identification. Aaron has agreed to lead several more shorebird trips in the upcoming weeks and if you are at all interested in learning to identify shorebirds, these are great trips to participate in.

*Contributed by Dave Herr*

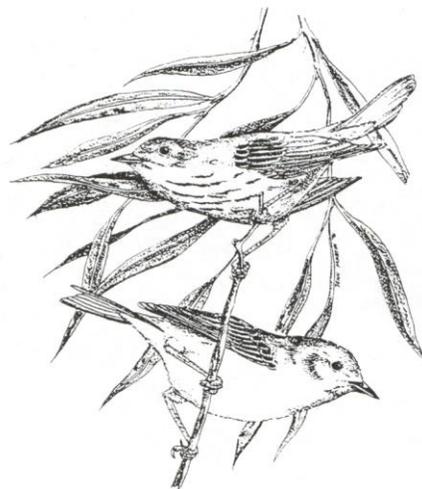
## **Oregon Bird Book Available at Public Library**

If you have ever had a question about any bird you have seen in Oregon, there is now a book that will provide the answer. The recently published BIRDS OF OREGON – A GENERAL REFERENCE has a wealth of information on Oregon birds.

A member of the Pendleton Bird Club has donated a copy of this outstanding book to the Pendleton City Library. The book has arrived and will be cataloged very soon. Therefore, anyone can now use this great reference book by checking the reference section at the library.

## **July – August Bird Sightings**

During mid to late summer, much of the local birding focuses on shorebirds. Those who were fortunate enough to hear Aaron Skirvin's excellent presentation at the August Pendleton Bird Club (PBC) meeting will remember that he said shorebirds nesting in Canada and Alaska fly south in July and August. Because they have such a long journey, they stop at available mud flats to feed during their southern trip. In Umatilla County three of the best spots to find migrating shorebirds are Cold Springs and McKay reservoirs and Mission Ponds. In an effort to save space, shore bird sightings for these three areas are summarized below. Additional information about Mission Ponds is reported in Jack Simon's article also in this newsletter.



### **Cold Springs Reservoir:**

Craig and Judy Corder have been checking Cold Springs regularly and have developed an impressive list of shorebirds for this report period including: **Semipalmated Plover, Killdeer** (300 on 8/15), **Black-necked Stilt, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER** (several different birds), **Western Sandpiper** (500 on 8/15), **Least Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, Wilson's Snipe, Wilson's Phalarope** and **Red-necked Phalarope**. The Corders also found **Virginia**

**Rail and Sora** (including one juvenile **Sora**, which was the first confirmed nesting of this species for the area).

### **McKay Reservoir:**

Although the number of birds has not been as high at McKay, during this reporting period PBC members have found most of the expected shorebird species including: **Semipalmated Plover, Killdeer, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER** (2 on 8/3, 1 on 8/12 and one on 8/19), **Western Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, Wilson's Snipe, and Wilson's Phalarope**. Other interesting sightings at McKay included several juvenile **Black-crowned Night-Herons, Bonaparte's Gull, Caspian Terns, 4 COMMON TERNS** (8/9), **Double-crested Cormorants** and several species of ducks. **American White Pelicans** continue to congregate at the upper end of the reservoir, with 91 noted on 7/20. The number of pelicans is declining, but more than 20 were seen on 8/16.

### **Mission Ponds:**

With the exception of **Short-billed Dowitcher**, all of the shorebird species located at Cold Springs and McKay Reservoirs have also been noted at Mission Ponds this report period. Of special note was a **Red-necked Phalarope** Aaron found on 8/18. Aaron also reported seeing a **Prairie Falcon** at the Ponds on the same day and watched the falcon capture a small bird. According to Aaron, this area is a great

place to find **Lesser Yellowlegs** and a good place to compare **Lesser** with **Greater Yellowlegs**. Jack Simons has been spending a lot of time surveying this area and has found many different species including a number of **Black-crowned Night-Herons** and numerous **Great Blue Herons (27 on 8/15)**. On 8/10, Jack reported seeing a **Turkey Vulture** in the area and on 8/12 Aaron noted 6 **Turkey Vultures** flying slowly to the west.

### **Other Sightings:**

Folks have reported a number of other interesting sightings from around the area. On 8/15, Paul Daniello reporting seeing about 2 dozen **Vaux's Swifts** circling a chimney near the junction of Main and NW Despain. The birds eventually flew down a chimney where they roosted for the night. During the next several weeks, migrating **Vaux's Swifts** can be seen in the Pendleton area. Please report any areas where you note large flocks of these birds swarming at dusk. On 8/16, Craig and Judy Corder found a freshly killed **MOUNTAIN QUAIL** along highway 395 between Battle Mountain State Park and Battle Mountain summit. When they stopped they heard the bird's mate calling. This was especially sad since **MOUNTAIN QUAIL** are very rare in Umatilla County.

*Please report your bird sightings to Dave Herr at 276-6413 or by e-mail, [dsherr@oregontrail.net](mailto:dsherr@oregontrail.net)*

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